


REALIZING THE CHINESE DREAM

ABOVE OF THE "LADDERS TO HEAVEN"

*A modern Chinese version
of the Promethean myth*

Chen Guo
Translated by Gong Rui et. al.

 CHINA INTERCONTINENTAL PRESS

 SICHUAN EDUCATION PUBLISHING HOUSE

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图书在版编目(CIP)数据

天梯之上: 英文/陈果著.

—北京: 五洲传播出版社, 2014. 12

ISBN 978-7-5085-3003-1

I. ①天… II. ①陈… III. ①报告文学—中国

—当代—英文 IV. ①I25

中国版本图书馆CIP数据核字(2014)第286514号

作 者: 陈 果

翻 译: 龚 锐

出 版 人: 荆孝敏

责任编辑: 张美景

装帧设计: 李 杨

天梯之上

出版发行: 五洲传播出版社

地 址: 北京市海淀区北三环中路31号生产力大楼B座7层

邮 编: 100088 电 话: 010-82005972, 010-82007837

网 址: www.cicc.org.cn

出 版: 四川教育出版社

地 址: 成都市槐树街2号

邮 编: 610031 电 话: 028-86259315

网 址: www.chuanjiaoshe.com

印 刷: 中煤涿州制图印刷厂北京分厂

开 本: 115×185毫米 1/32

印 张: 7

版 次: 2015年1月第一版第一次印刷

书 号: ISBN 978-7-5085-3003-1

定 价: 109.00元

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Foreword

May the “Light of the Ladders to Heaven” Shine into Our Hearts

For thousands of years, perched on cut-off, precipitous cliffs in Sichuan’s Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture, the isolated Erping Village inhabited by Yi ethnic minorities in Wushidaqiao Township of Ganluo County has observed the civilization evolving at its feet, while silently guarding the lonely mountain.

Filled with a strong sense of ethnic identity and driven by a passion for education, Li Guilin and Lu Jianfen, a married couple both of the Yi ethnic minority, left their home in Hanyuan County of Sichuan’s Ya’an city and took root in this remote village that can only be reached after climbing five very steep ladders, known by the locals as “ladders to Heaven.” They have spent 19 years paving a path towards education and moral learning for the children living in the mountain district.

Above the “ladders to Heaven”, the torch of hope is thus kindled, illuminating a vision of civilization.

In this book, the author uses plain narrative to describe a modern Chinese version of the Promethean myth. Just like the billowing Dadu River and the grand Jinkou Canyon near Emei Mountains, the couple’s stories arouse nothing but a great awe!

What makes this book so gripping is its simple narration and beautiful illustrations that bring much aesthetic pleasure. Through vivid details, impressive moments of the couple’s contribution throughout those 19 years are reproduced. Readers are also offered with a truthful depiction of the alluring landscapes in the region along with the colorful Yi customs.

Many people have been profoundly moved by what Li Guilin and Lu Jianfen have done, and they have in turn impressed the couple. The five hand-made wooden ladders are now replaced by secure and sturdy steel ladders. The ethnic unity and friendship demonstrated in their mutual sympathy and support are evidence of the Chinese people’s

moral values and the nation's long tradition as a land of great hospitalities.

Having read the manuscripts, I find three words may be properly used to illustrate what the couple has done for the villagers: wine, torch, and ladders. Wine and fire are highly valued by the Yi ethnic minority people. The Yi couple has lit the torch of knowledge for the children in the remote mountain village. Their ordinary but admirable life may be compared to wine, giving forth intoxicating aroma. Relating them to "ladders" is perhaps more appropriate in that it is by ascending those "ladders to heaven" they have helped build that the children have gained access to school, out from the mountains into the big world.

Time flies! It's a great delight to see the once isolated Erping Village and its helpless villagers have changed in the children's reading sound, and are striding forward towards civilization.

An illustrious era is in need of a great spiritual power. Li Guilin and Lu Jianfen have inspired us all with their selfless devotion and extraordinary perseverance.

Building and climbing the "ladders to Heaven,"

the two teachers virtually unknown to the general public have sacrificed their most precious years in life for helping those in need, which strikes us as the most awe-inspiring dedication in this illustrious era.

How lofty are the “ladders to Heaven!”

Zha Youliang

Prologue

“Some might say that 18 years of life is long, some might say it’s not. However, for a couple who have been teaching in a village sitting on a cliff 2,800 meters above sea level for 18 years, it’s definitely a long time and with deep meaning...”

On the night of February 2, 2009, the “2008 Touching China Award Show” presented by China Central Television (CCTV) attracted hundreds of millions of Chinese viewers. Using the above opening remark with suspense, the prominent CCTV host Bai Yansong directed the attention of TV audience towards a husband and wife, arousing the curiosity about what had happened to the couple in those 18 years.

The TV screen then moved to the Canyon of Dadu River, showing the roaring waters, and then the vast mountains surrounded by soaring clouds.

Albeit the ordinary natural scenes and plain narration, the story told was neither ordinary nor plain.

The scenes shown on TV could not be more familiar to Li Guilin – the great canyon, the dangerous mountain paths, and the students full of vigor in the primitive and peaceful Yi village. But when he watched these scenes on TV at home now, they seemed to him familiar yet strange, stirring mixed bittersweet feelings in his heart. He sat in front of the TV silently, his mind tossing with the waves and torrents.

His wife, Lu Jianfen, sat next to him, caressing the hair of her younger son Li Xiang. The elder boy Li Wei had gone to school, and Li Xiang would also go back to school soon. For Jianfen, the two sons meant a lot to her.

The seats facing the TV set directly were reserved for Guilin's parents, with others sitting around them. They keep this seating pattern whenever the family has a rather rare chance to sit together.

Beside the TV cabinet, a bouquet of flowers – sunflowers, baby's breaths and carnations – stood quietly in a vase, giving forth a delicate fragrance.

"They have kindled a torch of knowledge on the remote mountain paths and helped children climb up the ladders on high cliffs leading to school. For 18 years, they have lived a modest

life, persistently toiling in the field of hope to make miracles happen." This was the presentation remark delivered by the Organizing Committee of "Touching China Award" to Li Guilin and his wife Lu Jianfen.

Guilin stood up and put his arms around his wife for a long while. When he took his arms away, he suddenly saw her face all in tears – a face no longer looking young.

Silently, Guilin walked out.

He just wanted to cool himself down in the breeze. However, an amazing view aroused a new surge of emotion in him – he saw a meteor shooting across the dark sky like a fireball, drawing a brilliant curve.

Guilin didn't believe he could see such a rare view. He rubbed his eyes very hard. But when he opened his eyes again, the meteor had disappeared into the distant horizon.

The place where the meteor fell was his another home – Erping Village across the Dadu River valley where he and his wife had set up a primary school and spent 18 years developing and protecting it.

Eighteen years ago, he made the toughest decision in his life. He left his home in Hanyuan and moved to Liangshan along a remote mountain trail,

a trail that seems long enough to take his whole life to go.

He felt a throb in his heart. Isn't that meteor like himself, living far away from home? Doesn't that curve just resemble his past 18 years devoted to the mountainous area?

I. "Ladders to Heaven" in the Isolated Erping Village

1. A teacher's responsibility is heavier than a mountain

In September 1985, Li Guilin graduated from Matuo Middle School in Hanyuan County. Back then, middle school graduates were quite rare in rural Hanyuan, and Guilin, known for his good handwriting, had many opportunities to choose a nice job. But he decided with no hesitation to be a substitute teacher at a primary school back in his hometown, Wanli Village in Hanyuan County.

"A substitute teacher is still a teacher after all!" In Guilin's view, being a teacher is the best job in the world. On the day when he was offered the job by the school, he was so happy that he celebrated the occasion drinking a lot of wine as if he were celebrating his wedding.

Guilin is very strict on his work, and whatever he does, he wants to do it best, wishing that no one else could have ever done it better.