

梁遇春：談“流浪漢”

About Vagabonds

By Liang Yuchun

Translated by Lifeng Ouyang

When verbal battles over one's outlook on life reached their peak then fell out of fashion, on a whim I wrote an essay 'Ren si guan' 人死觀 [Outlook on death]. Indeed, this action might be labelled a bit reactionary, and deserved the accusation of being intellectually backward; on reflection I later came to regret my decision. Similarly, a few years ago, in Beijing there was a hot debate concerning the translation of the word *gentleman*¹, but now, when almost nobody is interested in it, I tactlessly decided to dwell on the opposite of *gentleman*—that is, *vagabond*—a choice I will unavoidably come to regret, but in the urge to write something, how could I concern myself with all of that?

Gentleman is hard to translate, yet not as bizarre as *vagabond*. There is simply no suitable Chinese equivalent for the word. In ordinary English-Chinese dictionaries, it is often translated into *zou jianghu zhe* 走江湖者 (a habitant of the demi-monde), *liumang* 流氓 (a rogue), *wulai zhi tu* 無賴之徒 (a scoundrel), and *youshou haoxian zhe* 遊手好閒者 (a loafer), yet in my opinion these translations do not capture the essence of the word. A *vagabond* does not live as an itinerant performer or a chiselling rogue. Both the words 'scoundrel' and 'loafer' are derogatory, but a *vagabond* is endearing. I have no alternative but to translate it as *liulanghan* 流浪漢 for the nonce, though of course this is still not quite accurate. To me, words like *gentleman* and *vagabond* are so capricious because they have been used so flexibly for such a long time that they have lost their

¹ This word is in English in the source text, as with other mentions of 'gentleman' and 'vagabond' in italics.

original meanings. Each person brings his own interpretation to these words, and as the implications multiply, we become more flexible in using them. We are thus unable to find their Chinese equivalents with so many associations. In the beginning, the words *gentleman* and *vagabond* were linked with property—the former meant a dandy who enjoyed a huge fortune and lived an affluent life while the latter a poor wretch who had no real estate and drifted along aimlessly. Since a gentleman is wealthy, he is naturally highly educated, well mannered, and cultivated in conversation, to say nothing of never haggling over pennies or using strong language. With the passage of time, the word *gentleman*, which previously referred to a descendant of an influential family, has come to denote any refined person. Today, regardless of his family background or level of wealth, as long as he is gentle in manner and upright in conduct, we call him a *gentleman*. Even when a destitute pedant feels unfairly treated, he may defend himself: ‘I am not rich, but I am a *gentleman*.’

The evolution of the meaning of *vagabond* has gone through a similar progression. At the start, the word referred to a person who has no wealth and muddles through life, or who does not have a regular job and occasionally plays dirty tricks. But he takes the world as it is, and has few worries. Since he is inured to the carefree life, he carelessly squanders all the money he might come across, and is thus naturally generous to his friends. Because he has no family cares, unlike overcautious wealthy people, he acts forthrightly. When he drinks, he drinks his fill, and when he talks, he shoots his mouth off, often fabricating wild and interesting yarns. Since he cares about nothing in the world and is cheerful all day long, scrupulous people may say behind his back that he has no sense of responsibility. He bears no ill will against anybody, so he does not line up soybeans and black beans on the table to count his good or bad thoughts all day long as if ticking off beads on an abacus, nor does he knit his brows scheming to frame others. He is scatter-brained in action, but kind in heart. Adult though he is, he is like a mischievous, naïve child, but with any number of weird fantasies in his mind. He is all smiles, and harbours no tricks. ... Today, we refer to whoever has this kind of mindset as a *vagabond*, regardless of whether he was born of nobility or has never left his hometown. He is somewhat like an ancient Chinese knight-errant, yet he doesn’t carry a sword, nor, assuming an air of arrogance or ferocity, search the land to fight for justice. He does not hold firm to rigid moral principles. As a result, I cannot but translate

vagabond into *liulanghan*, in which *liulang* refers to the ‘vagrant state of mind’. So, the vagabonds I extol are those who, like damsels living in the seclusion of their boudoirs, may have never ventured out so much as a step to see the world.

The late-nineteenth-century British poet and essayist Alexander Smith lavished praise on vagabonds. In his essay ‘On Vagabonds’, he ingeniously pointed out:

It is quite true, he has a peculiar way of looking at many things. If, for instance, he is brought up with cousin Milly, and loves her dearly, and the childish affection grows up and strengthens in the woman’s heart, and there is a fair chance for them fighting the world side by side, he marries her without too curiously considering whether his income will permit him to give dinner-parties, and otherwise fashionably see his friends. Very imprudent, no doubt. But you cannot convince my vagabond. With the strangest logical twist, which seems natural to him, he conceives that he marries for his own sake, and not for the sake of his acquaintances, and that the possession of a loving heart and a conscience void of reproach, is worth, at any time, an odd sovereign in his pocket. The vagabond is not a favourite with the respectable classes. He is particularly feared by mammas who have daughters to dispose of—not that he is a bad son, or likely to prove a bad husband, or a treacherous friend, but somehow gold does not stick to his fingers as it does to the fingers of some men. He is regardless of appearances. He chooses his friends neither for their fine houses nor their rare wines, but for their humours, their goodness of heart, their capacities of making a joke and of seeing one, and for their abilities, unknown often as the woodland violet, but not the less sweet for obscurity. As a consequence his acquaintance is miscellaneous, and he is often seen at other places than rich men’s feasts. I do believe he is a gainer by reason of his vagrant ways. He comes in contact with the queer corners and the out-of-the-way places of human life. He knows more of our common nature, just as the man who walks through a country, and who strikes off the main road now and then to visit a ruin, or a legendary cairn of stones, who drops into village inns, and talks with the people he meets on the road, becomes better acquainted with it than the man who rolls haughtily along the turnpike in a carriage and four. We lose a great deal by foolish hauteur. No man is worth much who has not a touch of the vagabond in him.²

² Alexander Smith, *Dreamthorp: A Book of Essays Written in the Country* (London: Strahan, 1863), pp. 271–272.

Alexander Smith related in the essay how a vagabond gets married and starts his career. From the above, we can see that a so-called vagabond is not necessarily a homeless person drifting from place to place. Smith mentioned only one side of the matter, so let's look at vagabonds from another perspective—comparing them with *gentleman*, to piece together other traits and see a complete picture. Moreover, a vagabond's complicated personality (by definition, a vagabond will not observe rules docilely) cannot be made clear at one go.

In British literature, of all the essays on the nature of the *gentleman*, the apostate John Newman's *Discourses on the Scope and Nature of University Education* is universally acknowledged to be the most penetrating. He wrote:

[I]t is almost a definition of a gentleman, to say he is one who never inflicts pain. [...] He is mainly occupied in merely removing the obstacles which hinder the free and unembarrassed action of those about him; and he concurs with their movements rather than takes the initiative himself. [...] The true gentleman in like manner carefully avoids whatever may cause a jar or a jolt in the minds of those with whom he is cast;—all clashing of opinion, or collision of feeling, all restraint, or suspicion, or gloom, or resentment; his great concern being to make every one at their ease and at home.³

Of course, we all would love to make friends with such fastidious gentlemen. However, if everyone in the world gives way and shows care, hems and haws, if everyone is ready to sympathize and chime in with others, and no one will spear-head the attack, if everyone yields and submits to each other, aiming only to compromise and bearing no prejudice, then although the world will be at peace, unfortunately it will be a lifeless peace! So, we have no alternative but to hail the valiant, dauntless vagabond. He is so determined to do what he wants to do on a whim that he can whistle in the face of opposition and push ahead, unconcerned about whether it will be good or bad for people, succeed or fail, or, naturally, disturb others or not. In comparison, a 'gentleman' is inclined to look on indifferently with folded arms and gently clap his gloved hands. What a vagabond does is not necessarily beneficial to society or contribute to human welfare, but his fear of nothing under the sun, his disregard for personal gain or loss, and his heroic neglect of right and wrong can at least bring some vitality to this apathetic world!

³ John Henry Newman, *Discourses on the Scope and Nature of University Education* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 327–328.

His dashing spirit can aid the ‘gentlemen’, keeping them from yawning all day, hands covering their mouths, with nothing to say. Incidentally, the vagabond yawns naturally, without restraint, while a ‘gentleman’ purses his lips like the sentimental beauty Lin Daiyu in *Dream of the Red Chamber*. To me, both unchaste maidens and remarried widows are beneficial to society, since if they did not exist virgin girls and widows who maintain their chastity would have nothing to talk about, and so have no way to extol their own virtues.

Moreover, a vagabond fools around all day long, ignores everyone else, and even forgets about himself. A genuine vagabond will not incur the animosity of others because he has attained the realm where he forgets all about others as well as himself. The spur of the moment is his only guide. He loves to laugh and loves to see others laugh as well. He cares for nothing else. A ‘gentleman’ considers others at all junctures, but if he gets things wrong, he may make them feel uncomfortable instead. He is thus inferior to the vagabond, who shares everything he has with others: when he eats, everybody eats, when he drinks, everybody drinks, and one and all share in the conversation. Since his starting point is making no distinction between himself and others, everybody naturally feels happy in his company. Even if he has a slip of the tongue and offends someone, he can still be forgiven, and the offence stemming from his innocence only demonstrates his lack of cunning. Just as an ancient Chinese literatus said, a writer can compose a superb piece of writing in a flash of inspiration; a vagabond, ruled by his passions, following his inclinations in everything he does, and having no regard for others, is considered by people around him a wonderful companion, for in his presence they can be free from social constraints and begin to act freely. Similarly, many people prefer to linger in smoke-filled taverns and tea-shops rather than go claim ties of kinship with princes and the nobility in their living rooms; young masters of wealthy families love to mess about with grooms and other lowly people rather than go visit their gentle, hospitable relatives. John Newman also said:

He knows the weakness of human reason as well as its strength, its province and its limits. If he be a[n] unbeliever, he will be too profound and large-minded to ridicule religion or to act against it; he is too wise to be a dogmatist or fanatic in his infidelity. He respects piety and devotion; he even supports institutions as venerable, beautiful, or useful, to which he does not assent; he honours the

ministers of religion, and he is contented with declining its mysteries without assailing or denouncing them. He is a friend of religious toleration, and that, not only because his philosophy has taught him to look on all forms of faith with an impartial eye, but also from the gentleness and effeminacy of feeling which is the attendant on civilization.⁴

Indeed, these people are so highly cultured that they regulate their fires just right and never flare up, but at the same time they have forfeited their vivacity, having worn away the fire of the human soul that Prometheus stole from Zeus. The most renowned eighteenth-century British painter Sir Joshua Reynolds, a close friend of Samuel Johnson (*the fat man with the pockmarked face*), was a most good-humoured person. One day Johnson said to him, ‘Reynolds, you hate no one. But I like a good hater.’ Johnson’s great brain was rich in subtle observations of life, so even his blurted-out grievances could contain penetrating golden sayings. To be a good hater is quite an art, which everyone should learn. I’d say that those who cannot ardently hate people cannot passionately love them either. A vagabond knows how to love and how to hate. As for religion, he either desperately believes in it or utterly ridicules it. John Donne, Robert Herrick, and Benvenuto Cellini were much like vagabonds, who all shared a religious fervour; Voltaire and Nietzsche were also vagabonds, who sarcastically abused and sneered at religion with their witty remarks.

In the tragic comedy or comic tragedy of life, we should take a clear stand on everything—we must either attack or support; if we compromise everywhere and gloomily tramp alone on the battle-field, life will unavoidably be lonely and monotonous. Since we all know human intellect is limited, why do we still consider ourselves smart, take upon ourselves the position of God, and assume an air of indifference toward all views, like an adult listening to a child talk in his sleep? Why do we still take on the blank look of an imbecile, yet covertly brag about our own vision, while sympathizing and forgiving the weak intellects of others? If we really have sympathy for human beings’ limited intellect, we should join with them and act as wildly as they do, and when people all act recklessly, we will have limitless sympathy for one another. If we join their gang and go astray together, we can naturally have a faithless comprehension of each other. Only after drinking three glasses of crude liquor, boisterously singing, pounding the table, and inexplicably smiling into each other’s eyes can

⁴ Newman, *Discourses on University Education*, p. 330.

we have genuine sympathy for others and truly understand their weaknesses. Unlike the ‘gentleman’, who may also show compassion, yet behind which there is often a sneer of the sort that is found in Buddha’s pity for all living things. I have hated spectators of life most, so I never tire of reading *The Life of Samuel Johnson*, a thick book by James Boswell; in contrast, any mention of Joseph Addison’s *The Spectator* makes me frown, and although I do admit that his writings are smooth and elegant, neither too long nor too short, I am afraid he was as cold as a stiff corpse. Newman said that a ‘gentleman’ should have ‘gentleness and effeminacy of feeling’. A vagabond does not possess the charm of a fashion model on a catwalk, but has a sound, masculine frame. He has the nerve to bare his body to wrestle with life and fight it to the death. No matter what may become of him in the fight, a vagabond’s life is powerful and interesting. His is not a wasted existence! After having tasted the bitter and sweet of life, he gladly travels to the next world. This attitude of tossing and tumbling delightfully through life sufficiently deserves our admiration, but it is one forever unknown to the effeminate ‘gentlemen’.

Jesus Christ said, ‘For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.’⁵ A vagabond only cares about his transient pleasures and gives no thought to his personal safety, yet he enjoys every minute of life. Those who cautiously guard their lives for fear of losing them miss out on the real joys of living. Only when their coffins are finally nailed shut do they realize they have wasted their lives and enjoyed none of the benefits. Yet by then it is too late for regrets. They cherish their lives like a miser guarding his money, but even a miser can find pleasure in counting his hard-earned cash behind closed doors every night, while those who dearly cling to life and live in constant fear of death are incapable of enjoying such self-satisfaction. A miser who is always ready to risk his life for wealth is in the end a head above the person who only cares about his own skin, so God gives the miser his fair share of joy. In Bertrand Russell’s words, a vagabond does not follow the possessive impulse in life; instead, the creative impulse inspires him.

In fact, all things in the world are constantly in motion, so how can there really be any permanency? Nothing but extinction is immutable; everything else is invariably subject to change. Truly, the wheel of dharma is always turning. In his masterpiece *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*, Walter Pater made

⁵ Matthew 16:25.

some brilliant remarks about this idea in the conclusion, which, unfortunately, are so beautifully written that I dare not translate them. Life, in particular, is transient and full of uncertainties, so a heart that does not pulsate belongs to the dead. Thus, unless we take life as it comes and plunge ahead happily regardless of the consequences, we will never enjoy life. The modern essayist Jackson wrote in an essay about vagabonds, ‘The vagabond seems to live on the rolling billows of life.’⁶ Unlike an ordinary person who clutches his life so tightly that he chokes it to death, a vagabond stretches out his supple body and rides the waves on the high seas of life, surfing them and going with the tides. To him, everything is imbued with life, and his hot blood harmonizes with it. The person who best represents the vagabond spirit is the American poet Walt Whitman, who sang in a loud voice and never bothered about rhymes. Every line in *Leaves of Grass* displays the true colours of the vagabond. It is, as it were, the vagabond’s Bible.

The vagabond life is so interesting in good part because it teems with danger. Playing football, serving in the army, scaling cliffs, and the like are enjoyable pastimes because danger plays a major part. In this monotonous, commonplace world, any brave and righteous man may frequently become impatient and hear the call of the wilderness. The free spirit of roaming around and hunting in the wooded mountains in primitive times will instinctively lie submerged within our dark suits. We are thus eager to seek outside adventure and live a fuller, less conventional life. Everybody knows that the vast ocean has sunk countless big ships, yet every year many Anglo-Saxon youngsters, out of their desire for the dangerous maritime life, leave their comfortable homes against their parents’ wishes, choosing instead the arduous life of a sailor. The vast sea under the endless azure sky is so spellbinding precisely because it is the most perilous place in the world. Who among us of sound body and mind doesn’t long for adventure and lust for a life on the sea? The Lady from the Sea is not alone in this yearning. That’s why Frederick Marryat, James Fenimore Cooper, Pierre Loti, Joseph Conrad, and other novelists wrote about the sea, and why their masterpieces won readers’ sympathy. Havelock Ellis once compared life to a dance. If the world really can be said to be a ballroom, vagabonds are drunken

⁶ This is a faithful translation of the Chinese original, but who the actual ‘Jackson’ is cannot be determined.

and joyful dancers whirling about the floor. Yet well-behaved gentlemen just sit at the end tables listlessly drinking their boring coffee, bemoaning the swift passage of time.

Aside from enjoying life without limits, the vagabond is also accompanied by colourful fantasies. In Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield*, Mr Micawber kept saying even in the most straitened circumstances, 'Something will turn up.' This is what a vagabond is supposed to be like—he always remains optimistic, following the rosy path all the time. He believes that his prospects will be bright. Sure enough, his future will fulfil his forecast, for in his life there is not a single unprosperous day. Even in times of distress, he remains positive about life, because after a good cry his tears have nourished the roots and shoots of his hopes. He has confidence in himself, so he often eloquently speaks about what he will do before he does it, but as soon as he has spoken, another impulse arises and his planned task is forgotten and remains undone. This inconsistency between word and deed was frowned upon by Confucius, but how endearing these heroic contradictions can be! In his famous *The Dance of Life*, Havelock Ellis wrote, 'We change everyday, and the world changes too, in accordance with the way of nature, so what are inconsistencies on the surface from an overall perspective sometimes represent a deeper consistency.' (This is most likely what he said, but I can't specifically remember offhand.) A vagabond follows his natural high spirits, and says whatever comes to mind. How exciting his life must be! After all, action is not necessarily the only outcome for an idea: some subtle ideas need only be discussed to be praiseworthy; putting them into action might prove to be just a nuisance. We all love the world described in fairy tales and myths, though we all recognize that they do not actually exist. A vagabond's straightforward remarks are a rainbow across the bleak sky of life, and for this alone they are worthy of our thanks. There are many things we feel we are not capable of in the beginning, but if we speak them out, we will be obliged to work hard on them and may unexpectedly succeed. If we are afraid of failing beforehand, and keep our dreams bottled up, then abandon them when the first obstacles are encountered, won't our capacity for handling difficulties deteriorate with each passing day? As a result, before starting anything, we should speak it out to spur ourselves on, and only then can life become interesting and progress be made. Even if we sometimes meet with failure, compassionate people will forgive us, while mean people will never show us their

compassion, which is worthless to begin with. Our actions must be enhanced by our imaginations, therefore John Masefield wrote, ‘Where there is no vision the people perish.’⁷ Imagination and inconsistencies are the guarantees of a splendid life. A vagabond thinks up strange ideas and does absurd, inconsistent things; neither tradition nor law can restrain him. He is indeed a fortunate son of freedom! In his eyes, the world is a paradise, for he lives a heavenly life.

If we read carefully the history of literature, we can see many great writers were something of the vagabond. William Shakespeare once stole a deer; Ben Jonson and Christopher Marlowe were among the regular patrons of the Mermaid Tavern; Oliver Goldsmith roamed around Europe playing his mouth organ to earn his bread; Richard Steele spent his days avoiding creditors; Charles Lamb and Leigh Hunt were wild men; Samuel Taylor Coleridge was addicted to opium; not to mention Thomas De Quincey, and everyone knows about George Byron, Percy Shelley, and John Keats. Even the moralist William Wordsworth had an illegitimate daughter in France who later became the girl in his famous sonnet ‘Vaudracour and Julia’. Rabindranath Tagore, whose eyes blaze like torches and who constantly dwells on the spiritual life, often played truant as a child. Robert Browning ran away with Elizabeth Barrett, who later married him against the wishes of her father. A few years ago, a busybody discovered Charles Dickens’s irregular behaviour when he was young. Of course, there is no need to say anything about the unconventional life of Algernon Charles Swinburne, Robert Louis Stevenson, and those art-for-art’s sake contributors to *The Yellow Book*.

How is it that vagabonds write so many classic works while university-trained ‘gentlemen’ spend day and night reading them word by word? First, a vagabond dares to speak and take action, never bothering to hide his thoughts, curry favour, or stoop to compromise, so what he says is always sincere and touching. Sometimes he will boldly fabricate barefaced lies that neither a coward nor a hypocrite would have the nerve to tell. Thus, even in these lies there is truth that results directly from the liar’s daring. Moreover, literature is often the crystallization of the writer’s personality, so the more distinctive his personality is, the more directly his thoughts will be conveyed, and the more valuable his work will be. A vagabond is a person of outstanding personality; both his thoughts and actions demonstrate his exceptional traits, and thanks to his bold,

⁷ This is actually from the Bible (Proverbs 29:18) and not from John Masefield.

straightforward temperament, he can vividly display his peculiar personality on paper. Alexander Smith got it right: 'Genius is a vagabond'; Greek philosophers said that knowing oneself is most difficult, so excellent autobiographies are few and far between in world literature, yet the few imperishable ones were all written by vagabonds. Benvenuto Cellini killed men in cold blood and he clearly captured this in his autobiographical *Memoirs*, the artistic brilliance of which has endured over the centuries. Aurelius Augustine led a dissolute life as a young man, yet his *Confessions* shares an enduring place in history with *A Confession* by Leo Tolstoy (who indulged in unspeakable sensual pleasures while in Moscow) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Les Confessions*. Benjamin Franklin was also a well-known vagabond; no matter how hard he tried to pose as a gentleman his vagabond nature would shine through. Just read William Cobbett's critical articles on him and you can see how eccentric he was! Thomas De Quincey wrote *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*, whose title is sufficient to explain its contents. Edward Gibbon, the author of *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, loved to make trouble for his professors in his youth, and his thin autobiography also provides enjoyable reading. Richard Jefferies, who was wholeheartedly devoted to the beauty of nature, showing no interest in anything but journeying to mountains and rivers, yet his autobiographical work *The Story of My Heart* is of crystalline intelligence and a marvellous confession. I recall that once a rich American lady who hoped her son would become a man of letters wrote to consult with a great writer, who replied, 'Give him several thousand pounds every year and just let him fool around.' Indeed, what could be better than this to foster the young man's creative spirit? I hope university students who wish to produce vigorous works get out and live like vagabonds instead of shutting themselves up in their humanities classroom. The recent half-year suspension of classes at Peking University will do a world of good for China's future literary arena, because students of the liberal arts, who have nothing to do but go window-shopping and tour the city all day, will unavoidably fall into the ways of the vagabond. Such an opportunity comes only once in a lifetime, and I hope our current students can seize the chance and thereby avoid future regrets.

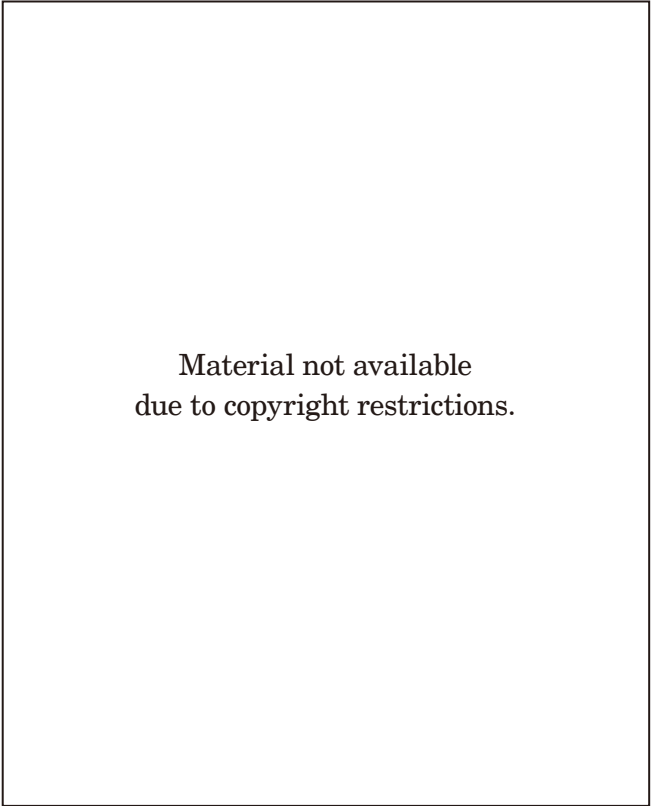
In his essay collection *Notes on Life and Letters*, the British novelist Joseph Conrad, who passed away just a few years ago, talked of Charles Luffmann, a writer in the vagabond spirit, and said that after reading his books, many

girls would send their greetings to him. Filled with jealousy, Conrad lamented pitifully (although he was originally a seaman): ‘I have in my time told some stories which are (I hate false modesty) both true and lovely. Yet no little girl ever wrote to me in kindly terms. And why? Simply because I am not enough of a vagabond. The dear despots of the fireside have a weakness for lawless characters.’⁸ A vagabond is endearing indeed, for he is virile, unconventional, and upright. How can a love-struck damsel avoid falling for him? As the Chinese saying goes, ‘An innocent girl is infatuated with a heartless man.’ Precisely because such disreputable men are always relentless vagabonds, who sow their wild oats and care nothing for the world, the sheltered maiden, confined to her boudoir, falls head over heels in love with him at first sight. No matter how unfaithful he later becomes, her infatuation will not waver. Both tales of a medieval noble lady’s love for a knight and the ancient Chinese beauty’s affection for her hero invariably express the delicate maidens’ deep affection for men drifting aimlessly through a troubled world. Hong Fu Nü 紅拂女, an intelligent singing girl in the early Tang dynasty, ran away in the depths of night to secretly meet General Li Jing 李靖. Consort Yu 虞姬, a devastating beauty, took her own life in a military camp by the Wu River to show her eternal love for Xiang Yu 項羽, the rebel leader in the Qin dynasty. Xi Shi 西施, a rare beauty of the state of Yue, drifted in obscurity with her lover Fan Li 范蠡, a grand master of Yue. Such examples are legion. In the Qing dynasty Shanghai prostitutes loved to cohabit with grooms. Now movie stars love to cohabit with chauffeurs, and concubines love to have liaisons with bodyguards, all the same idea. In short, a vagabond is blessed with an emotional appeal that women cannot resist, and his peculiar, unpredictable behaviour hits the target in the passionate, susceptible hearts of women. Who says that only a woman’s heart will melt at the sight of a vagabond? Some of our friends who often mess about, squander money, and behave indiscreetly often ask us for loans and get us into trouble, but we still love their frankness and sincerity, and readily help them out. The greatest vagabond in the world is Christianity’s Devil, but who is not fond of Satan? In the pre-Shakespearean era when English mythological drama prevailed, audiences would vigorously clap their hands when the clownish devil figures came on stage.

⁸ Joseph Conrad, *Notes on Life and Letters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 54–55.

The demon's every move would set the audiences roaring with laughter. In 'On the Devil' from *The Orange Tree: A Volume of Essays*, Robert Lynd said, 'Satan, in *Paradise Lost*, appeals to the imagination like some great and dashing pirate in a boy's story.' All children love pirates. After reading Milton's epic, many people felt that the treacherous Satan is of much greater interest than the rigid God. There are so many endearing traits to Satan that I cannot list them in one breath, so I will have to save that topic for future essays.

In the late Qing dynasty, a number of princes and nobles would change into the ragged clothes of beggars on summer afternoons before stealthily walking to the Shichahai roadside singing songs to beg from passers-by. At dusk, they would take off their patched garments and return home to their residences. This is proof of Manchu people's peculiar ways of enjoying life, which I came to admire after living in Peking for a few years. On hot summer days, they would lie down in the shade of willow-trees and sing impromptu songs while feasting their eyes on the men and women passing by; they exchanged their court-dresses for thin, tattered gowns so as to taste the life of a vagabond: they certainly know how to enjoy life! Actors and actresses also live like vagabonds. They make themselves up and go on the stage to win the audiences' laughter and tears, taking on the lives of the characters they are playing. A few late-Qing noblemen would often go on stage and join the troupe to play certain roles—this also shows they were adept at seeking pleasure. Miyazaki Tōten 宮崎滔天, an adamant Japanese supporter of Dr Sun Yat-sen 孫中山, worked for the Chinese Revolution for the better part of his life, before he learned the art of singing and comic dialogue and became a travelling minstrel. In retrospect, he discovered all the emotions pulsing in his heart, but I think this is really the nirvana that a true ronin deserves. Actors and actresses both here and abroad are popular with audiences because they are the most evident vagabonds among us. Charles Dickens's novels were so popular that every time a new book came out he would have to notify the police to keep guard at the doors of bookstores for fear that readers might become unruly. The reason behind this frenzy is that the main characters in his novels, such as the four members of the Pickwick Club and the people they meet on their journeys, and Sydney Carton in *A Tale of Two Cities*, are all first-class vagabonds. Du Shaoqing in *Unofficial History of the Scholars* 儒林外史, the 'Tattooed Monk' Lu Zhishen in *Outlaws of*



Material not available
due to copyright restrictions.

A Vagabond Musician 流浪漢 by Wu Buyun 伍步雲 dated 1984
Courtesy of the Hong Kong Museum of Art

the Marsh 水滸傳, Liu Xianglian in *Dream of the Red Chamber*, and Lao Can in *The Travels of Lao Can* 老殘遊記—all have made deep impressions on readers' minds and are applauded as model vagabonds.

A vagabond, who is happy-go-lucky all his life, often creates a happy atmosphere out of nothing, brings joy to the hearts of those he comes across, and makes them adore him for no reason at all. No wonder Alexander Smith said, 'Nature makes us vagabonds, the world makes us respectable.' On this point we should chant 'back to nature' as Jean-Jacques Rousseau did. Anyway, in an apathetic China, the spirit of vagabonds is a potent shot in the arm, a much-needed cardiac stimulant. Even if we cast aside all thoughts about our country or our nation, we should still hope to live interesting lives, instead of having all day long to humour mediocre gentlemen, neither good nor bad,

neither progressive nor regressive, as we do now. At this moment, I recall a *ci* poem to the tune of ‘Moon over the West River’ 西江月 by Su Shi 蘇軾, the Song poet, which I think can convey the essence of vagabonds, so I copy it here to end the essay.

Wave after wave glimmers by the shore;
Cloud on cloud dimly appears in the sky.
Unsaddled is my white jade-like horse;
Drunk, asleep in the sweet grass I'll lie.

My horse's hoofs may break, I'm afraid,
The breeze-rippled brook paved by moonlit jade.
I tether my horse to a bough of green willow,
Near the bridge where I pillow,
My head on arms and sleep till the cuckoo's song awakes.
A spring day breaks.⁹

Recently I have been staying in Huangzhou. One spring night, I rode through Qishui and became intoxicated in a tavern there. By moonlight, I walked my horse to a stream, took off the saddle, lay down on a bridge, and in my drunken state went to sleep for a while on my folded arms. It was already dawn when I awoke to see undulating mountains clustered together and hear the river murmuring below. This made me think I was in a different world. So I inscribed this poem on a pillar of the bridge.

Two days before the Chinese New Year's Eve,
the eighteenth year of the Republic [1929], in Fuzhou

⁹ This is a slightly altered version of Xu Yuanhong's 許淵冲 translation, see Xu Yuanhong, trans., *Bilingual Edition 300 Song Lyrics* (Beijing: Gaodeng jiaoyu chubanshe, 2004), p. 177.