

LIANG XIAOSHENG

A LAND OF  
WONDER  
AND  
MYSTERY

*and Other Selected Writings*



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# A LAND OF WONDER



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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

FOUR stories and one novelette are included chronologically in this publication: "The Jet Ruler" is one of my early endeavours; "A Land of Wonder and Mystery", "Father " and "The Black Button" were written in a stage of rapid development, and "Ice Dam" was completed in 1988.

Literature is part of my life. The realities of life in China form the basis of my writing. For a mature novelist, reality is more than what is happening in the present or what is going to happen in the future. Reality also represents, I believe, the bedrock as well as the evolution of a culture or period of history, and is a prelude to the future. I sincerely hope that works by Chinese writers may serve as a window through which other cultures may observe the developments of events in our country.

Good works by writers from abroad exert a positive influence on Chinese writers, myself included. As the old adage goes, "Advice from others may help one to overcome one's own weaknesses."

A good work of literature cannot be confined within national boundaries. Literature is a universal means of communication.

I respect translators, Chinese or foreign, whether they translate a foreign language into Chinese or vice versa, for they have built bridges for mankind.

Pacifism, humanism, people and reality — these have been my guidelines in my life as a writer. I will not bend in the face of harsh criticism from those who follow certain modern trends.

May literature forever be a benign source of influence on the hearts and minds of the Chinese people. I firmly believe this is a difficult, though by no means impossible, task.

## The Jet Ruler

SHE turned towards the coal mine, where the majestic slag was like a pyramid wreathed in dense mist. The rising sun, blazing red and wheel-shaped, was suspended just above the slag, as if it had been hauled up to the sky by a thick cable.

Suddenly she thought of him. Today was an even-numbered day, and he should be down in the pit with the other miners. If it hadn't been for him, she would not have come here. Tomorrow she was going to leave, not knowing whether she would ever return.

One day four months ago, while her family were having supper, he had knocked at their door.

She had opened it and sized him up — a complete stranger, aged around thirty, strapping and broad-faced, with rough yet well-defined features. What a handsome man! She thought, impressed. Just the image of the King of Spades. Better if he had a beard. She had her particular aesthetic standards, and thought of the King as the ultimate in masculine beauty. What a pity he didn't have a beard!

She stood in the doorway, eyeing him with unconcealed appreciation, then asked politely, "What do you want?"

His reply was three words — her father's name.

"Come in, please," she said, making way for him.

He stepped inside and strode three paces to cross the hallway into the room. The whole family marvelled and wondered, their eyes focused on this unexpected visitor.

He explained vaguely, "I'd like to have a word with Bureau Chief Yan, about some business, if ..."

Her father put down his chopsticks immediately and led him into the living room.

About a dozen minutes later, her father walked him to the door, where they heard Father ask, "Are you a leader of the mine?"

"Is that important?" the visitor replied. "Take me as a spokesman for the miners."

When the man had left, Father called her into the living room, and asked her what she meant to do after graduation. She replied correctly that she was ready to serve wherever she was needed as a teacher. "That's the stuff." Father nodded appreciatively. "That's the way to think." Then, in the solemn tone of a superior addressing his subordinate at work, he said, "Well, it's like this. Because I'm the chief of the education bureau and you're my daughter, a graduate of the teachers' training college, and because the mine is in urgent need of school-teachers, you ought to volunteer to work there. I'm going to your college to give a pep talk, and I want you to set an example. Without volunteers, what I say will just be a lot of hot air. Do you understand?"

Yes, she understood, too well to utter a single word. What wonderful logic! And that damn "King" had come here to trap her!

She cried, whimpered, pleaded and lost her temper. She implored her mother to intercede and her sister to

protest on her behalf, but it was all in vain. Her father was firm and always gave the same answer, "You are not plunging into hell teaching at the mine." What a cold heart!

At last, against her will, she "volunteered".

She received a warm welcome the day she arrived at the mine. Descending from the train, her eyes spotted the "King" among the welcomers. Resenting him, she pretended not to see him.

He strode up to her, and held out a large hand to grasp her tiny one, saying, "I didn't expect to see you!" Then he proceeded with a series of introductions: the chairman of the trade union, the head of the women's association, the secretary of the Youth League and the primary school principal — all the prominent figures in the district. Even if she had been the minister of the Coal Industry himself, there could not have been a better turn-out of people to do the honours. That she was so important in their eyes was quite beyond her imagination.

The chairman of the trade union, pointing at the "King", said to her, "This is head of the mine. You know each other?"

So he was her immediate superior!

"I wouldn't say I know him," she replied coldly, glaring at him. "We met only once."

At her first dinner in the mine, the "King" sat beside her. He told her gravely, "You're the first graduate from the teachers' training college to come to this district. Our primary school was set up not long ago and it's in great need of trained teachers. But nobody wants to teach here even if we invite them. You're the

first to come, so I'd like to express our respect and gratitude to you on behalf of the miners. I hope you can understand this."

He uttered the word "understand" in a solemn tone, then paused, as if considering whether she could bear the weight of it.

Instead of being angry, she smiled. His formal, logical way of speaking reminding her of her father. Perhaps his school teacher had been too strict with his grammar.

He smiled too, and that lightened the atmosphere.

"If you've no objection, tomorrow I'd like to accompany you down the pit," he said. "You haven't been in a cage, have you?"

"I was in something like it in a park when I was small."

"Going down the pit in a cage gives you a sense of adventure. Of course, that's only the first time. Anyway, it may revive your childhood memories."

When she was first given a miner's overalls, her spirits sank at the sight of the coarse dirty canvas with its strong smell of sweat. She decided not to remove her own clothes but to wear the overall on top of them. Though it was summer, she could stand the heat, whereas the feeling of the rough canvas rubbing against her delicate skin was something unthinkable.

He noticed her decision, but did not sneer at her. Instead he gave an understanding smile.

The safety helmets were differentiated by four colours: red, green yellow and black. The regulations written on a board, which she read with interest, were as follows: the black helmets are for the miners, the yellow for cadres, the red for safety inspectors and the

green for people on temporary errands.

The storeman handed them two helmets. He helped her on with one of them, as well as a miner's lamp and a belt to which was fastened a battery.

The miners waiting for the cage hailed him from a distance. They teased him, but he took no offence, as if quite used to it. He grasped one joker's arm and wrenched it behind him until he bent down and protested, "What a bully you are, boss!" Then he let it go with a triumphant smile.

The cage rattled up and stopped at the pit-head. The moment she took a seat in it, three young men rushed over jostling to sit next to her. She ended up squeezed like a gecko against the cage's cold iron frame.

When he noticed this, he came up without a word and dragged the men away by the collar one by one. Then he seated himself beside her while the three young men resignedly sat elsewhere.

The cage stopped once halfway down. She saw the three young men get out, heading for a newly-opened face.

He showed her round the pit, with which he was so familiar, like a surgeon showing interns the blood vessels in a human body. He related the mine's history, the structure of the seam. Proudly he told her that their output was the highest in the district. Then he explained to her how the machinery functioned, about working underground and safety measures. He was such a patient guide that she was surprised. If she hadn't come, she would never have got so much specialized knowledge.

She could not help admiring him.

"Do you often go down the pit with the miners?"

"Yes, almost every day," he said. "I'm from a miner's family. Both my grandfather and father were miners, and I myself was head of a team at the age of eighteen."

"Do you think the miners respect you now that you're the head of the mine?"

No sooner were the words out of her mouth than she could have bitten her tongue off, recalling the way the miners teased him on the surface. She could not see his face, nor imagine his expression, but she discerned two sparkling eyes unmistakably resting on her. How bright they were! This discovery made her heart miss a beat. Now in this dark place there were only the two of them, a frail girl and a sturdy man. She thought of those rough-mannered youths and was so disturbed that in a moment of nervousness she knocked her lamp against the face, shattering the glass. There was total blackness everywhere.

"What's wrong with you?" His voice came out of the darkness.

"Don't, don't come over!" she cried panic-stricken.

He turned on his own lamp and handed it to her silently. Then he said calmly, "Let's go up now. You look a bit tired." After that he turned to go without looking at her.

She was exhausted. Her clothes, soaked with perspiration and sticking to her skin, made her feel uncomfortable. He strode ahead with steps twice as long as hers and she had to hurry to keep up with him. What she feared now was being left behind in the dark pit.

He paused to wait for her and gave her enough time



to catch her breath. When they resumed walking, she asked remorsefully and timidly, "You're not angry with me, are you?"

Without looking back, he replied, "For what?"

"For the question I asked you just now. Perhaps, perhaps...." But in her heart she knew that if he was really annoyed with her, it was not because of her question. Moreover, he had good reason to be angry with her, even to curse her.

For some time he went on walking in silence, then said, "As far as I understand, your question concerns my prestige. I admire Manager Qiao\* and would love to be a leader like him, but I know I can't, at least, as far as my relationship with the miners is concerned. When I put on a safety helmet, I like the men to feel I'm just one of them. I drink and play finger-guessing games with them. We call each other brother, and even swear together.... Half my wages goes on wine and cigarettes. Miners are not like workers in other enterprises. No, they're different. I must understand this. I'm only glad they think I'm not such a bad manager. Apart from that, I've no other desires. As for my own prestige, maybe the primary school-teacher can explain it better than me. I don't care — "

He said these words slowly, sustaining the same calm tone, in which she could sense a melancholy kind of self-confidence.

When they reached a bend in the tunnel, he jumped

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\*Manager Qiao is a fictional character in "Manager Qiao Assumes Office", a popular story by Jiang Zilong (see *Chinese Literature*, No. 2, 1980).