

LIU ZHENYUN

GROUND
COVERED
WITH CHICKEN
FEATHERS

and Other Selected Writings

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Panda Books

Ground Covered with Chicken Feathers

Liu Zhenyun is a well-known writer. He was born in Yanjin County, Henan Province, in May 1958, joined the army in 1973 and on demobilization in 1977 returned home and became a teacher. Later that year he passed the entrance exam for the Chinese Department of Beijing University, and graduated in 1982. He became a journalist at *Farmer Daily*, and was the director of the paper's literature and art department. His representative works include the four novels in this Panda book and *Legends of Hometown*. One of the initiators and representatives of neo-realism in China, he has won several National Excellent Novel Awards.



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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.

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The Corridors of Power

THEY were county Party secretaries attending a meeting in the provincial capital, but for all the notice anyone took of them they might just as well have been production team leaders gathering in a county town. There were four of them to a room, and at mealtimes they had to queue up with everyone else in a big canteen. After three days of this they were fed up to the back teeth. Zhou, Party secretary of Pixian County, summed up their feelings:

"The damn skinflints! When they come down to our place we wine and dine them like nobody's business, but when we come here for a conference they make us scabble for every meal in the public trough!"

The others all voiced their agreement.

They discussed giving the canteen a miss for once and going out for a slap-up meal in a restaurant. The first problem, of course, was who was going to pay, but they decided to draw lots.

Pale-faced Hu, Party secretary of Nanxian County, made up the lots lying flat on his stomach on his bed. To give everybody a better chance there were four draws: one for the drinks, one for the dishes, one for the noodles with shredded meat and one for the egg soup. As luck would have it, Jin Quanli of Chungong County lost all four rounds. As the others whooped in delight Jin tossed the four strips with his forfeits written

on them out of the window, protesting: "Aw, come on. This isn't fair."

But the others wouldn't let him off. As they pushed the chagrined Jin out of the door, Secretary Bai of Wujiang County said: "What do you mean, it isn't fair? Nobody forced you to pick the right ones every time. If you'd picked blank ones you wouldn't have turned down a free meal, would you? Well, you picked the right ones, so you've got to pay."

It was ten o'clock that evening when they got back from the restaurant. They were hotly disputing whether the liquor they had had with the meal had been top quality or not, when they suddenly saw Lu Hongwu, the region Party secretary, standing in the doorway of the guesthouse.

"Where have you lot been?"

They hastened to explain, all at once: "We were going crazy cooped up in here, so we went out to a restaurant for a meal."

At the same time Zhou pulled a paper parcel from inside his jacket and offered it to Lu.

"We saved you some bits of chicken," he said.

This mollified Lu, and he said as he munched on the chicken: "Shen, the head of the provincial Party organization committee, was looking for you just now. He wanted to have a talk but couldn't find any of you."

That sobered them up pretty quick, and they all went straight to their room to wash their feet and go to bed. But each one just lay there, unable to sleep. The fact was that these county Party secretaries were just as much afraid of the provincial organization committee head as the branch secretaries of production bri-

gades were of them — as if their very lives were in his hands. Moreover, it had been known for some time that there was a vacancy in the region for a deputy prefect which would be filled from among the ranks of the county Party secretaries. But which one would it be out of a total of eight of them? Nobody had any idea, but there had already been an enquiry, and now the provincial organization committee head wanted to talk to them all. So it looked as though the matter was coming to a conclusion. The whole bunch of them had been sitting drinking together; which one of the drinkers was destined for promotion? This problem caused group insomnia: Zhou kept going out to the toilet, and Bai kept coughing and spitting out of the window. They were all up first thing the following morning, shuffling off to the washroom with dark rings around their eyes, and all feeling somewhat uncomfortable with each other.

In the morning they heard the provincial Party secretary's report, and in the afternoon they discussed it. But as nobody seemed able to concentrate on the report, there wasn't much of a discussion. The provincial organization committee head summoned them individually for interviews in the quarters of Region Party Secretary Lu. His accommodation was a little better than had been afforded the county Party secretaries — two people to a room and their own toilet. One by one they came out of their interviews, lathered in sweat. In fact, the interrogations were pretty straightforward; he just asked each one his age, family situation, how work in the county was going, what was planned for the future, etc. The victims had all prepared elaborate speeches beforehand, but these were completely forgotten

as soon as the interview started. The conversation was cramped and wooden — just question followed by answer. Each one, as he left Lu's room, felt vexed and embarrassed, as if he had made a proper fool of himself.

Three days before the conference was to break up it seemed that the matter had been brought to a head. It was rumoured that the provincial organization head had submitted a report to the provincial Party secretary. The latter had taken into account the results of the earlier cadres' investigation and sought Lu's opinion, and this had indicated that Jin Quanli, Party secretary of Chungong County, would get the job.

It so happened that there was a regular meeting of the provincial Party committee that very evening, at which the promotion proposal was passed. The decision was relayed to Lu by the provincial organization head, who added that an official appointment would be made in a month's time. When the county Party secretaries heard the news they all lost a night's sleep in disappointment. Nevertheless, they put a brave face on it, pretending to be highly gratified at the decision, and clamoured that Jin Quanli take them out and treat them to a meal at a restaurant.

"Hey, Jin, now that you've been kicked upstairs you ought to treat us to a damn good slap-up feed, you know."

"And no lucky draw this time, either!"

But Jin demurred: "What are you talking about? Where's the notice of promotion?"

It did no good; they all hooted in derision: "Don't play the innocent. Everybody knows what's going on. Come on, come on! A treat, a treat!"

There was nothing for it but to stand another treat. However, not everybody went who had taken part in the draw and gone out to the restaurant last time. Zhou didn't go, neither did Bai, and nor did Hu. In fact the only people who went with Jin were Cong, Party secretary of Zhuxian County, and two others.

As soon as the table had been cleared a certain awkwardness gripped the company. Cong and Jin had been colleagues during the "Four Clean-ups" movement and they had always got along well together. Now Cong offered a word of consolation:

"Jin, don't take it to heart. Zhou and the others were tied up this evening, that's all."

Jin retorted: "We've been friends, Cong, you and I, for a long time, so I can tell you that I know my promotion has been a blow to everybody's confidence."

The other protested: "No, no. It's not like that at all. We've all received the Party's training for many years. Nobody could be so narrow-minded."

But Jin was annoyed. "What do you mean, they couldn't be so narrow-minded? There was a feast all laid on for them and they didn't turn up. It was done as a deliberate snub, wasn't it? Of course it was. We've been chums all these years, and whenever they came to visit me I never stinted on the entertainment. Anyway, I never wanted this promotion. It was a provincial-level decision. What could I do? To tell you the truth, I don't really want this deputy prefect's job. What's wrong with a county Party committee head's job? Cars and hotels all laid on for us, just the same as at the district level. At the county level I'm Number One, but at the district level I'll only be a deputy. I'll

have to put up with who knows what aggravation. If anybody else wants the job he can have it. How about one of you fellows?"

Cong tried to console him: "Oh, come now, there's no need to get upset. You'll all be friends again before long."

"I'm not upset. I know very well that they've all worked their fingers to the bone all these years — that none of them has done any less than I have. And now I've got this promotion, they're annoyed."

Cong rejoined: "Well, yes, they are annoyed, but it's all to no purpose. Do they think they can overturn a decision of the provincial Party committee?"

Thereupon, the other two butted in by calling for another drink.

The party broke up and they all headed back to the guesthouse. There they bumped into Zhou, Hu and Bai, who were also just returning from somewhere. The trio, feeling awkward about having missed the banquet, greeted Jin first, but quickly hurried past with embarrassed grins.

Their discomfort wasn't caused solely by the fact that they had turned down the invitation. While Jin had been venting his spleen in the restaurant the others had found out that Jin had got the promotion because he was an old classmate of Xu Nianhua, the new provincial Party secretary. This discovery had caused them some relief, as such a connection, it was felt, had naturally assured him the job; if any of the others, Zhou or Hu or whoever, had had the same relationship then he would have got the job, wouldn't he? This seemed a satisfactory explanation, and they realized that they no longer had any need to nurse a grievance against

Jin. Anyway, he already had the promotion, so what was the point any more of making a fuss? Jin, after all, had always been a good sort and had got along well with everybody. So after Jin came back they all got back on speaking terms again and the misunderstanding was forgotten. When he saw that Zhou and the others had changed their attitude and no longer nursed a grudge against him, Jin began to feel remorse over his peevish outburst in the restaurant. Surely it was par for the course for them to be a bit chagrined for a while at his getting promoted to deputy prefect, wasn't it? So thinking, his annoyance evaporated, and the atmosphere in the room they all shared was soon restored to what it had been at the time they had drawn lots to see who was going to stand a treat. But at lights-out that night Hu, clad only in his underpants, said as he tugged at the light cord: "Hey, Jin! It looks like from now on you're going to be our boss. Well, we just want you to know that you'd better not start throwing your weight around in front of your old buddies. We'll give you a hard time if you do."

Whereupon some of the others chimed in with: "Yes, that's right. We'll give you a hard time, all right. Any of that nonsense, and when you come down to our county offices you'll only get 'four dishes and one soup' to eat."

But Jin was not fazed by this. He shot back with: "What kind of weight has a lowly deputy prefect got that he can throw around? Well, if you county fellows refuse to feed me I suppose I'll just have to eat in restaurants, as I always do."

This brought a roar of laughter from the others, and yells of: "That's right! If he throws his weight around

he'll have to eat in restaurants."

On the day before the conference wound up, the various counties sent cars for their Party secretaries. They all shook hands before they climbed into their conveyances, in a flurry of invitations to each other to come down and visit, and while all this was going on Zhao noticed that the car that had come to pick up Jin was a shabby old "Shanghai". Thereupon, he pointed to his own county's "Bluebird" and said: "Let me give you a lift in my car."

So Jin sent his car on ahead and climbed in to Zhou's. The first stop was in Zhou's county town, where Zhou ordered the driver to head straight for the local guesthouse, the top hostelry. There he treated Jin to a hotpot supper, complete with crabs and turtle soup, and not forgetting a bottle of pure grain spirit. Afterwards, he got the driver to take Jin home.

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As a matter of fact, Xu Nianhua, the new provincial Party secretary, was not an old classmate of Jin Quanli, the Party secretary of Chungong County. It was just that they had got to know each other ten years previously. At that time Jin had been deputy county Party secretary and Xu had held the same position in a county in another province. They had bumped into each other on a visit to the model village of Dazhai and had shared a room for one night there. It turned out that they both liked to have a few drinks, although neither had a great capacity for booze, and they got along famously. During the day they went out together visiting, and in the evening they