

CHU FUJIN

THE  
NAKED  
FIELDS

*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.



# CONTENTS

Foreword	7
The Naked Fields	10
The Projection Room	154
Man's Worth	210





## Foreword

TWENTY years ago, I moved from a big city to my mother's home, a small county town in the south. After living there for twenty years, I returned to the big city. I was seventeen years old when I was sent alone to the countryside, and my life then was very hard. Now, many years later, small counties form the general background to my writing. The counties in the south have hills and water, their own customs, their own slang and dialect. In short, they have their own local characteristics. A county township reflects both life in the big city and life in the countryside. But more importantly, the small county has a grip on my mind, for it was there that I spent my entire youth. It is the background for my dreams. I do not need to return very often, and I can still grasp the pace of life there.

Writing about life today in the small counties of the south is one aspect of my stories.

Since I published my first work more than ten years ago, there have been tremendous changes in Chinese literature. Looking back, many short stories are now obsolete, making them difficult to read. This is due to progress in society, the development of literature, and people's changing tastes and ideals. All these works describe ordinary lives of the moment. No matter how popular a certain work was or how large a sensation it caused, it remains inextricably linked with the everyday

life of those times and has no way of passing through the tunnel of time.

This is also a problem of perspective. People's demands on literature have changed as society progresses. Works whose points of view are purely social have ebbed and flowed.

Works with a literary perspective have remained more stable in their acceptance and popularity.

Works with a literary point of view also differ in a thousand ways. That is a difference of taste and appreciation. There are foreign works that I like, and there are those that I dislike, and there are those that I somewhat like and those I somewhat dislike. But I do not know what foreign readers will think of my works.

Reflecting the vicissitudes of life, the plots of most of my stories are thin and light like the misty rains in the south. I know there are some readers who enjoy my works and some who do not.

Of course, the first thing that a writer's creation expresses is himself. What he expresses and how he expresses it derive from the author's point of view. And from his perspective he reveals his artistic imagination and his artistic style and reflects his artistic life. The West has its own ways, the East has its own ways, each race has its own traditional ways, and each writer has his or her own special way of understanding and expressing life. The thousands of different ways are the thousands of different points of view which converge on the reader in an appreciation of literature.

Changing a perspective is like changing the view. I have no way of knowing how foreign readers look at China or what they ask of Chinese literature. I have no way of knowing the perspective of readers separated

by such vast distances, cultural traditions and translation. But I believe that even though people's lifestyles are different, their hopes and desires are mutually comprehensible, in which case literature should also be mutually comprehensible.

It is very hard for a writer to predict whether or not his works will be accepted by readers. It depends on language, customs, culture, etc. In Chinese we say that it is "luck". The interaction between writer and reader through a story is also a kind of luck, a luck that brings writer and reader together. It is a rare opportunity for Chinese works to be revealed to foreign readers, and I am very happy and honoured to have this opportunity to bring distant cultures together.

## The Naked Fields

THE light streaming in through the window grew darker and darker. Fang Xikun looked up from his cards and out of the window to where the broadcast building was already fading into the deepening shades of dusk. His eyes swelled under the corners of his brows. He looked back at the cards, but the characters flowed together to form a single line of black.

The corridor outside his door was deathly quiet. After a moment, the sound of footfalls on the stairs drifted up, but the noise was monotonous and echoed loudly. It seemed to Fang Xikun that the sound of footsteps was mimicking the beating of his heart. The footsteps now came from the main hall. They were stepping on the inlaid black-and-white pattern of the mosaic floor. After three more steps came the main door. As the door opened, the tight hinges let out a screech of protest as they scraped against each other. Each time he registered the sound, it felt as if the scraping were actually inside his heart. It was not possible to hear the screech of the hinges now, but he still felt the sound in his heart. The scraping sound was prolonged, stretched out ... thud, the door finally closed. The door screeched again as it swung back and forth. Slowly, slowly, the door should have stopped swinging by now.

Fang Xikun put down his pen and shrugged his

shoulders. The weariness he felt in his heart had subsided a little. Do I have a heart problem? Ten years before, not long after his marriage, Fang Xikun felt that his heartbeat was irregular, sometimes fast, sometimes slow. He had once been to the city hospital for an examination.

"It's arrhythmia, nothing to worry about. Young people often suffer problems like this," the doctor told him.

He believed the doctor was consoling him. Back then he did not think of himself as young. The idea that he was young was a result of the aging of society.

"Why do you think yourself old?" his wife Kong Yingying would frequently ask him. After Kong Yingying had published her novel everyone called her a "young writer". What was strange was that even today, whenever a commentary or criticism mentioned her, it still referred to her as a young writer.

Although later he had had several E.C.G.s, and the results showed nothing wrong, Fang Xikun all along believed that he had a heart ailment, albeit a latent and subtle one. It was hard to detect from the outside, but eventually it would show itself. That was unavoidable. It was just like his relationship with his wife Kong Yingying; their breakup was implicit from the beginning, but only manifested itself the day they separated.

Everything in the world has an ending, which implies that everything has been decided. This fatalism is not too far removed from the inexorability of dialectism. A thought flowed through Fang Xikun's mind. There had been a period when he'd read a large number of books by philosophers such as Hegel,

Kant, Lenin, Berkeley, Aristotle, Socrates, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche. He also read the Chinese Taoist, Buddhist and Confucian classics. Part of his philosophical knowledge came from other sources. Fang Xikun felt that he already understood philosophical theories. But he found that using these theories to observe actual events was of no particular interest. But they would keep pouring forth from his mind.

Sometimes he thought that there was no one who understood the world around him more profoundly or intrinsically than he; sometimes he felt that what he understood was meaningless. It was just a kind of voluntary rumination, a useless type of thinking.

Is it because of this that I've become so pedantic, he thought.

The room was very dark, and he could only vaguely see the outlines of the desk and the bookshelves. By the window there was still a glimmer of light. Fang Xikun stood up, went over to the wall by the door and turned on the light. The hanging fluorescent light suddenly filled the room with its white light. Everything was in its usual place, and for a moment gave him an unnatural feeling. The light in the room was a grey, dull white and reflected brightly off the plastic covers of the books stacked on the desk. Books thick and thin were piled up. The thick ones were martial art stories from Hong Kong and Taiwan, and the thin ones were about, say, how to understand your partner, how to have a good sex life, how to stay fit, how to cook, how to decorate your home.... There was a stack of old books under the desk, ones with dog-eared pages, and torn covers. Fang Xikun's job consisted of registering and arranging the new books and sewing the old

books together and putting cardboard over the covers.

Fang Xikun stood for a moment, then turned out the light and left the room. The corridor was black, but he did not turn on the light. At home he was used to economize on electricity, and in the little room he only used a small 8-watt bulb. But that home was no longer his home.

At present he lived in the library building on the fourth floor in a single room. The apartment that he, his wife, and their daughter Ruru lived in belonged to him on paper, but when they divorced it went temporarily to Kong Yingying. Their daughter was to live with her mother, and he was to pay them a living allowance until Ruru came of age.

"In any case, you must give Ruru a place to live. The apartment's hers and if she ever comes back to you, you can have the flat as well," Kong Yingying said to him in court.

Someone had obviously taught her what to say in court, Fang Xikun thought. She had never been that clever, that evil-minded. When they were together, he was always the one watching out for her. Her view of society was too simple, just like those stories she wrote.

Fang Xikun stood at the end of the corridor. The cold evening light reflected through each window along the hall in strips of dark and dim light. He went up. The whole building was still, every door shut, and whenever he approached a window a thin, dark shadow appeared on the opposite wall. At the end of the hall, around a corner and up some stairs, was his room, about ten square metres in size. When he turned on the light he felt a slight warmth, just as if he had read an exquisite, thoughtful sentence in a book.

Fang Xikun used an electric hotplate to reheat his leftover lunch. He had placed his utensils on an old reclining bench. There were stacks of these old benches in the storage room downstairs. The food on the hotplate began to bubble, and the steam came out from under the pot cover. He let it steam for a bit, he felt it added a little warmth to the room. Then he opened the pot, filled his dish and ate. When he first moved in here, he had said to himself: this is not bad. In his childhood he lived in Nancheng in a rented private room. He shared the room with his mother and father and younger brother. There was a wooden partition in the room, and you could hear the slightest movements of the people on the other side of the divider.

Outside the front door was a dark brick alley, several smaller alleyways, and a lane that intersected it. At the mouths of each of the smaller alleyways was a sewer. Every morning he heard the sounds of his mother and neighbours emptying and rinsing the toilets. That was followed by coal smoke filling the room as people lit their stoves and the clapping sound of people fanning their fires. He had been used to the smell of the smoke so he did not notice it. The room was continually smoky and hazy, just as the air of that city was always smoky and hazy.... Afterwards, when he was assigned to a production team and sent down to the countryside he lived in an old thatched shed next to the production brigade's storehouse. Green weeds surrounded the path outside his shed. When the weather cleared after the rainy season the roof of the shed would sprout green wisps of grass which meandered downwards. Later he was recruited to work in the



county town and lived for a time before his marriage in a dormitory in the purple building of the Cultural Palace. Back then housing was extremely scarce, so he shared a room with Xue Zhide, another educated youth who had temporarily transferred to the factory. Xue Zhide would return home in the middle of the night, turn on the light, wash his face and make the bed. He woke up Fang Xikun every time.

Now he had this single room. He did not have too many extravagant hopes. He used an electric hotplate to cook his food, three meals a day was easy, and he did not feel the fatigue he had felt when he had a family. Over those ten years his wife and daughter always made him feel that he had many things to do. If he sat down for just a moment and picked up a book he would feel that he had left something undone. Now he felt carefree and relaxed. After eating, he put the bowls and chopsticks in the vegetable basket, and in the morning and at noon he would also place them there. He first used hot water to scald them, and then he took them to the bathroom to wash. The bathroom was on the floor below at the end of the corridor. The facilities in the library were public, and of course no one considered that anyone would be living there. The workers in the library all said that the leaders were quite magnanimous in allowing Fang Xikun to move in. He lived in a room owned by his work unit, he used library's utilities that he did not have to spend money on rent, water or electricity. Didn't this also show the enlightenment of the leaders?

Fang Xikun finished washing the bowls and chopsticks and returned to his room. He poured himself a cup of tea and sat down. Sitting there, just sitting