

PRIZE-WINNING STORIES FROM CHINA

1980-1981

By Ke Yunlu, Zhang Xianliang and others

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Editor's Note

The release of creative energy in the post-"cultural revolution" period has continued to produce works of high quality. Appropriately, Mao Dun wrote in his foreword to the first number of *Selections of Stories* which came out in July 1980: "A new spring has arrived. There has never been so much creativity for the past 30 years." The present anthology comprises 16 of the many prize-winning short stories for the years 1980 and 1981.

As contemporary Chinese literature entered a new age, the writers recounted their sufferings during the "cultural revolution". Many of the pieces in the previous anthology, *Prize-Winning Stories from China 1978-1979*, are based on personal experiences of the nightmare of the soul. The term "scar literature" gained currency in the early post-"cultural revolution" period. It is hoped that readers will not jest at these scars — certainly not those who have felt the wounds of life, which may have been of a different kind.

But calm always returns after even the most violent storm, as nature recovers from disorder. Any wound will eventually heal. Time alleviates even the greatest pain, in one's memory, and the mind will sooner or later regain its former peace. Of course, traces of past sufferings, recollected not yet in tranquillity, can still be found in a number of stories which came out in 1980 and 1981. However, in general, the term "scar literature" can no longer accurately describe the body of literature that was produced in those two years. The writers feel it is their mission to give realistic reflections of life and experience in their concerted efforts to create a modern socialist literature. They believe, as does Hamlet when he comments on the purpose of acting, that the artist should "hold the mirror up to

nature". Life is not a simple story that can be simply told. The deep commitment to life and experience has been the Chinese writers' source of inspiration and strength.

The socialist writer believes that artistic creation is a lot more than indulgence in self-expression. In his vision of life and society, he sees a strong bond between him and the reader. That sense of responsibility of the Chinese writer has sometimes been overlooked by Western scholars — I dare not use the word "misunderstood".

What do the stories in this anthology have in common? It is love and the sense of discipline that life demands. In these stories, love manifests itself in its different forms and its range is wide: from romantic young love with its joys and agonies, to the love of one's country which may at times turn out to be the cause of frustration — perhaps even resentment, though not blatantly expressed, which springs from the very depths of that intense love itself

The themes vary; so, too, the style. There is light humour in the story "Phoenix Eyes", unfailing devotion to an ideal in "A Soldier in the Tianshan Mountains", the psychological study of envy in "A Saleswoman", the deep concern about the abuse of power in "Thirty Million", and so on. The writers welcome the new hopes which have dawned on China, but their sensitivity, a rare gift, also enables them to see the new problems which have come with social change. Their literary merits apart, then, these stories may serve as a record, written with imagination, of Chinese life in a new age.

It is too early to predict what new literary trends the writers of the stories in this anthology may have set. What happens after the birth of a new day is open to speculation. Their achievements, even if they may not have been adequately reflected in the English translations, have certainly earned them each a place in the history of modern Chinese literature, which has yet to be written.

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KE YUNLU

(1947 -)



Ke Yunlu, or Bao Guolu before he changed his name, was born in Shanghai in 1947. After graduation from a senior middle school in Beijing in 1968, he worked as a peasant in Shanxi Province. Since 1972, he has been working in a polyamide fibre factory in Yuci city.

"Thirty Million" is his first publication. His latest work is "A High-Ranking Cadre Went to Beijing", a short story published in 1981.

THIRTY MILLION

Ke Yunlu

I

Early 1979. A vinylon factory, still under construction.

On the ground between the buildings, heaps of steel bars and planks were lying pell-mell. In the bitter wind, scraps of paper from the cement bags were flying. Members of the factory's Construction Committee were accompanying several high-ranking officials of the Provincial Bureau of Light Industry in their inspection of the building site.

"Thirty million and no cutting down, not even one cent? It's steely, isn't it?" The man who uttered these words was the Bureau's Party Secretary and Director, Ding Meng. His sweeping glance, as he gave everybody a searching look, seemed to suggest that he was plotting something. He had short grey hair. The wrinkles on his forehead were strikingly deep and the lines on his face were like cracks in the rocks, rugged and hard. His usual jesting tone clearly indicated that he was displeased.

Director Ding, who had just been restored to his former post, was a remarkable man. Before the "cultural revolution", he was well known throughout the province for being careful and resolute in performing his duties, and there were numerous accounts of his exemplary work. The object of his present visit was to examine the proposed supplementary budget of the vinylon factory, which, under construction for the past ten years, had indeed acquired the reputation of being an "age-long project". This year, plans had been put forward at last for the completion of the work within the next twelve months. But at the same time, the Joint Construction Directing Committee —

composed of the vinylon factory (Party A) and the Ninth Department of the Provincial Construction Company responsible for the building work (Party B) — submitted a report requesting an increased funding of thirty million yuan. It should be borne in mind that the original budget for the building of the factory was fifty million. Because of over-spending, however, time and again investment had had to be increased. By now, a total of one hundred and fifty million had already been consumed. Undoubtedly, it was absurd to grant another thirty million in order to complete a project which originally required fifty million.

Director Ding knew full well that at present it was an extremely difficult task to cut down investments. Even the Planning Committee, the Construction Committee and the Central Government could not find a proper way to cope with that. Everybody said that the present situation could never be changed. But he wanted to have a go, a good go, at this "present situation", which nobody had the courage to challenge so far. He also felt he was in a favourable position to tackle it: the Party Secretary of the vinylon factory and Chief Director of the Joint Construction Directing Committee, Zhang Anbang, was a cadre trained and promoted by him when they were working in the same textile factory in 1965. He knew Zhang well and naturally believed that he would be a help in his present mission.

However, things did not turn out to be what he had expected. The two of them had not been in contact with each other for well over ten years, and now Zhang Anbang had changed into someone distant and unfathomable. Although he did recognize the warmth and ease with which he was treated as an old superior, there seemed to be a certain barrier subtly erected behind all that politeness and respect. Under Zhang Anbang's arrangement, the examination of the supplementary budget for the past few days seemed to be shrouded in a thick fog. On the surface, everything appeared to be precise and there was no evidence whatsoever of any unjustifiable request for further funds. If one asked for the accounts, a pile of "Budget Reports" and

"Calculation Reports" would be sent in, something like two feet high. The hundreds of pages were filled with thousands of figures worked out by the computer. If one wanted to hear some opinions, well, Party A and Party B of the Joint Construction Directing Committee had already prepared detailed and relevant reports. In short, it all appeared that the budget was authentic and the only thing left to be done was its approval.

Somehow, the perfunctory politeness and the official air irritated Ding Meng more and more. Eventually, he could not help feeling that somebody had spread a cover over everything and that he had not seen the true facts. Who had done this? Zhang Anbang? Ding Meng had yet to decide.

"We've made every effort to trim the budget. It can't shrink any more." The man holding out his hands in reply was no other than Zhang Anbang himself, the Party Secretary of the factory. He had a long and oval fat face, with bright eyes which were full of life. The voice was sonorous even though he was making such a casual remark, but the contrived tone conveying the feeling of closeness was meant to be a special appeal to an old superior for his appreciation of the way a subordinate had been trying hard to cope. After these few words, he smiled cordially at his subordinates, who, all clustered round him, expressed at once their agreement with fawning nods and smiles.

"What's that?" asked Ding Meng, pointing at a building constructed for temporary use. It looked like a ragged warehouse.

"It's the temporary dining hall," Zhang Anbang replied placidly. He pointed at the original dining hall beside it, now filled with cement and machines. "That has become the temporary warehouse because of insufficient storage space, and we've had to build this temporary dining hall. I'm sure you'll agree that the workers shouldn't be eating in the open air."

As he spoke, they entered the "temporary dining hall". Above, were reed mats which served as the ceiling; below were broken bricks which made up the ground. The windows had no frames and the plastic sheets, fixed higgledy-piggledy by wooden strips, were flapping against the wind. Everything had a "temporary" look all right. One of the directors of the Light Industry Bureau's Construction Department confirmed, "They did submit an application for the building of the temporary dining hall."

Ding Meng glanced round the hall and snorted, "What a temporary dining hall!... Built for temporary use, why do you need cement and mortar for the walls? And the girth?... Afraid that it's too easy to be pulled down later, eh?" Ding Meng was pointing at various things that caught his eye, full of anger. "Such enormous space, wide doors and wide windows. Look, even the foundation for the partition walls has been laid. So this is a temporary dining hall?... I'll tell you it's going to be a big club; all it needs is some slight alteration.... Well, cooking up a false budget and building something not stated in the plan! It's criminal."

Everybody was stunned by this totally unexpected questioning and kept silent. Embarrassment and apprehension filled the air. Nobody had ever thought that Director Ding could see through everything so easily. The matter was serious.

Zhang Anbang was a little displeased. He looked at everybody and then turned to Ding Meng. Smiling calmly, he said with some regret, "There's no other way really, Director Ding. It's inevitable because of the extreme Leftist policies insisted upon several years ago. What with slogans like 'Production first and living, second', who dare run a club openly. It wouldn't have been approved, as you well know. . . . Most of our workers in the factory are young and we have to look after their cultural interests somehow."

The sympathetic and reasonable defence changed the atmosphere. Everybody was relieved, quietly admiring Chief Director Zhang. Now it seemed that it was Ding Meng's turn to be caught in a dilemma, hard pressed for an answer.

"I see. You can claim credit for that, too, can't you?" said Ding Meng, sarcastically. "It's 1979 now, you know.... Why are you still playing games trying to cheat?" He noted that Zhang Anbang wanted to have more to say in defence and, waving his hand, instantly stopped him.

"First, submit a report on running a temporary dining hall on false pretences and be ready to accept any disciplinary measure."

Everybody was again shocked.

"Then send another report to the bureau and try to get its approval of the club you have in mind. All right?"

These two decisions came fast, like lightning cutting through the clouds. Everybody realized that Director Ding meant business.

Ding Meng went on; his censorious and searching eyes surveyed all the members of the Construction Committee. "It seems to me that your Chief Director is lacking in principles.... If he can do things like that, well, what about the other comrades? Why didn't any of you raise any objection, or at least report to the higher-level authorities on the matter?" Nobody said a word. It was truly a wall of silence.

The truth, of course, was that under the banner of "collective benefit", the cadres of an enterprise were often united when they asked the government for more money. That was natural and understandable. It did not pay to sabotage this "collective benefit", for everybody wanted his share, large or small. And everybody wanted to remain at his post in the work unit. That was a very common phenomenon at present, and it had been mocking and enraging Ding Meng for the past few days.

Now, under his fierce eyes, nobody dared look up — except Bai Sha, Dean of the Construction Office of the vinylon factory, a middle-aged woman technician. Nonchalantly, she brushed back a tuft of short hair which was hanging over her forehead uncovered by her blue scarf. She had a quick glance at Ding Meng and resumed her indifferent stare in another direction.

"Comrade Bai Sha, I know you are responsible for the budget. Why didn't you insist on principles?" Ding Meng's eyes fell on her, frankly criticizing her. Instantly, mild anger flushed her cheeks and cold animosity came out of her eyes.

"Director Ding, really I should be held responsible for all this," said Zhang Anbang as he stepped forward. He sounded very sincere. "All the comrades have been working very hard on specific assignments, and it hasn't been easy over the past few years. The faults are all mine; truly, they are not to blame. Besides, this matter of the temporary dining hall has nothing to do with the thirty million....

"Nothing to do with it? You being held responsible? Just you wait. You'll have a lot to answer for," said Ding Meng within himself as he looked askance at Zhang Anbang, whose tricks over the "temporary dining hall" further reinforced his conviction that there was something fishy about the thirty million. He looked at Bai Sha and asked again, "Bai Sha, what's your final comment on the thirty million?"

"Honestly, that's the minimum figure required for the completion of the vinylon factory. Our views on this are one and the same," answered Zhang Anbang instead, smiling and speaking again in the tone of an old subordinate. He very much wanted to relax the tense atmosphere.

"Anbang, it's rather odd, isn't it?" Ding Meng gave him a stern and displeased look. "You're speaking for everybody. She's not dumb, is she?"

Zhang Anbang smiled a little. His expression was one of willingness to accept any criticism from Ding Meng.

"Bai Sha, let's hear your final comment. You can't just be the dependant of your boss," said Ding Meng.

"Dependant? I haven't learned to be one yet." Bai Sha retorted coldly. Ding Meng's words had hurt her self-respect. A woman technician of well over thirty and unmarried, she was pure indifference. In her eyes, there was no need to be serious about anything at all. As long as it did not affect her, if it was thirty million, then let it be thirty million. True, she had taken part in planning the budget, but her heart had never been in it. In the factory, she merely followed the tide and did her eighthour stint everyday.

"Bai Sha, cool down a bit," said Zhang Anbang reproach-

fully but protectively. "Director Ding would like to hear your views on the thirty million."

"I don't have any," said Bai Sha, her manner still icy. "Thirty million is probably enough." She did not even look at Ding Meng. Swinging her scarf a little, she turned away and said no more.

"Probably? Is that the word used by someone working in economic planning?" Ding Meng lost his temper. His glances cut through the crowd like a sword; even his cheeks were twitching. Everybody still remained silent. Watching these silent faces, Ding Meng felt that he should keep his cool. Losing one's temper was no more than displaying one's feeling of weakness and helplessness. He desperately wanted to remove the cover which had been concealing the true facts. At once, he thought of that invaluable man, and, eyeing Zhang Anbang with disdain, said solemnly and authoritatively, "All right, if that's how things stand, I'll invite a specialist to investigate the whole matter: Qian — Wei — cong. . . . Ever heard of him?"

Bai Sha instinctively turned round, her eyes betraying her fleeting surprise.

Zhang Anbang had never expected that Ding Meng would make such a move. Nevertheless, he nodded heartily and said, "That's very good indeed! It'll be even more reliable." In his smile, there was not a single trace of uneasiness. He did not know who Qian Weicong was, but believed that even a more astute expert would not be able to find anything to query, in a matter of a few days, in the mass of figures.

"You'd better do the reduction yourselves first. . . . When you are found out, do be careful," said Ding Meng.

H

That afternoon, Bai Sha came to Zhang Anbang's home.

"If the budget needs to be redone, let's do it from scratch. As it is, it won't stand up to the scrutiny of Qian Weicong," she said plainly.

"It can't be that bad," Zhang Anbang shook his head and smiled, not the least perturbed. For, by noon he had done his probing. Qian Weicong was an ordinary engineer in charge of designs at the Bureau of Light Industry. His son, Qian Xiaobo, was a worker in the vinylon factory.

"You may not believe it, but he was a budget expert, well known throughout the country in the past," Bai Sha reminded him.

Zhang Anbang was lost for a little while. He did not know Qian Weicong was a budget expert or how influential these so-called experts were. In order to conceal his bewilderment, he laughed heartily and in his usual, kind and joking tone, when speaking to his subordinates, said, "So you're afraid? Why? It's all part of our work."

"Afraid? What have I got to be afraid of?" Irritated, Bai Sha gave him a sour look. "I only feel it's not worth getting into trouble, that's all. There's no need to." As she finished her words, she turned and left.

Watching her slender shadow disappear outside the door, Zhang Anbang realized the situation was serious and that he had to take counteraction immediately. However, he remained seated in the sofa for a few seconds as if he were in a trance. Then, all of a sudden, he recalled the private talk Ding Meng had with him in the morning after the inspection. His words were so fair, sincere and straightforward that Zhang Anbang was rather moved. At the time, meeting Ding Meng's solemn and kind eyes, he did have second thoughts about the "thirty million".

The telephone on the desk rang. It was a call from the Bureau of Materials demanding the workers recruitment quota. Zhang Anbang had promised a few extra job openings in order that the children of some of the Bureau's Directors could be given positions in the Provincial Construction Company—that had to do with the "thirty million" too. Since people from the Bureau of Materials always gave themselves airs, Zhang Anbang kept saying "It's O.K."