

ZHOU DAXIN

THE
SESAME
OIL
MILL

and Other Selected Writings



FOREIGN LANGUAGES PRESS





THE SESAME



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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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Always Start from the Early Spring Morning

Guo Linxiang

I came to know Zhou Daxin a few years ago just after he published "A Woman Called Han Jianü", a short story about a country woman's life after her recruitment into the army. Simple as it is, the story offers a convincing portrayal of Han Jianü, whose sincere, sharp character touched me deeply. The story won the National Best Short Story Award and was made into a telefilm, winning fame for Zhou Daxin as a writer. By contrast to the strong impression that I received from his work, just upon our first meeting, Zhou Daxin did not prove nearly as memorable. He is a man of few words who blushes easily. During our conversation he spoke only in response to questions, looking at me attentively when I posed them. Following this initial acquaintance, I often read the short stories he had published in newspapers and journals, and we began a regular correspondence; the writer and his faithful reader. I have a special liking for those of his works which focus on the life of the people in his hometown. Redolent of the culture of the Central Plain, a feature of his locality, these tales have increasingly drawn attention from Chinese literary circles.

We began to introduce Zhou Daxin's works in

Chinese Literature in 1992, beginning with "The Sesame Oil Mill" and "Out of the Woods". These two stories were later made into two films under the titles *The Woman Sesame Oil Maker* and *Out of the Woods*, and to my great delight, the first won a Gold Bear medal at the 43rd Berlin Film Festival in the spring of 1993. At the time the news arrived, I was busy editing the collection of Zhou Daxin's stories, to be published in the French series of Panda Books. Already, this collection has been well received by French readers.

In the spring of 1992 Zhou Daxin invited me to pay a visit to his hometown, Nanyang in Henan. I arrived at dawn one day to find the place densely surrounded by huge mountains that were curtained behind clouds and mist. This was the Nanyang Basin. It is a region of temperate climate and many other favourable natural conditions; a land rich with the culture of the Central Plain — home to a large group of famous Handynasty stone sculptures — and a land that has produced many historical figures. Take for example Zhang Heng, inventor of the world's first seismic detector, born here at the beginning of the first century. Also native to Nanyang was Zhang Zhongjing, Zhang Heng's contemporary and author of the epoch-making medical books *A Treatise on Fevers* and *Gold Cupboard of Concise Treatments*.

Zhou Daxin has profound feelings for his hometown, revealed in the store of legends he knows: "It was said that the forefather of the Nanyang people was an extraordinarily brave general of the Kingdom of Heaven. Because he rendered outstanding service, the Jade Emperor granted him the fertile land of Nanyang. But for fear that he might become too power-

ful, the Jade Emperor sent deities to surround the place with big mountains, allowing the general only to live and grow within the basin created. I learned this story when I was six, and I still suspect its authenticity even today. But I have to admit that the mountain blockade seriously hindered economic development in the past, and until the 1970s Nanyang survived by virtue of its self-sufficient economy, the people confined to an old-fashioned, impoverished life."

Zhou Daxin's love for his hometown is inherent in his literary creation, running like a thread throughout his writings. His also mother played an important part in his life; managing to send him to school by living frugally even under poverty-stricken conditions. This laid the preliminary foundation for his literary ability. "It's because my mother endured all kinds of hardships that I could take up my pen to write," he told me. Thus female characters in Zhou Daxin's stories play a significant role often under the difficult circumstances within the plot. "Out of the Woods", his first novelette, depicts the changes that take place during the reform years in the life of a family which earns a living with a travelling monkey show. It shows how the female protagonist exerts her wisdom and strength to lead her family out of poverty and on the road to a rich, more comfortable life. "She represents the many women living in my hometown who have transformed their old lifestyle," Zhou Daxin explained.

The second woman in Zhou Daxin's life was a high school classmate, an intelligent and beautiful girl who worked hard both at school and at home. Zhou Daxin did not mention whether or not he had a romantic interest in her, but he did tell me more than once that he

saw his mother in her. Just before they graduated from high school, she was forced to leave because her family had fallen into debt, to be married as part of a so-called "marriage exchange"; to a stranger with a sister that became her brother's wife. Nobody knew where she went after she married. Soon after, Zhou Daxin joined the army and left his homeland bitter with the memory.

A few years later, whilst on a visit home, he ran into the girl. There was no trace of beauty or charm left in her. Her hair was dishevelled, her clothes were old and ragged, and her sallow face was wrinkled. Trailing after her were two skinny children. At the instant their eyes met, a slight sparkle came into her eyes, but disappeared quickly, and she hurried away silently. But Zhou Daxin clearly saw the tears forming there. People told him later that she had married a disabled man, who also suffered from some kind of neurosis. The disease had been passed onto their two children. Years of loveless marriage and heavy family burden had destroyed her youth. The unexpected meeting aroused Zhou Daxin's memories, and it was with great sadness he wrote "The Sesame Oil Mill", which caused an immediate stir following publication. One critic praised it as "a eulogy to the awakening of human nature".

If people love Zhou Daxin's earlier stories because they have a strong flavour of the Nanyang area, then his recent work "For Love of a Silversmith" should further attract readers for its regional colour and vivid characterization. Both form the backdrop to an unusual and ironic plot. It is a tale of people driven by their emotions and passions yet whose desires are

curbed by the intervention of those who have positions in society to protect. With a dramatic twist at the end, this story offers a surprise at every turn.

Although Zhou Daxin's stories depict different times and different characters in different plots, his deep love for his hometown, his efforts to explore the rich history and culture of his native place, and his sense of responsibility as a writer, all remain the same. In producing a stream of stories in quick succession, in standing on the stage to receive a literary prize amidst great applause, and having Beijing Film Studios invest a large amount of money to produce "For Love of a Silversmith" as a film under the same title, people would not believe that just a few years previously Zhou Daxin was still a surveyor in an army mapping unit, who read economic books avidly, so that one day he would be able to transform his homeland with his knowledge. He contributed articles to newspapers, only to be rejected time and again, until finally in desperation he took pen to paper and poured out all his feelings, emptying himself of sorrow as well as desire. After he had sealed the envelope, he was at a loss to know where to send his letter. As if in jest, he mailed it to a prestigious newspaper. One early spring morning when the weather was still chilly and snowflakes were flying outside, he received two letters; one a notice from the editorial board informing him that his long letter had been published in the newspaper's fiction column; the other from a college student who stated that she had decided to accept the love he had expressed to her. When I met him more than ten years had passed since that day, however Zhou Daxin still felt too embarrassed to tell me about that first tale of woe, saying it

was too shallow. But he still remembered clearly that early spring morning with the snowflakes. At the time when the English edition of his collection of short stories is to be published, I am happy to wish him: always start from the early spring morning!

Translated by Niu Jin

For Love of a Silversmith

WHERE this story happened is now a stretch of desolation.

All ruins once had their day, just like the bones in graveyards that once belonged to strapping young men and vivacious girls. As I now stand in the ruins strewn with chicken feathers, shredded paper, rotting vegetable leaves and used condoms, I remember that morning of eighty-seven years ago, and the first thing that comes into my mind is the narrow Xiguan Street that twisted along in a thin morning mist. Next I saw the shop of grey brick and green tiles with two small gargoyles squatting on the ridge of the roof. The name of the shop — Fuheng Silver Jeweller's — is inscribed in white on a black background. Then I heard the door softly creak open.

1

On that spring morning shrouded in thin mist, when Zheng Shaoheng got up from bed and moved over to open his shop door he had no inkling that something with grave consequences would be taking shape that day and that it was already beginning to creep slowly towards his home. As his swarthy legs moved towards the door, half-dressed as usual, the backs of his shoes trodden down, one hand rubbed the sleep from his

eyes, whilst and the other he pulled down the jujube wood bolt from the door, yawning noisily as he did so. He had barely pulled the squeaking door panels back when the cool morning air rushed in and tightly enwrapped him. He shivered and sneezed so loudly that the sound rolled and tumbled away down the flagstone street. A long-tailed black bird with a pointed beak alighted on a locust tree on the other side of the street. Cocking its head in his direction, the bird fluttered its wings and made three short hoarse chirps. Its unnatural chirps surprised Shaoheng who wondered: Is there something wrong with the bird?

He began to set out his working tools: a burner for melting silver, a box of moulds, an anvil, a block and a hammer, a file and a pincer, a small steel rule and a bottle of alum solution to give the silver ornaments a finishing polish... He also laid out two benches for the customers.

"Breakfast's ready!" shouted his father, Zheng Hengliang, from the inner partition of the room. He had also been a silversmith. Now getting on in years, he cooked and did light jobs such as filing the rough edges of the silverware.

Every morning, as Shaoheng got ready for the day's work, his father cooked in the rear part of the house. Shaoheng was now the main silversmith of the Fuheng Silver Jeweller's, famous in the city of Nanyang.

Father and son sat opposite each other, eating corn buns and slurping noisily sweet potato gruel. Though they handled silver every day, they made do with dark coarse grain for meals. A large part of the money they earned went on heavy taxes, and they were also saving

to expand their store. So they spent as little as possible on food.

The sound of footsteps as Shaoheng was finishing his porridge told him that the first customer of the day had arrived. He gulped down what was left, grabbed a homespun dark blue apron and tied it round his waist.

"I want a big hair-pin to go through my bun." It was an old lady with bound feet. Shaoheng remembered that she was the mother of the tobacconist named Hou. He took the silver ingot, and bowed to her politely. "Please take a seat, Your Ladyship. I'll do it right away."

He lit the burner and clamped his lips around a tube through which he blew to make the fire leap into a tiny strip of flame. More customers drifted in and sat on the benches. The Zhengs, who had been silversmiths for generations, were well known in these parts and customers queued up every day. The silverware could be roughly divided into two categories: children's and ladies' ornaments. For children, they had such motifs as tiger heads, lions and coins, deities, Buddhas and many other kinds of pendants. There were also bells shaped like peaches or baskets to be worn on the babies' hats which tinkled as they moved their heads. For women, there were eight different varieties. The first was gorgeous headgear decorated with dragons and phoenixes, flowers and plants, fish and insects. These were exquisite wedding-day ornaments for brides. Then there was a large assortment of hair-pins for buns and plaits and other coiffures. Still another sort was earrings and pendants, the most beautiful of which were in animal motifs. The fourth kind was necklaces with a plum, snake or flower pattern. The fifth was