



LIU HENG

THE
OBSESSED

and Other Selected Writings



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Preface

Literature may reflect the ethos of a country or a nation, while at the same time it can transcend the limits of time and space to most widely resonate a truly universal humanity. Literary works of art that move hearts may even inspire the compassion of strangers toward a people or country...

This "Panda Series" of books, expertly translated into English, compiles the works of well-known modern and contemporary Chinese authors around themes such as the city and the countryside, love and marriage, minority folk stories and historical legends. These works reflect the true spirit and everyday lives of the Chinese people, while widely resonating with their changing spiritual and social horizons.

Published from the 1980s, through more than 100 titles in English, this series continues to open wider the window for readers worldwide to better understand China through its new literature. Many familiar and fond readers await the latest in this "Panda Series." This publication of the "Panda Series" consolidates and looks back at earlier released literary works to draw new readers, while stirring the fond memories of old friends, to let more people share the experiences and views of the Chinese people in recent decades. We express our sincere appreciation to all authors, translators and editors who have engaged in their dedicated and meticulous work over the years to bring out these works. It is their passion and endeavor that have enabled this series to appear now in luminous distinction.

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Foreword

Li Ziyun

LIU Heng is one of the outstanding young Chinese writers to emerge in the 1990s. He and several other young writers have been responsible for the popularity of new realism in Chinese writing. However, his works are the most influential.

Since 1979 Chinese literature has seen a number of dramatic changes. Since the 20's modern Chinese literature with a traditional base was modelled after French and Russian critical realism of the 18th and 19th centuries. Then the Soviet Union's literature exerted a huge influence on it. After the establishment of the People's Republic, the government modified the Russian principles of socialist realism into revolutionary realism and romantic revolutionary realism. These became the tenets of creative writing. Although the word "realism" was used, this form of writing no longer magnified life or reflected the times. Over a long period it became a means of disseminating policy and clouding issues. Only a few works were able to portray life more or less factually. During this historic period, China was cut off from any cultural exchange with the West. Chinese authors were only exposed to Russian and Eastern European writers. As a consequence the only available model was again, realism. Therefore, their best works

belong to that genre.

After 1979, opening to the West and reforms brought a great influx of Western writings. A great variety of modern Western literature that was barred from China became available. Stream of consciousness, the new novel, absurdism, surrealism and fantasy were a complete departure from the critical realism of 18th and 19th century, or for that matter, Russian literature. A new era had begun. China's policy in regard to literature also underwent a change. The government no longer insisted that literature must be subservient to politics, and be its mouth-piece. Nor did it insist any longer that the only acceptable means of expression had to satisfy both the needs of politics and literature. Furthermore, it no longer dictated what and how to write. Writers were given more freedom to select subjects and explore new ways of expression. They were thinking and choosing. Many schools of writing appeared.

Of course, some writers stuck to traditional realism. These were men with a social conscience, who were influenced by classical and modern Chinese literature. The axiom that writing must have universal appeal and express the cares of the masses remained. By exposing social ills they became the voice of the people. Many of these writers also adapted certain Western conventions according to their needs.

However, newer writers, impatient with traditional ways which they considered behind the times, experimented with new techniques. Their works can be grouped into two categories. The first is what is called the "root school" of writing. This is quite different from the Western notion of searching for personal

roots. Instead it probed the origins of culture. More particularly, it searched for the effect of tradition on the formation of Chinese character. This school of writing is clearly influenced by Western modernism. Stylistically, it utilises symbolism and allegory, and often certain philosophies as well. It also brought about a sub-genre concerned mainly with exposing primitive customs of remote places. The first category was often too subjective, while the latter pandered to sensationalism. Readers quickly lost interest. The appearance of another form of realism followed. A number of young writers who came into contact with modern Western literature became dazzled by bold new techniques which they had never encountered before. Also, since the reform and opening to the West, changes took place in Chinese society. Traditional life styles, values and mores were questioned. Many people, particularly the young became confused. They found they could relate to certain feelings expressed in modern Western literature. Therefore they were eager to adopt them as their own. Actually they did not produce much of value, because of the basic difference between Western and Chinese society.

China is still backward socially and culturally. The life-style of most people, their psychology, concerns and interests are quite different from their Western counterparts. The modernist works that appeared were mostly pale imitations of Western styles of expression, thoughts and feelings. There is little that is individual and sincere. Also many writers strove for a fragmented style of narration by deliberately shattering the form and meaning of language. These works were a different fare from that which readers were used to. Although

they were popular for a time, they quickly palled.

Chinese literature sank once more into the doldrums. It was during this period that new realism appeared. The school of new realism began in 1986 with the works of Chi Li and Fang Fang and came to fruition with Liu Heng. Chi Li and Fang Fang did not probe deep into the human psyche, or use the sub-conscious as their spring board. Instead their feet were firmly planted in the realities of society, and they stared unblinkingly at the human condition. Its main difference from traditional realism is that it does not aim to create typical characters and settings. Instead it focuses on everyman and ordinary events. Their characters are not limned in stark black and white, but mostly in shades of grey. Plots are not developed to their logical conclusion through cause and effect. They strive for naturalism by avoiding any appearance of refinement in their language, and deliberately present life in all its triviality, as a mirror in which the reader may examine his own life. These techniques have roused the empathy of many readers.

These characteristics first appeared in Chi Li's "A Troubled Life" and Fang Fang's "View." Liu Heng has gone a step further in his novels. In "A Troubled Life" Chi Li deliberately adopted a monotonous tone in describing the day to day activities of an ordinary labourer. The narrator in Fang Fang's "View" is the spirit of a dead child. It is through the dead child's eyes that the reader sees the struggles of the parents and nine siblings, crammed into a thirteen square metre shack.

If the straight-forward narrative form of "A Troubled Life" and "View" roused the reader to ponder

the value of human life, the works of Liu Heng explore that theme in greater depth. By showing what lies behind the facade, he reveals the soul of his characters as they strive for basic human rights, and self esteem, and what precipitates their failure, or drives them to destruction.

"Damned Food" which brought recognition to Liu Heng and the top award for short fiction 1985-86, and "The Obsessed" may be cited as sister works. In them Liu Heng dispassionately examines the plight of two farmers of Floodwater Canyon as they deal with the basic problems of sustaining and propagating life. Through these stories we see that in remote areas a segment of the rural population live in near primeval conditions.

The title "Damned Food" comes from rural colloquialism, and signifies the average farmer's anxiety over a commodity so precious that it colours consideration of such emotions as love and hate. The woman, nicknamed Goitre because of her affliction, is sold to the farmer Yang Tiankuan for two hundred catties of grain. She is strong and cunning. She can do the work of a man, and she is not above stealing and conniving. Before long she is the family's main support. Even her husband defers to her. Her downfall comes when she loses the family's grain ration coupon. Suddenly the family is plunged into crisis. For without the coupon they are faced with starvation. Her position in the household plummets. Finally she is driven to suicide. Her last ironic words are, "Damned food!" The story is simply and powerfully told, and hammers home the idea that life is worth no more than two hundred catties of grain, or a lost ration coupon.

"The Obsessed" is a tragedy that evolves around the question of sex in a poor rural family. It becomes clear from the outset that it is the driving force of the narrative. Yang Jinshan who is unable to father a child proceeds to perpetrate sexual sadism on his bride Wang Judou as soon as they are married. His cruelty increases as impotence overtakes him. A third member of the household is his nephew, Tianqing, who is first shocked then angered by his uncle's obsession. In the end the two young people fall in love. Liu Heng does not treat this as an ordinary tale of illicit love. On the contrary, he shows how the restrictions of a closed society, and its mores, turn a joyful experience into pain, suffering and death. When Yang Jinshan discovers the illicit love between his wife and nephew he first attempts to kill her, and her son Tianbai, then attempts suicide. He too is a victim of circumstance. Judou and Tianqing are terrified of being discovered while Jinshan is alive. However, his death does not bring surcease. Without Jinshan's presence to shield them, their predicament deepens. The pressure on the lovers comes from within, instead of from any external forces. The guilt and fear arising from incest is deepened by Tianbai's refusal to accept his natural father. Worse still, he adopts his surrogate father's sharp, cruel and suspicious attitude which eventually drives Tianqing to suicide. His son becomes judge and executioner. In these two stories Liu Heng details the high price people in remote areas sometimes pay for the basic necessities of life; food, and the right to a normal sex life.

"Whirlpool" and "Unreliable Witness" deal with intellectuals. The protagonists, Zhou Zhaolu of "Whirlpool" and Guo Puyun of "Unreliable Wit-

ness'' have satisfied the basic needs of life. Compared with Goitre and Tianqing they are well off, although Guo Puyun may have certain psychological and sexual difficulties. However, he is attractive to women and is passionately pursued. Liu Heng again questions the value and meaning of life in these works.

Zhou Zhaolu in "Whirlpool" is a success. He has a happy home. He is the epitome of the complacent intellectual. Zhou Zhaolu is a lucky man on the surface. He has pulled himself out of an impoverished rural background, went to a key university, became a researcher in an important institution, and finally rises to be its vice president. What propelled him to success? As Liu Heng describes him, Zhou Zhaolu is not only well equipped for his job, he has a keen sense for opportunity and a chameleon-like ability of adapting to his environment. He has a way with people: deferential and careful with higher-ups, and thoughtful toward subordinates. Although he is aware of the restrictions of the prevailing mores, he falls in love and strays from the straight and narrow. However, he does not allow it to get in the way of his upward mobility. The question that Liu Heng poses is how far should a man suppress personal desires and emotions to create a self image that will meet with the approval of others. The novel not only bares the soul of a hypocrite, but more importantly, asks whether people such as Zhou Zhaolu are successful human beings.

This theme is extended through "Unreliable Witness'', which probes the causes of the suicide of an intellectual dis-satisfied with his circumstances. The life of Guo Puyun is not as unlucky as he thinks it. The things that Zhou Zhaolu strove for do not interest

him. He craves things he cannot have. He laments not being a professional dancer; he envies his friend's success as a painter; he wants to write poetry. On closer examination, all these things are pipe-dreams. He does not have the necessary talents, nor does he have the tenacity for success, and a firm goal. In fact he does not know what he wants. His inability to find the meaning and value of life is due to his lack of direction. Instead he sees himself as cursed. He missed being admitted to a key university because of six marks; his painting did not bring success; an accident scarred his face. Most of all he was cursed with impotence. Each was a blow that weakened his will to live, until it drove him over the brink. In fact the curse that dogged him was an excuse to avoid realities. He needed a crutch to prop himself up, which he was too weak to find. The purpose of life eluded him to the end.

The unifying theme of these works by Liu Heng is the value and meaning of life. These themes expressed in terms of modernism and new realism, are quite different from the social concerns found in the traditional realism. Stylistically Liu Heng is constantly changing. In "Whirlpool" and "Unreliable Witness" there is a tendency toward repetition, and convoluted sentence structures. Structurally they are less successful than "Damned Food" and "The Obsessed". But in these defects we can see that as a writer, Liu Heng is not standing still. There is evidence that he was influenced by the styles of the investigative and psycho-analytic novel. By using a third person to probe the death of Guo Puyun, and telling the story in fragmented flash backs he has moved away from the investigative novel which requires proof at the end. In-

stead through an objective sifting of motives he has produced a fascinating if inconclusive testament of a blighted life. This treatment has brought the character's psyche and the central theme of the piece to vivid life. Liu Heng and his new realism can be expected to rise to new heights in the future.