Ms Deng Xiaohua

Doctor of Literature, *honoris causa*
Citation



There is a yellow mud street on the outskirts of that city, my vivid memory recalled. But they all say there is no such street in the area.

I went looking for it, wading through the golden hazed paths, passing by the fleeting shadows veiled in dust, in search of the yellow mud street.

I asked everyone I met, "Is this the yellow mud street?" They all just stared back with dead fish eyes, and no one answered my question.

My shadow moved aimlessly on the scorching asphalt road, while the blazing sun parched my eye sockets, making my eyeballs feel like glass beads stuck in my eyes and turning them probably into dead fish eyes, too; while I was still struggling in search of the yellow mud street.

The above text includes several Is: the I treading on the asphalt road and leaving footprints behind; and the shadow of I (me) leaning on the asphalt road. But how does the author describe from 'what I saw' to 'the world around I (me)' at that particular scene; and how does the author apprehend what the person I then was thinking? Specifically, how does she, through the narration of the text, help unlock the mystery of I, thereby helping explain the awakening echoes upon our souls? All these narrations of the aforesaid I are the genius craftsmanship of Ms Deng Xiaohua.

Ms Deng Xiaohua, originally named Deng Zemei, adopted the pen name Can Xue when she first started her literary

odyssey. Deng, whose ancestral roots are in Leiyang, Hunan, was born in Changsha, Hunan. A renowned contemporary writer in China, she has dedicated herself to novel writing and literary critique. Her pen name, Can Xue, has dual, contrasting meanings: one symbolises 'the pure white snow atop the mountain', while the other represents 'the polluted, trampled snow'. She aims to harmonise these two elements in her writings, expressing her unwavering pursuit of life experiences, her ceaseless exploration of the spiritual realm, and her desire for allure, all ultimately creating a distinct quality in her work.

Ms Deng was born in the courtyard of the New Hunan Daily (now known as the Hunan Daily). She spent her childhood in the dormitory and kindergarten of this media organisation. She was thus often tied to the cultural community in Changsha through her nickname the 'newspaper child'. In the embrace of lush green trees and the lingering scent of printing ink, the courtyard contained her earliest memories. Since childhood, Deng nurtured a deep love for reading, wandering through enchanted realms of fairy tales and the timeless whispers of classical literature from both East and West. In the company of her father, she delved into profound philosophical texts, absorbing the art of thoughtful contemplation and the wisdom of ages. Despite the hardships of her early life, she persevered, labouring during the day while dedicating her nights to learning English by herself. She once worked as a supply English teacher while additionally taking up translation work on original English literary works, and immersing herself in a wealth of classic Western masterpieces, including those from the world-renowned Franz Kafka, whose works have greatly influenced her. As for Chinese literature, she particularly loved reading *Dream of the Red Chamber* and Lu Xun's *Wild Grass*. In her quest to weave together the threads of Eastern and Western cultures within her literary tapestry, Deng embarked on a profound and expansive journey, uncovering the timeless elegance of the charm of culture.

Deng's first short story Soap Bubbles in Sewage was published in the magazine *New Creation* in 1985. However, her actual debut work was short story 'Yellow Mud Street' which she began writing in 1983 and completed the following year. Yellow Mud Street swiftly captured the attention of the writers' circle in Changsha. However, the path to publication was far from smooth. Although several local writers offered their support, it was the renowned author Ding Ling whose assistance proved pivotal. Ultimately, Yellow Mud Street was published in the literary journal *Zhongguo (China)*, making its debut in 1986 and garnering

considerable acclaim in the literary world. The excerpt quoted at the beginning of this citation is taken from this short story.

By the mid-1980s, Ms Deng had already published over ten short stories in various national magazines. Since then, writing has become her primary profession, fulfilling her childhood dream. Since the publication of Yellow Mud Street, she has released nine novels, more than a hundred short stories, several dozen novellas, essays, critiques, and more. Early works such as *The Cabin on the Mountain, Old Floating Clouds,* and *Dialogues in Heaven* pioneered a new literary and artistic trend, carving out a unique path. As a result, Deng's works were celebrated as the representative of avant-garde literature, marking the dawn of avant-garde fiction in China and leading a new literary movement across the country.

Ms Deng values the spirit of exploration and innovation, focusing on uncovering the inner self and employing literature as a medium for philosophical inquiry and reflection. Her work often delves into the depths of the human soul. With a unique approach to both her creative style and writing techniques, she has cultivated a distinctly personal style of new experimental writing. Through literature, she aims to achieve breakthroughs in motifs and styles, crafting stories of China rooted in authentic experiences and envisioning a new type of identity for the future. As she said, 'Literature as a form of art is mostly in harmony with the complexities of human emotions and experiences; and reflects the ideals of humanism. It possesses a quality that resonates across different cultures and societies, making it relevant and meaningful to a wide range of people. At its core, literature fundamentally revolves around love.' She further stated, 'Precisely because literature embodies human fraternity , it allows individuals to transcend and elevate themselves within the realm of art.' Ms Deng hopes to inspire, through her literary creations, 'a yearning for life and the ideal'.

Ms Deng's novels have always drawn the attention of overseas readers as soon as they are published. Some of her novellas have even been translated to upwards of ten foreign languages, casting a significant impact in the literary world. They have been translated and published by many well-known overseas publishers, such as Northwestern University Press, Yale University Press, Henry Holt Publishers, New Directions Publishers, and Open Letter Books in the United States; Éditions Gallimard in France, Ruhr University Press in Germany; Editore Teoria in Italy;

Kawade Shobō Shinsha and Heibonsha in Japan; and Fitzhenry & Whiteside in Canada, among others. Deng's literary works have also been translated and published in overseas journals and magazines, including *Bungei Shunjū* and *Quarterly Chinese Modern Fiction* in Japan. A literary study centre, Can Xue Research Society, was even established in Japan, along with the launch of an academic journal titled *Can Xue Studies*.

Ms Deng's works have made a significant impact on the international literary scene, as reflected in the global recognition she has received. For instance, in 2015, she won the Best Translated Book Award in the United States, becoming the first Chinese writer to have received this award. That same year, she was longlisted for the Independent Foreign Fiction Prize , a literary award inaugurated by British newspaper *The Independent*. She was also longlisted for the Neustadt International Prize for Literature in the United States. In 2019, she received another nomination for the Best Translated Book Award in the United States, and was longlisted for the International Booker Prize in UK in 2019 and 2021. In 2021, she received the Literary Lifetime Achievement Award. The following year, she won Malaysia's Huazong World Chinese Literature Award in Malaysia, and received a nomination for Germany's Haus International Literature Prize. In 2024, she received the American Literature Award, becoming the first Chinese writer to be honoured for her lifetime achievement.

Mr Chairman, the literary works of Ms Deng Xiaohua are infused with light, which allows her to inspire, transform, and uplift others. They invite readers to embark on a journey of spiritual exploration, motivating them to embrace love, life, and ideals, thus allowing them to benefit from the enlightenment of her works. After decades of hard work, she has cultivated a unique literary style and presence, making a profound impact on the literary landscape both domestically and abroad, and bringing a distinctive charm to the global literary world. In recognition of her lifelong commitment to literary creation, Mr Chairman, I have the honour to present to you Ms Deng Xiaohua for the award of the degree of Doctor of Literature, *honoris causa*.