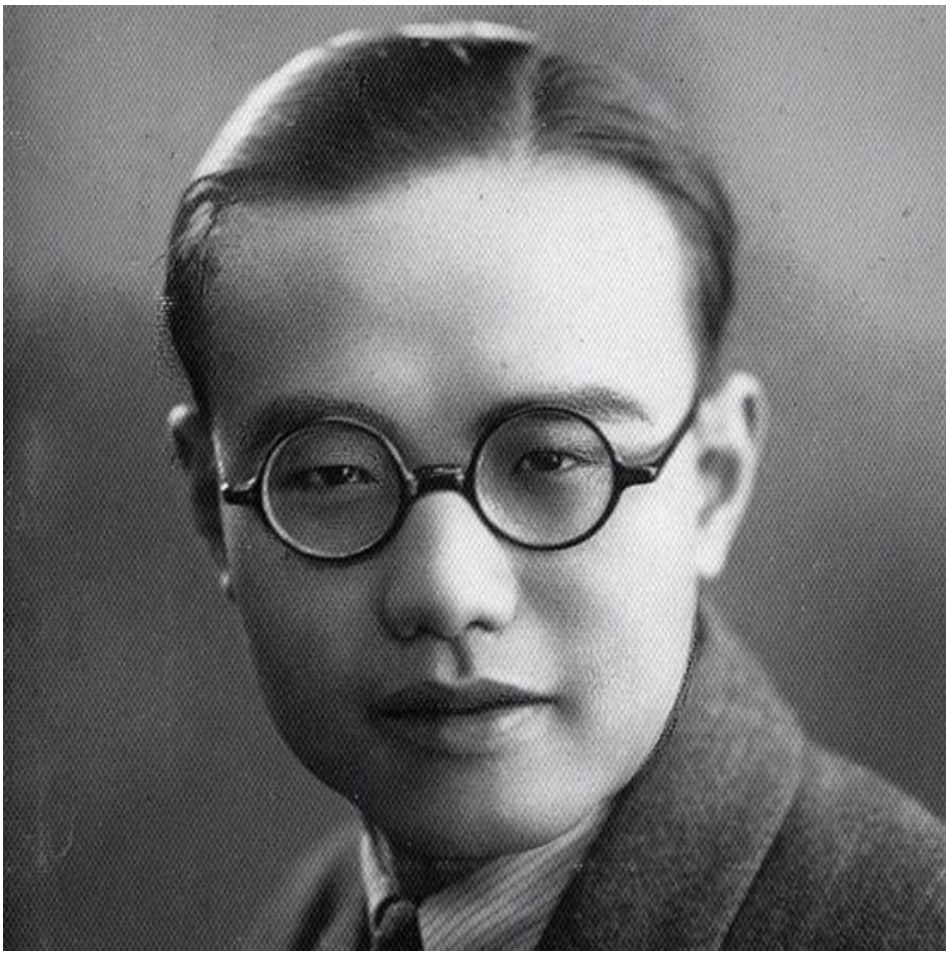
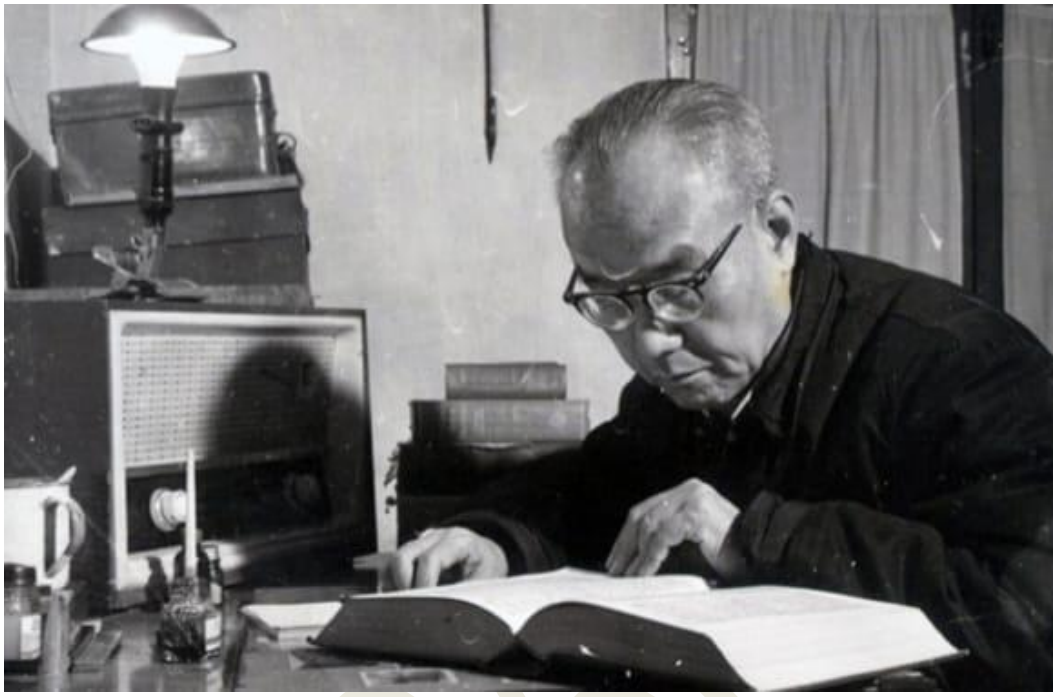
Biography of Shui Tiantong



A Wandering Scholar Who Sang of His Unfulfilled Aspirations

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Chapter 1
A Young Man from Lanzhou and the Tsinghua Campus (1909–1923)



On 6 February 1909, Shui Tiantong was born in Lanzhou, Gansu Province. His father, Shui Zi, was a distinguished educator in modern Gansu who had served as Director of the Gansu Provincial Department of Education. Shui's biological mother died when he was young, and he grew up under the care of his grandmother. He was the eldest son in the family, while Shui Tianzhong, who later became an art critic, was his younger half-brother.

From an early age, Shui demonstrated an exceptional talent for language and a strong desire to express himself. During the early Republican period, when students were encouraged to

deliver speeches in public, his teachers frequently lifted him onto the platform to give impromptu addresses. His ability to speak eloquently was among the earliest qualities remembered by his relatives and friends. In 1923, at the age of fourteen, Shui gained admission to Tsinghua School. Before his departure, relatives and friends cautioned him: “It is good that you are going to study at Tsinghua, but we shall see whether you can endure the hardships there.” Many years later, he recalled with laughter: “What hardships? The rooms were too warm in winter, the electric lights were so bright at night that I could hardly sleep, and we had to go swimming every day. I suppose those were the hardships they meant.”

Shui described his six years at Tsinghua as “the happiest period of my life.” There, he not only established a solid foundation in English but also learned to swim under the “kind yet firm” insistence of his physical education teacher, John Ma. Swimming transformed his previously frail constitution, shaped by his upbringing on the Loess Plateau. The Tsinghua library became, in his words, “the window through which I first glimpsed the world.”

At Tsinghua, Shui became acquainted with fellow students including Liu Wuji, Luo Niansheng, Luo Ailan, Zhu Xiang and Chen Jia, with whom he joined the Tsinghua Literary Society. He served as editor-in-chief of Tsinghua Weekly and published numerous articles under the pen name “Zhuobing,” gradually

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developing a sharp and incisive writing style. Between 1927 and 1930, he published more than thirty pieces in Tsinghua Weekly alone, using both his real name and pseudonym. These works ranged from current affairs commentary, personal reflections and modern poetry to translated fiction, fables and even one-act plays. His modern poetry displayed distinctly Symbolist characteristics, combining mystery and suggestive imagery with a “hazy and restrained beauty.” Scholars later considered his poems outstanding even when compared with the classics of Chinese Symbolist poetry from the 1920s and 1930s.

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Chapter 2
An Intellectual Quest Across the Ocean (1929–1933)

In the autumn of 1929, Shui Tiantong graduated from Tsinghua and travelled to the United States for further education. He first entered the third year at Oberlin College in Ohio, studying English literature and Latin. Oberlin was then regarded as a distinguished institution comparable in reputation to Harvard and Yale. Shui later told his student Huang Bikang that what he appreciated most about Oberlin was its “liberal and humanistic breathing,” an atmosphere of intellectual freedom and humanism.

A year later, he transferred to Cornell University, where he studied Medieval Latin. He subsequently passed a rigorous interview and entered Harvard University's graduate school, studying under I. A. Richards, a pioneer of Anglo-American New Criticism. Shui specialised in Medieval English Literature while also studying comparative mythology, and in 1933 he obtained a master's degree from Harvard University.

During his three years at Harvard, Shui received training in some of the most advanced approaches to literary criticism. Richards was among the most important literary theorists of the twentieth century, and his methods in semantics and literary criticism profoundly influenced Shui's subsequent

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academic development. After graduating in 1933, Shui undertook short periods of study at the University of Cambridge in Britain, the University of Marburg in Germany and the University of Paris in France, studying French, German, Spanish and Italian.

Having left Lanzhou as a young student, Shui had undergone six years of education at Tsinghua followed by four years of academic training in the United States. By then, he had acquired proficiency in numerous languages, including English, French, German, Japanese, Italian and Latin. He was twenty-four years old and preparing to return to China.

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Chapter 3
From Shandong University to the Basic English Society (1933–1937)

In the summer of 1933, Shui Tiantong returned to China. Through an introduction by his senior Tsinghua alumnus Liang Shiqiu, he became a lecturer in the Department of Foreign Languages at Shandong University in Qingdao. The department was headed by Hong Shen, an old classmate from Tsinghua.

His time at Shandong University was relatively brief. In 1936, the provincial government under Han Fuju sought to place Shandong University under its “direct leadership,” creating considerable anxiety among the university's faculty and students. At precisely this time, Shui's former teacher, R. D. Jameson, invited him to Beiping to participate in the China Basic English Society.

Basic English was a simplified system of English developed by the British scholar C. K. Ogden, using a vocabulary of 850 words with the aim of making English an international language. Richards and Ogden intended to promote the system worldwide and selected China as a priority country. Their initiative received financial support from the Rockefeller Foundation and the endorsement of prominent figures in China's intellectual and cultural circles. Jameson and Richards

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persuaded Shui to assume responsibility for the undertaking. He readily accepted, resigned from his position at Shandong University, and began implementing the language experiment as a director of the Basic English Society.

Shui conducted educational experiments in the Beijing–Tianjin region and compiled and published Basic English textbooks and various bilingual English–Chinese literary readers. In doing so, he completely set aside the research projects in literary criticism and cultural anthropology that he had already begun.

The Marco Polo Bridge Incident of 7 July 1937 brought the society's educational experiments to an abrupt halt. Shui used this period to translate The Essays of Francis Bacon. In his preface, he wrote: “When I began translating this work, the enemy was invading, Beiping and Tianjin had fallen, scholars had scattered, and books and records had vanished. The translator had no choice but to explore this profound darkness by the faint light of a firefly...”

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Chapter 4
Principal of the Yunnan English College: Foreign Language Education Amid War (1937–1948)

After the Basic English Society relocated to Yunnan, it cooperated with the provincial authorities to establish the Yunnan Provincial English College, with Shui Tiantong serving as principal. Wu Fuheng, who had recently returned from studying in the United States, was appointed Director of Academic Affairs.

During his ten years in Yunnan, from 1939 to 1948, Shui drew upon his extensive knowledge of English literature to train large numbers of foreign-language specialists for the war effort and local education. At the invitation of Xiong Qinglai, then President of Yunnan University, he also lectured at that institution. He maintained close relationships with professors in the departments of Foreign Languages and Chinese at National Southwestern Associated University, including Wu Mi, Robert Winter and Wen Yiduo.

Shui possessed an upright and outspoken personality, the temperament of a poet, and a certain pride in his intellectual abilities. He lived next door to Robert Winter, with whom he once disagreed over a minor matter. Winter insisted that he had personally witnessed the incident and declared emphatically, “I have been keeping an eye on this for some

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time!" Refusing to concede, Shui immediately retorted, "I don't mind if you had been keeping two eyes on this all the time..."

While serving as principal of the Yunnan English College between 1939 and 1948, Shui trained substantial numbers of interpreters for the Nationalist armed forces. Many of these interpreters participated in transport operations along the famous Hump air route, making important contributions to China's resistance against Japan.

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Chapter 5
Returning to Lanzhou: Founder of Lanzhou University's English Department (1947–1957)

In the autumn of 1947, the Department of English was formally established as one of the first five departments within the College of Liberal Arts at National Lanzhou University. Professor Shui Tiantong, a Harvard graduate and distinguished specialist in English language and literature who also served as Dean of the College of Liberal Arts, concurrently assumed the position of department head.

In 1948, Shui was formally appointed Dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Head of the Department of English at Lanzhou University. He introduced the Basic English teaching method, applying the experience he had gained through the China Basic English Society to higher education in foreign languages in northwestern China. From 1948 to 1952, he served as Professor and Dean of the College of Liberal Arts at Lanzhou University.

In 1953, Shui transferred to Northwest University, where he served as Professor and Head of the Department of Foreign Languages. In 1954, he joined the Beijing Foreign Languages Institute as a Professor of English and concurrently served as Director of the Library, remaining in that position for more than twenty years, from 1954 to 1976.

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His translation of The Essays of Francis Bacon, completed in 1939 for the Sino-American Cultural Foundation Committee and published by the Commercial Press, was reprinted and reissued nearly twenty times. It was subsequently included in the Commercial Press's prestigious series of Chinese translations of world classics, becoming an exemplary work of English-to-Chinese literary translation. For nearly a century, this translation has continued to influence Chinese readers' understanding of Bacon.

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Chapter 6
A Long Intellectual Winter (1957–1979)

In 1957, Shui Tiantong was wrongly labelled a “Rightist.” For a scholar who had devoted his entire life to language and literature, this marked the beginning of an intellectual winter lasting more than two decades.

He was removed from his teaching duties and assigned to compilation and translation work within a Chinese–English dictionary team. From his arrival at the Beijing Foreign Languages Institute in 1954 until 1976, he spent more than twenty years serving as Library Director. During these decades, political campaigns interrupted his academic career, yet he did not cease working. He participated in the compilation of Chinese–English dictionaries, continuing to contribute to China's linguistic scholarship in a different capacity.

In 1979, Shui “moved beneath the moon,” an expression he used in his later autobiographical reflections, carrying a touch of poetry and resignation. He returned to Lanzhou University as a professor and began supervising master's students specialising in Shakespeare studies. Although he was already seventy years old, his academic life experienced a remarkable renewal.

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Chapter 7
A Distinguished Shakespeare Scholar and His Final Years of Academic Work (1979–1988)

Following China's reform and opening-up, Shui Tiantong became a respected senior figure among the older generation of foreign-language scholars. At Lanzhou University, he supervised master's students specialising in Shakespeare, generously passing on the knowledge accumulated throughout his life. Proficient in English, French, German, Japanese, Italian, Latin and several other languages, he concentrated primarily on Shakespeare studies and became a nationally recognised Shakespeare scholar and translator.

He recommended Sir Edmund Chambers's William Shakespeare: A Study of Facts and Problems as essential reading for Shakespeare studies. This classic work was subsequently edited and translated into Chinese by Pu Long, a senior professor and distinguished translator at Lanzhou University, filling a longstanding gap caused by the absence of a Chinese translation.

Shui's academic positions and honours included Honorary Council Member of the China English Language Education Association, Honorary Council Member of the Translators Association of China, Council Member of the Chinese Comparative Literature Association, Adviser to the Gansu

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Translators Association, and Professor in the College of Liberal Arts at Lanzhou University.

On 1 October 1988, Shui Tiantong passed away in Lanzhou at the age of seventy-nine.

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Chapter 8
Concluding Reflections: A Wandering Scholar Who Sang of His Unfulfilled Aspirations

Shui Tiantong's life can be summarised through a phrase he used in his own reflections: “A sword-strumming guest who wandered for half a lifetime.”

The expression “strumming the sword” originates from the story of Feng Xuan and Lord Mengchang in the Strategies of the Warring States. Feeling unappreciated, Feng Xuan leaned against a pillar, struck his sword and sang, “Long sword, let us return home!” By describing himself as a “sword-strumming guest,” Shui expressed the experiences of an intellectual who had wandered through the upheavals of his age, enduring misunderstanding, neglect and displacement.

Yet his wanderings were far from meaningless. From Lanzhou to Tsinghua, from Oberlin to Harvard, from Qingdao to Yunnan, and from Beijing back to Lanzhou, his journeys traced the complete trajectory of an intellectual searching for a place of purpose and belonging during a turbulent historical period. He was a translator whose Essays of Francis Bacon was reprinted nearly twenty times and became a model among Chinese translations of world literary classics. He was an educator who trained interpreters for China's wartime efforts at the Yunnan English College, helped establish the English Department at

Lanzhou University, and supervised postgraduate students in Shakespeare studies during his later years. He was a Shakespeare scholar who contributed to the early foundations of Shakespeare studies in China. He was also a poet whose early modern verse was considered outstanding even among the classic Symbolist poetry of the 1920s and 1930s.

Huang Bikang, a former student of Shui and a professor at Peking University, wrote in a commemorative article: “Professor Shui Tiantong was a distinguished scholar and educator who experienced an academic rebirth after China's reform and opening-up, continuing to work diligently in university teaching and scholarly research throughout the 1980s.”

From the young boy from Lanzhou who was lifted onto a platform to deliver speeches at Tsinghua, to the master's student studying literary criticism under I. A. Richards at Harvard; from the principal of the Yunnan English College during wartime, to the scholar labelled a “Rightist” who quietly compiled dictionaries in the library of the Beijing Foreign Languages Institute; and from his self-deprecating description as a wandering, sword-strumming guest to his return to Lanzhou University at seventy to train postgraduate Shakespeare scholars, Shui Tiantong devoted seventy-nine years to a life that embodied the struggles and achievements of a Chinese intellectual during the twentieth century's most

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turbulent decades. His legacy survives in the nearly twenty reprintings of his translation of Bacon's essays and in the hearts of every student he taught.

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