

LU XING'ER

THE MOUNTAIN
FLOWERS HAVE
BLOOMED
QUIETLY

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.

Panda Books

The Mountain Flowers Have Bloomed Quietly

Lu Xing'er was born in Shanghai in 1949. In 1968, at the age of nineteen, she was sent to do farm work in the Great Northern Wilderness, and in 1978 entered the Central Drama Institute. Her first story, "The Ox Horn", appeared in Heilongjiang Literature in 1974. Since then she has published a dozen short stories, and among them are "Oh! Blue Bird", "The Mountain Flowers Have Bloomed Quietly", and "Born a Woman". She has also produced two novels, *A Kiss to the Century* and *Fairytales in the Grey Building*. Her publications also include two collections of short stories, *The Structure of the Beauty* and *The Unremembered Tablet in the Wilderness*.

CONTENTS

Oh! Blue Bird	1
The Mountain Flowers Have Bloomed Quietly	166
One on One	290
Under One Roof	307

Oh! Blue Bird

This sounds like a fairy tale. Long, long ago, two innocent children went into the wilds to look for a bird with pure blue feathers, because a fairy maiden had told them that the blue bird would be able to tell them the secret of happiness. And so the children went on their journey, through twists and turns and...

1

SATURDAY.

Yongyong longed for yet dreaded the weekend. She sat quietly at her little desk facing the wall, a desk littered with English text books, dictionaries and scraps of paper covered with miscellaneous words so closely scribbled that they looked like squiggly worms crawling all over the paper. The little desk crammed in between the high double decker bunk and the wall along the door carved out a small area of about one square metre. Behind her, it was a different world.

"Oh, I've got another big bag," muttered Lili as she hurriedly packed up the laundry she meant to take home to be washed. She was her mother's spoiled infant. When she first received the university's notice of acceptance, her mother came with her to help her register just as when she had first gone to nursery school

hanging on to her mother's apron strings.

"Don't forget the biscuit tin, kitten," Wang Ping reminded Lili as she sat on the bunk pulling on her new bell-bottom trousers.

"Never fear. Mum got some super cream crackers through a friend this week. Just you all wait." Lili brought down a big biscuit tin from the top shelf and shook it. It was quite empty. Every evening, after study hour, she would open the tin and share her snack with the other girls.

"Hey, girls, how do I look?" Wang Ping turned around slowly showing off her new trousers. She was tall and a prominent figure in the track and field team.

"You've got long legs. Bell-bottoms look good on you. Lovely line!" said Little Ou who was standing on a stool and reaching up to the shelf to rummage through her little suitcase, making a mess of the contents. She kept her hair short with a smooth fringe over her wide forehead like a teenager.

Lines? Yongyong longed to turn round to have a look. She rarely noticed what people looked like and "line" sounded so fancy and sophisticated. While she was working at the Forestry Centre, she felt that plain, rough clothes were the right thing for her. Every time she went back to town for her vacation with her mother, her mum had to go to a second-hand store to look for conservative-style clothes for her.

"Who's got some nylon rope?" asked Ou.

"What do you want it for?" Wang pulled out a rope from under her bedding.

"To camp in the Botanical Gardens. Got to put up a little tent with my blankets."

Lili cast Yongyong's back a significant look. Little Ou caught on at once and jumped down. She put her arms around Yongyong. "Come with me. After a week of hard work, it's time to relax. You should learn how to live."

Yongyong only shook her head apologetically.

"You should go," Wang chipped in. "Otherwise, you'll be the only one left in the dormitory this Sunday..." Before she could say more there was a knock at the door.

As soon as Little Ou pulled open the door, she laughed derisively at Wang. "So that's why you've put on new trousers."

A tall good-looking young man stood there, the collar of a blue sweat-shirt turned out over his jacket. He was a member of the provincial tennis team.

"So long now," Wang smiled as she slung her knapsack over one shoulder, put her hand on the boy's arm quite naturally and walked out without any embarrassment.

"I'm off too," Lili announced, biscuit tin in hand. "Mum will be waiting for me at home."

"Me too!" Little Ou picked up her rolled-up blanket and glanced at Yongyong again. Only then did Yongyong turn round with a forced smile. "Go on," she said.

All the girls left, their chatter and laughter dying away. Yongyong now stood up. It was very peaceful in the dorm all by herself. Living with those jolly, talkative girls, Yongyong looked forward to the peace of the weekend when the least she could do was to memorize the new words on her vocabulary lists. But once the weekend came, the loneliness following the silence would tinge her usually moody nature with more than a touch of melancholy. Lili went home happily. Wang went off with her boyfriend. It wasn't as if Yongyong wasn't envious. But for her?

When she was filling forms at registration, Ou had leaned over to ask, "Do you have a baby?" Yongyong had covered the form with an arm muttering "Uh...um..." She didn't know why she should feel as if she had something disgraceful to hide before this childlike schoolmate whose glance was both curious and friendly. Before coming to university, she had made up her mind that she

would not say anything about her baby to the others; she would particularly say nothing about *him*. There was neither joy nor glory for her to brag or mention them.

Perhaps she should have gone with Ou for the nocturnal visit to the Botanical Gardens, squeezed with her into a tiny tent and talking about light-hearted but interesting subjects... No, even if she had gone, she would not have felt at all light-hearted. Last week when they had a class-room quiz she had got a fail mark though she had prepared seriously beforehand, sitting up two whole nights. When she got her paper back, she had stared at it like a fool. The startling red crosses on her mistakes caught in her throat like fishbones, making her unable to swallow her lunch. Suppose in the end she just couldn't manage to get through? She felt like having a good cry, but what was the use of tears? After all, she had brought all this on herself. Why had she come at her age to study in the first place? She was somewhat sorry she had. All the girls in class were much younger. Little Ou was ten years her junior. Now all of them sat in the same classroom. She didn't want people to ask about her age, hating to hear their remarks, full of pity, "You're already so...and still going on..." But the many more years she lived had not given her the things she should have had. It was now too late. She really shouldn't have taken this step.

The ball game on the court outside her windows finally came to an end. Yongyong was able to push open the window.

There was a splendid sunset. A smudge of lichee-pink spread into a rosy glow and violent shades which merged into the azure of the horizon. Under this canopy of colour the branches of the plane tree appeared bright and dazzling. There was no breeze. Green leaves hung motionless against the canopy as if in deep meditation.

"Why ever did I come to university?" Yongyong's gaze was pinned to the scene outside her window. Twelve years ago, her

gang of hot-blooded fun-loving young people with axes stuck into their belts had gone to that fascinating primeval forest and camped under the trees for several nights. Like a huge green tent, the giant trees with their thick foliage covered them snugly, sheltering their excited, exuberant hearts. "We will stay in the forest all our lives!" — was the courageous pledge. But as the years went by, one by one the others had left the forest. Yongyong alone remained. She was leader of the Girls' Logging Team; she was a model worker cited for hard work by the provincial authorities. When was it that she too began to grumble against the forest and eventually leave it?

Shu Zhen was on winter vacation, and Yongyong dashed back from the mountains to visit him, two bulging sacks of pine nuts on her back.

The sawing, the gathering, the squares, the logs... Yongyong talked about everything at the Forestry Centre, but her husband, newly returned to town to study journalism at college, seemed not a bit interested now. Shu Zhen just sat there cracking and gobbling up the crisp hard pine nuts. What else was there to talk about? Yongyong went on doggedly cracking until she had a big handful of delicious kernels for him.

"Let's go to Dinxin Tea Garden for sweet dumplings tomorrow," Shu Zhen finally said.

Yongyong was very pleased. She loved going out with her husband and she loved sweet rice dumplings.

The tea garden was very crowded. They had just found a table when someone called Shu Zhen's name asking him to join them. At a table by the window sat four of his schoolmates, two boys and two girls.

"This is Yongyong," Shu Zhen's introduction was simple.

Yongyong sat down stiffly. She was very disappointed. She rarely came out to eat with her husband; why did they have to

bump into this gang, utter strangers to her? He never took her to his college to meet his schoolmates. Perhaps all men were vain and wanted wives to be glamorous and beautiful who aroused the envy of other men so that they could feel proud. Yongyong did not have a youthful look. The winds and storms of the forests were sharp as knives, cutting rough lines into her complexion. Swinging axes or wielding a saw, she worked like her male comrades so she no longer looked as delicate or fragile as fresh young girls from school. As Shu Zhen's wife and a grown woman, she would not pass with flying colours among the college girls. She imagined that he found her looks nothing special. Sitting beside him, she felt she was not in harmony with him. Shu Zhen wore a brown casual jacket which made him look boyish and buoyant. He had a broad forehead under which his long smooth eyebrows made his eyes bright and attractive. His schoolmates liked to call him The Handsome One.

As soon as they sat down the two girls opposite Yongyong glanced at her with a keen and curious look. Yongyong, her hands between her knees, didn't know where to look. Her husband seemed more talkative and animated than when he was with her alone.

"You know that Italian reporter Oriana Fallaci interviewed Nixon, Nguyen Van Thieu and even Khomeini..."

"Have you heard? This is world news!" another boy put in. "There is doubt about the authorship of the Soviet novel *And Quiet Flows the Don*. It's said that Sholokhov was probably not the real author..."

"Have you read the script of those newly-released foreign films?" asked a girl with short windblown hair, hitting the table with her chopsticks in rhythm with her words: "Really fascinating ones, the *Godfather*, *Fabulous Family*, *A Courtesy Call*..."

"Oh, yes, yes. *Fabulous Family* is so long it had to be published

in two issues of the translation magazine," cried the other girl, gesticulating with her arms as if she was discussing it in a literary salon. "It's very revealing, exposing the whole of society through one single family..." She seemed oblivious that she was merely in a tea garden having dumplings.

Yongyong was unable to put in a single word. She sat there in silence. She knew nothing about those events and the books they were talking about. The remote Forestry Centre where she worked seemed like a natural watertight screen cutting the world into two. Buried in the mountains, she could only live like a primitive being in the primitive forests. Suddenly she felt there was an invisible force pulling her away from the others sitting at the same table, as if there were an impassable gap between them. It was awful to sit like this, quite lonely and apart. How she wished the dumplings could be served at once so that she could swallow them and be gone.

Her husband was still deep in discussion with the others. Just then, a waitress with a pale, cold face passed by their table. Yongyong unwittingly asked, "Why haven't our dumplings come yet?"

The waitress jumped up with a loud cry, as if shot by a pistol. "Don't come here for food if you can't wait!" Her shrill voice rang out over the hubbub of the noisy tea room.

Shu Zhen glared at Yongyong. "What are you in such a hurry about?"

Embarrassed, Yongyong turned away. The others at their table had all stopped their animated conversation to look at Yongyong in surprise. There was a hint of contempt in their eyes. But very quickly, as if covering up, they resumed their conversation. Dejected, Yongyong hung her head.

After saying goodbye to the others as they left the tea garden, Shu Zhen said not another word. Yongyong too walked silently,

her steps getting slower and slower until she gradually fell behind him. Shu Zhen, on the other hand, quickened his steps. He strode further and further away in the hurrying tide of people.

"A big forest separated you and me..." Yongyong wanted to write this down in a letter when she returned to the Forestry Centre, but eventually she crossed it out after a long hesitation. It wasn't just a huge forest really. Every Saturday, when Shu Zhen returned with his bulging canvas knapsacks, Yongyong felt that it was a magic sack of mystery. Once when he wasn't around she couldn't resist the temptations to look into it. Books, note books, even the slips of paper with casual scrawled words on them seemed to hide tremendous changes and secrets. She realized that these were not mere secrets but the "world" he was so interested in. It was this world of his which was pulling them further and further apart. A scrap of much creased and torn paper floated down from a textbook.

*A ball of fire,
And a poem,
A proud, serene marble sculpture,
An ordinary person who can really work.*

This little verse of his was entitled *Wife*. Was this what he hoped of her? True, she was a ball of fire, but certainly not a poem. She was indeed an ordinary person who could work but not a proud sculpture. Obviously, she was a long way off from his ideal. The few dumplings she had swallowed in the tea garden were tossing and turning in her stomach as if never digested. They felt heavier than little lead balls.

Was it because she had wanted to digest those dumplings that she had gritted her teeth and come to study?

Yongyong turned to pick up a glass of water on her desk. It

was icy cold but she poured it down her throat as if hoping to drown something. The chill of the water sobered her somewhat. She picked up her book again, forcing herself to stuff the printed letters into her head. But her head was reeling again, the small letters darting back and forth in front of her eyes like tadpoles in the water. She had to lean back and close her eyes for a few moments. How tired she felt! She longed to go to bed, bury her head under the quilt and sleep with not a thought in her head for several days and nights. Hadn't she had this sort of feeling before?

Outside the dormitory tent, the loudspeaker hanging overhead was blaring out: "Our Girls' Logging Team was the product of the Gang of Four's ultra-left line..." Yongyong collapsed on her bunk and closed her eyes in a semi-coma. Nearly ten years of hard labour seemed to burst out in accumulated fatigue at this point. She felt utterly exhausted, so tired that there were no thoughts left in her head. Her brains were like a burnt-out forest, all shrouded in whitish smoke. Life too was singed by flames, leaving nothing behind at all. She became very ill. Her health had completely deteriorated. Waves of dizziness kept overcoming her. The doctor said it was anaemia due to over-exhaustion.

Yes, it was time to leave this primitive forest.

As she was making arrangements for departure, she was given a thorough physical. The results she brought back included a positive urine test. Pregnant! Was it a daughter or a son? Her heart thumped as if a tiny being were already breathing there, accelerating her own heartbeat. Surprised, delighted but also a little frightened. She was going to be a mother but she was not prepared. Motherhood? A powerful, new and sacred feeling gushed from her heart like a rivulet in spring surging out of melted mountain snow, a tenderness and tranquility vibrant with new life and hope. For ten years, she seemed to have missed really living properly. Wife, husband,

family all still seemed strange to her. In fact, at the very thought of him... she still felt bashful. But the fruit of their union, a life still strange to her, had barged into her consciousness. She should write to him immediately to tell him the news! No, send him a telegram. As if dashing out to catch a train, she ran to the post office. A man passed her a form to fill in her message. Yongyong flushed red, so stupid of her. How could she write such a message? "Sorry," she muttered before dashing out of the post office like someone on the run. Better not to tell him yet. When her departure was finally settled, she would appear before him and tell him in a whisper... What would be his reaction? He'd cry out in delight, his blazing eyes melting into a happy warm smile, bright like the noonday sun. She sank into sweet imaginings.

The day she finished with formalities at the Forestry Centre, Yongyong timidly pushed open the door of the local hairdresser's. Once she was in the big barber's chair, she watched the continuous changes of herself in the mirror with a fresh and frightened feeling. Her long plaits were cut off, the shorter hair curled into layers of waves. When the hairdresser put an oblong mirror behind her head for her to see the whole result, she felt that her shoulders were carrying a newly installed head which she was quite unable to turn round. Was that me? She dared not recognize herself. Still she liked the change. It was time she said goodbye to her maiden days, to the past years. The new life within her brought changes into her heart, she felt that even her voice was now softer and gentler. She hoped that by the time she got home she would begin everything anew and bring so much joy to him. Yes, he would be glad. Hadn't he said long ago that women should be gentle and make themselves nice looking?

But the moment she pushed open the door, Yonyong felt tense. Holding tight to her bag, she watched with uneasiness the first glance of her husband. At first he stared at her in surprise, showing