

THE MODERN CLASSICS

中国当代经典系列 ·

*in a rural school  
in China*



# THE SKY DWELLERS

## 天行者

刘醒龙 著 EMILY JONES 译

WINNER OF THE EIGHTH MAO DUN LITERATURE PRIZE, 2011

中国出版集团  
中译出版社

在被遗忘的遥远乡村，  
一群于贫苦中坚守的民办教师，  
一个个为求转正而发生的辛酸故事，  
一段不曾走远的中国乡村教育史。

*The Sky Dwellers* describes the lives and struggles of primary school teachers in Jieling, a tiny, fictional community nestled high in remote mountains in China. These teachers are not state teachers, with regular salaries and pensions to look forward to. They are, instead, community teachers (or “minban teachers” – a term which literally translates as “people-supported” teachers) whose wages are paid by the local community and who might not have received much beyond primary school teaching themselves. During the 1960s, 70s and 80s, most children in China were taught by minban teachers. From the early 1990s onwards, the role was gradually phased out, and some teachers were lucky enough to become state teachers.

A community teacher's life was one of poverty. State subsidies provided only part of their wages and local cadres were supposed to make up the rest from often very limited village funds. But often the cadres did not pay on time, or at all. Inevitably, this would result in tensions – a theme explored in this novel.

Each of the teachers in the book responds differently to the pressures of life as a community teacher. But the novel is not just about the teachers' lives, it also deals with the impact they had on the children and the community they served. Set in the 1990s, a time of great social and cultural change in China, *The Sky Dwellers* is a compelling, personal and moving account of a part of China's recent past which is often overlooked.

China/Literature/Contemporary

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Born in 1956 in Tuanfeng in Hubei province, *Liu Xinglong's* works include eleven novels and twelve collections of short stories. Some of his novels have been translated and published in English, French, Japanese and Korean. His novel *The Sky Dwellers* won the 8th Mao Dun Literature Prize, while his *Holy Heaven's Gate* won the first Academy of Contemporary Chinese Literature Prize and the second China Novel Society Novel Prize. He has also won the Lu Xun Literature Prize for a novella and Taiwan's United Literature Prize.



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# Chapter 1



The September sun gave no hint yet of its softer winter warmth. The moment it rose over the mountains it brought people out in a sweat, then hung red and proud until the time came for it to set in a blaze of scarlet. That was when the small mountain village of Dazhang shook off its sun-baked torpor and came to life. After a day of quiet, it was now impatient to let off steam. A black dog drove a clutch of chickens out from the bamboo grove. The commotion was too much for an old ox, returning home at day's end. It lifted its head and let out a long bellow. Black smoke spilled from the chimneys and was carried swiftly up the hillsides where it gathered and grew into dark clouds.

Night was falling. Zhang Yingcai had spent the day beneath the large camphor trees at the edge of the village. He turned the last page of a novel which he was reading for the second time. He could hardly bear to put it down. A *Small Town Youth* was written by a cadre from the county's cultural centre. When he graduated last summer, Yingcai had staged a burglary from the school library so he could keep this beloved book to himself. It was a large operation, six burglars in total. Originally there had been just five, but

they'd run into Lan Fei in the library. Fortunately, they discovered he was also there to steal books. First, Lan Fei tucked a book on the political treatise "Thick Black Theory" under his arm, then several volumes on Machiavellianism in bureaucracy. The others picked out books on domestic appliance repairs, machine maintenance, breeding, and cultivation. Yingcai only took this novel, then went outside to stand guard.

He'd heard that Station-Head Wan, the head of the town's education station, was due to visit, so Zhang Yingcai went to wait at the edge of the village every day, taking the book with him. He finished it in just a few days. The more he read, the more he realised the wisdom of his class teacher's catchphrase for motivating his pupils: *Better to die in the sewers of a real city than to live among the springs of Jieling*. Jieling was a tiny settlement, perched on the highest, most distant and inaccessible spot in these mountains. Just standing at the door and looking up in its direction was exhausting.

The thought made him reflect on his time at high school.

He had spent four years there instead of the usual three. The fourth year was a repeat, personally arranged by Station-Head Wan. Obsessed with reading novels, Yingcai failed to pay proper attention to other subjects. He never scored more than thirty per cent in any maths test. His class teacher reprimanded him for letting his uncle (the station head no less) down. He even suggested, with great sadness, that Yingcai must surely have been sneaking sweet potato from Jieling to have performed so badly in maths.

The mountainous settlement produced not only sweet

potatoes, but also sweet-potato shaped people. (They even had a different name for the vegetable, calling it *hongshao* instead of the more common *hongshu*.) People from Jieling were such stupid, fat sweet potatoes they couldn't even use chopsticks. Jieling was also famous for the fact nobody there had ever been to university. When Yingcai started his third year, the main school gate faced in the direction of Jieling. But by the time he repeated that final year, the parents of other children who were re-sitting years had given money to have the gate moved. It now faced away from Jieling—and the passing rate in the national university entrance examinations had doubled. Sadly, the beneficiaries had not included Zhang Yingcai.

The word was used frequently by his school teacher, sometimes as a noun, but more often as an adjective. “Don't be so *Jieling*” he'd say or, perhaps, “Are you trying to make your parents really *Jieling*?” Noun or adjective, “Jieling” had an extraordinary ability to galvanize the graduating class in their attempts to get into college. But it was also an antonym, a dangerous opposing force against which they fought tooth and nail.

Whenever Yingcai had nothing to do he would toss his lucky coin. It was in his hand now. *Will uncle come today or not? What kind of job has he found for me? How much will it pay a month?* Great fortune and great tragedy hung in the balance of that coin toss, and the answers it brought.

During the last fortnight, Yingcai had twice seen someone in the distance, who looked just like his uncle, walking along the track that led to Jieling. But every time the man reached the fork in the path he changed direction and

headed towards the neighbouring village of Xizhang. The first time Yingcai saw him, he ran along a small footpath to try and intercept him but was waylaid by Lan Fei. Like him, Lan Fei was not among those who distinguished themselves on the university entrance examinations. Lan Fei was repairing his father's burial mound, which had collapsed in the rain storms. Preoccupied with his distant target, Yingcai was caught off guard. His former classmate was desperate: the grave stone was too heavy for one person to handle. Yingcai stepped in and helped him; when they finished, Lan Fei only thanked him, showing no inclination to invite him home for a drink of water. Yingcai deliberately mentioned that he had never been to his home, but Lan Fei gave as good as he got, replying that he had never been to Yingcai's home either. Yingcai had continued on for several kilometres but saw no further trace of the man, and returned home in frustration.

Today was the third time. As the sun was setting behind the hills, he saw the man who looked like his uncle at the fork in the track. It was as if the man was avoiding him. He willed the wind blowing in from far away to carry a message to Station-Head Wan: *Hey, your nephew lives in Dazhang, not Xizhang.* Yingcai did not toss his coin again. He shut his eyes and sighed, then got up and walked home with his novel.

As soon as he got in, his mother said to him, "I was just about to call you to go and draw some water."

Yingcai threw his book down. "I went this morning. Is it all gone already?"

"You're the fusspot who thinks pond water is too dirty

to wash vegetables in, and insists we use well water.”

He had no answer to that, so went to fetch the water. When he returned, the two buckets hanging from a pole on his shoulders, he noticed the water vat inside the house was still almost half full. He stopped and said to his mother, “I saw Uncle going to Xizhang.”

His mother stared. “Don’t talk rubbish.”

“I haven’t said a word up to now. But I’ve seen him three times.”

“Well, pretend that you haven’t seen anything.” His mother lowered her voice. “Don’t tell anyone, and especially not your father.”

“What are you in such a flap about?” Yingcai asked. “Uncle is ideologically sound, there’s no way he would do anything inappropriate.”

His mother gave a forced laugh. “It’s just a shame the same can’t be said about your aunt. Otherwise I’d go to their house and tell them off for making you wait for a job like this.”

“It’s not her fault that he’s going about the place acting the grand official.”

“Your uncle should have been more steady. If he had married Lan Xiaomei from Xizhang, he wouldn’t have ended up a slave to a woman like Li Fang. It’s better not to pair with someone from a higher class than yourself.”

“Are you saying I shouldn’t ask him for help?” Yingcai replied touchily.

“Why are you making such wild guesses about what your uncle is doing anyway?” His mother replied hurriedly.

Yingcai came out with it. “I’ve had enough; I don’t care

if I fall off his coattails. I'll be blunt: if you don't make Uncle help me find a job, I won't lift so much as a rice straw for this family." He put the pole back on his shoulders and carried the water outside. The step which kept the animals out of the courtyard was a little high. He stumbled but did not fall, though he did swear.

His mother was angry. "Who are you cursing now? The thunder god or your uncle?"

"Nobody asked you to have such a useless son, did they? No good at school, no prospects. But I'm pretty good at swearing—if you don't believe me, just wait and see."

Sure enough, when he came back with the water Yingcai swore again. His mother smacked his ear, then started to cry. "Just wait until your father gets home, he'll deal with you then."

Yingcai had no dinner as a result. By the time his father came home he had already gone to bed. He lay on the bed and listened to his father asking what had happened. His mother covered for him and said that he had a headache so was lying down.

"All that learning has made him lazy." His father sounded angry. "He's nearly eighteen and useless as a fart. Last year he missed going to college by three points. When he retook the test this time he got one point less!"

Yingcai bolted the door to his room, then sat down at the table to write a letter to a girl he knew from school called Yao Yan.

*I've just read the book you recommended last semester, A Small Town Youth. The chapter called "The Ninth Street Stall" is really*

good, there are so many details that could have happened at school. Yu Jie reminds me of you; you both have beautiful souls.

After filling one sheet of paper in this way, Yingcai ran out of things to say. After a lot of thought, he continued.

*My uncle is the head of the town's education station. He is going to help me find a good job. In a few days I will be posted to a unit with lots of talented people. I can't tell you where I'll be working just yet, I'll write again when I start—and I guarantee that you'll be amazed when you see the postmark on the envelope.*

Yingcai read the letter through when he finished. In spite of himself he blushed and picked up his pen to cross out the last paragraph of boasts. He lay back down on the bed, staring blankly at the bright light playing over the ceiling.

When he woke he realised that he'd slept through the night without putting the mosquito net up; his whole body was covered in red bites. He sat up and looked at the half-eaten bowl of eggs from the night before. He was hungry, but he remembered the health advice posted on the school noticeboard: *Do Not Eat Leftover Eggs*. He withdrew the hand that had been hovering over the bowl. Just then his mother knocked. He didn't feel like opening the door, but the bolt was loose and it only took a couple of pushes for his mother to open it.

"Your uncle is here," she said quietly. "You need to behave properly, don't act with him like you do with your father."



His mother looked at the half-eaten bowl, then at Yingcai, and sighed. She picked it up and finished it off quickly. Yingcai got dressed and went into the main room. He had planned to address the man across from his father politely as "Uncle" but at the last moment something else slipped out.

"Station-Head Wan, you must have been busy lately." It sounded like a deliberate insult.

"Zhang Yingcai," the station head said, "I've come about a job for you."

"Don't be an idiot", said his father, "hurry up and say thank you."

"I've got you a position as a temporary teacher," his uncle continued. "There are only two free positions in the whole area and dozens of people who want the jobs, so I wasn't able to confirm that it was yours until yesterday. Hurry up and pack. After breakfast I'll take you up to report in at Jieling Elementary School."

Yingcai's ears pricked up. "Jieling?"

His mother couldn't believe it either. "There are so many schools around here, why does he have to go up that huge mountain to the back of beyond?"

"It's precisely because nobody wants to go there that they're short on teachers. They need temporary teachers," Station-Head Wan replied.

"What about the other job?" Yingcai's father asked.

The station head looked surprised. "There is a position at Central Elementary School, but after consideration the education station decided to allocate it to Lan Fei from Xizhang village."

Yingcai's mother saw his father's face change and interrupted quickly. "It can't have been easy for Lan Xiaomei to bring up a child on her own after she lost her husband. Looking out for them is the right thing to do."

His father looked at her. "So go and fetch me a bottle of insecticide, and let's see who looks after you once I've drunk it."

Station-Head Wan was annoyed. "You want to be served the choicest cut, I take it? Look, if you don't want the job, I can give it to someone else. The children's education is the most important thing."

Yingcai's father relented at once. "I didn't mean anything by it. Everyone wants to do better for themselves, it's like they say: even the Prime Minister dreams of being Emperor."

His mother cut in. "Yingcai, go and pack your bags now."

Yingcai had not said a word thus far, but now turned to look at his mother. "Pack my bags, my ass! You just want your little brother to get his way, so you're happy to send your own son to Jieling to suffer as a community teacher. It's not even a proper job like a state teacher."

"You don't have a town residency permit and you didn't get into university, so what makes you think you're qualified to be a state teacher? To put it nicely, you're lucky to get a job as a temporary community teacher. To put it less nicely, it's only thanks to your uncle's position as the head of the education station. You can't have things too easy now, or how will I explain it to the authorities when I help you in the future?"

His father chipped in. "If you don't want to teach, that's fine, I could do with some help at home."