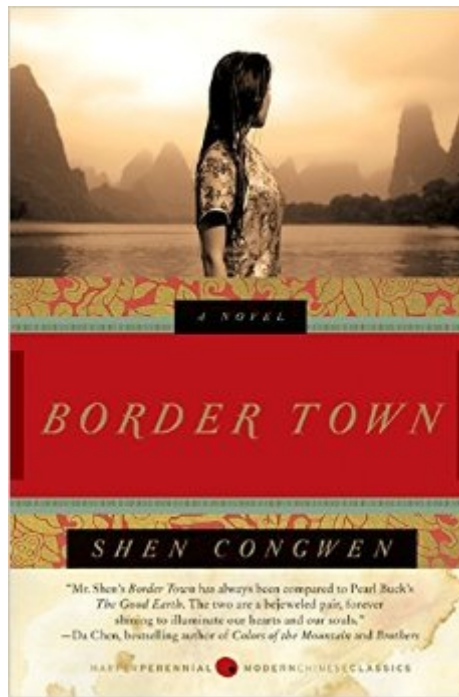


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Border Town: A Novel



Synopsis

New in the Harper Perennial Modern Chinese Classics series, *Border Town* is a classic Chinese novel "banned by Mao's regime" that captures the ideals of rural China through the moving story of a young woman and her grandfather. Originally published in 1934 by author Shen Congwen, this beautifully written novel tells the story of Cuicui, a young country girl who is coming of age in rural China in the tumultuous time before the communist revolution.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Congwen is one of China's literary giants. When I say "giants," I mean it. Congwen is often dubbed the "greatest lyric novelist" of modern China. This new translation by Jeffrey C. Kinkley is a masterpiece. This book was originally written in the time before the Communists took over China. Congwen suffered a breakdown during the communist revolution and never published another work of fiction. This story is a glimpse into the beauty of a countryside so rich in history. The storytelling is wonderful. This is a coming of age story set in rural China. The main character is a young girl named Cuicui. It's hard to discuss the plot (which includes a tragic turn for a family member-- I don't even want to say which one) without giving away much of the story. I hate "spoiler reviews". I don't want to make it impossible to enjoy the book, so I'll just say that this is a classic of fine Chinese literature. That really should be enough. Don't miss this modern translation. Recommended, without any reservations.

This is a beautiful novel, very well written in a sensitive, yet fluid, rich and accessible language, with

a very clear ethnographic flavor. The imaginative creation of characters is clearly set in a specific rural space and historical epoch, at the end of imperial times, before Japanese invasion and communism. Center stage belongs to a loving and caring relationship between a young orphan girl and her grandfather. Even though they live alone at the outskirts of a small rural town set by a river, they are embedded in both a close knit network of relations with the town's dwellers, and a flux of passengers dependent on their sense of loyal duty and hard work to get across the river on a manually pulled boat. Clear social class distinctions, the annual recreation of a traditional dragon-boat festival, daily life immersed in the rhythms and textures of both work and nature, the granddaughter's coming of age and her shy discovery of love, unexpected accidents, and more. A somewhat romantic view of rural pre-revolutionary life, though. Conflicting power relations are left out of this otherwise lovable story.

This lush, bittersweet short novel centers around the lives of a ferryman and his orphaned granddaughter Cuicui living by a river bank outside a remote town on the Szechuan-Hunan provincial border (hence the title). The novel takes place at the time it was written, after the fall of the dynasty but before the chaos of the Japanese invasion and World War 2, when ancient traditions and morality were still intact, especially in distant outposts such as the town of Chadong. Cuicui, aged 13 to 15 through the course of the story, dreams of romance while dreading the negative consequence of marriage: leaving her beloved, aging grandfather. Meanwhile she is courted by two brothers from the nearby town, one through a match-maker, the other by means of the Szechuanese tradition of love song serenades. In her innocence, Cuicui both deliberately and unintentionally ignores the brothers' advances. The author depicts a beautiful and idyllic landscape as an almost cinematic backdrop for the reserved, taciturn relations between his characters. He employs short bursts of emotional dialogue, then pulls away to focus on the minutiae of rural life--the steel striker used to light a pipe, the feel of silk crepe turban cloth, jars of tung oil and bamboo tubes filled with wine--in the way that a bashful girl turns her head aside out of modesty. Chen packs concentrated bursts of emotion into scenes throughout the novel, telling a heart-grabbing story of life by the river. It's a gorgeous book, considered a masterpiece of modern Chinese writing, for which the author was to have been awarded the 1988 Nobel Prize for Literature had he not died just before the official announcement. The translation is beautifully written. Strongly recommended.

I bought this on a whim and was not disappointed. The writing and translation are beautiful. It's a

simple story and not overly exciting, but the author paints a picture of a time and place that is enchanting. The culture and innocence of that time is so different from ours in the US, perhaps that's why some people aren't keen on this book. I found the notes at the end by the translator to be informative and interesting enough to look into the China and its' history in more depth.

Perhaps the third most important modern Chinese writer (after Eileen Chang and Lu Xun), Shen Congwen depicts in *Border Town* an idyllic, if not idealistic, vision of rural Chinese life just after the dawn of the last century. With an impassive poise and a delicate touch, Shen gives us a sketch that, instead of focusing on the headlines of the day to compose a realistic picture of the times, gazes into the details of a farmer's family's lives as filtered through something of a love triangle where headlines are almost absorbed completely into people's everyday reality without a trace, shedding a vast and poignant light on the lives it illustrates. My criticism is Shen sometimes seems to feel a little too 'sympathetic' toward his characters and their way of life (matched perhaps only by his repugnance of the Communists' exploitation thereof) that *Border Town* borders on utopia, turning more into nostalgic parable than doing the reality of these people full justice. I feel at times a small, moralizing, apophatically polemic voice through the text's background pulls the author down from arriving at a true, elevated and wide vantage. I didn't like the implicit allusion to the fall of Eden either, or the 'plot' of the love triangle, which feels forced. The publishers' book descriptions are banal as usual, and the unfortunate blab on the cover placing Shen Congwen and Pearl S Buck in the same sentence (like comparing Henry Miller to EL James) tries to make a dumb and racist appeal to Westerners longing for the exotic that safely conforms to their stereotype of China the Beautiful (perpetuated not only by Westerners but also by Chinese themselves trying to pander to those audiences). However, despite these flaws, I recommend *Border Town* as essential for anyone interested in modern Chinese writing. I would recommend more heartily Shen Congwen's autobiography for those who read Chinese.

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