

ZHANG CHENGZHI

THE BLACK STEED

and Other Selected Writings



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Panda Books
The Black Steed

Zhang Chengzhi was born in 1948 in Beijing, though his family comes from Shandong. After graduating from middle school in 1968 he went to work as a herdsman on the grasslands of Inner Mongolian for four years, becoming fluent in the language. From 1972 to 1975 he studied archaeology at Beijing University, and upon taking his M. A. in 1981 from the History and Language Department of the Academy of Social Sciences Postgraduate Institute, he joined the Nationalities Research Institute. He is now a professional writer and a member of the Chinese Writers' Association and has since 1978 published several collections of short stories, though his first piece was a poem in Mongolian entitled "Arad-un-huu" ("Son of the People"), which he adopted as a pen name. His stories "Why the Rider Eulogizes His Mother", "The Black Steed" and "Rivers of the North" were national prize-winners. Writing the last of these was, he says, like cutting a vein that bled long after its publication. Zhang Chengzhi brings much lyricism and romanticism to his stories, evidence of a poetic temperament. An introverted protagonist, his meditative monologues appear very subjective, sometimes extremely so.

Zhang Chengzhi also uses much symbolism. Surroundings not only are geographical but also personify nature; the Yellow River is not just a grand, rolling river, but an "honest, self-confident, tough father" who gives simple comfort to the protagonist and bears him across the violent waters.



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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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The Colour of the Horse

HERE is a story of the Mongolian grasslands: a foal was born pitch-black and remained so for three years. When you left the grasslands, the black horse stayed in your memory. After an absence of ten or fifteen years, you became nostalgic and returned. You sat on the ground chatting with an old herdsman who had with him a grey horse, and all that your eye fell upon remained unchanged; the valley, the rocks and the waves of the grass were all as they had been.

You happened to ask about the little black horse, and the old man laughed and pointed to the grey horse standing behind him: 'Don't you recognize him?' He said with a smile: 'This is the black horse!'

For a horse can change its colour. On the Han-agula Grasslands, where I was sent to work as a school-leaver, there was an old man called Alagedeng, who travelled hundreds of miles to recover horses he had lost years before. Most of them had changed colour.

Herdsman have a special eye. At night they can make out things which others can't, such as a cow in the distance or a stone on the ground; and they see a horse's bones through its hide.

The day Alagedeng came home I met him on the road. I was twenty then. He told me the colour, mettle and speed of each of his horses a decade before.

This special sight is called *tanihu* in Mongolian and is indispensable to a herdsman on the grasslands.

I tell this tale to introduce a joke, for I wonder whether or not my *The Black Steed* has changed colour through being translated into English. However that may be, I am very grateful to Stephen Fleming for the painstaking effort he has put into translating this book .

You, dear reader, do not understand Chinese, and I do not understand English, which is sad for me.

I hope all of my readers have the herdsman's *tanihu*.

Zhang Chengzhi

On my birthday , September 3, 1989

The Black Steed

PERHAPS it is because of the great popularity of herdsmen's songs — I don't know — but I often find that people have a certain misconception: they always think of the grasslands as a kind of cradle of romanticism. Whenever they hear I come from such a world, their faces light up with curiosity, and in their expressions I can immediately spot such allurements as white clouds, fresh flowers, young girls and fine wine. But it seems these friends find it difficult to truly apprehend the mood these songs convey, a mood that is a fundamental component of a herdsman's psychology.

On the broad plain, a lone horseman rides through the vast sea of grass. He has been riding silently, bumping along in the saddle, for several days, scorched by the burning sun. The grass, steamed by nature, sends forth a choking odour, but he is quite used to it. His brows come together at the bridge of his nose, his complexion is dark; he is reminiscing, thinking of his family, ruminating on the hardship of his life. Indifferently withstanding his remorse over his shortcomings and the prickings of his inmost heart, he wordlessly advances across the gently rolling plain. The suggestion of an impalpable mood drifts out from his breast and circles lithely and lowly round about his

horse. This mood is a nameless one, one he has never felt before.

This mood cannot be nursed, or even noticed. Between heaven and earth, since ancient times there was only this expanse of green grass, tempered year after year by severe frost and merciless heat over countless centuries. Then men became rough, uninhibited and bold, and everything in the depths of their hearts was covered up by a cold, masculine countenance. If not for strong liquor or something unusual which could break the restraints, allowing the softer aspects of these men's nature through, then one might as well abandon the idea of ever penetrating the barrier between oneself and them and getting to the bottom of the heart of a man who rides astride a horse at a crazy angle.

However, genius does truly exist. That mood, compressed for too long at the bottom of riders' hearts, begins already quietly to rise. It wavers and becomes a melody; a flavour that is limitlessly expressive, boundlessly descriptive and yet extremely unostentatious; a unique sort of genius. This genius is soundless, yet it bears a musicality that seems ordained by fate — including a low, slow rhythm; a melody that moves in cycles, as does life; and a colour, either green or blue. The riders, who have kept silent too long, begin to hum unawares, prompted by the surrounding genius: they begin to tell of their hearts' concerns, to unburden their souls.

Believe me: this is precisely the origin of Mongolian folksongs.

The long, high, sorrowful tune begins to sound; it batters the breast of the earth, collides with low passing clouds. As the powerful, oscillating and husky

notes fly high or plunge to a mutter with each beat, each new line comes hard on the heels of the last line's echo. The grasslands seem to have been infused with blood; everything has new substance. The song becomes louder and stronger, and the sheer intensity of its emotion carries it to the distant horizon.

The singer's horse trots forward and listens. Only the animal nods, silently expressing its sympathy for its master. At times, a man's tears may fall with a plop on to the fine mane of his horse: the man has found an understanding friend. This is how almost all the oldest songs came to have a fine steed in their names: *The Tall, Sturdy Black Horse, The Swift Chestnut, The Dark Grey Horse*, etc., etc.

The ancient song *Ganga-Hara — The Black Steed* — is one of these numberless ancient songs. I first heard its melody in my boyhood. I remember that I stood stock-still in the grass, my arms hanging at my sides, waiting until the song disappeared into the wind, my heart filled with a feeling of closeness and warmth. Later, when I grew to adulthood, I unconsciously favoured this song over others, although I had not penetrated its message. Even now I cannot say I have a full understanding of its extremely ordinary lyrics. What sort of song is it? It might be called a song of love....

Eventually I encountered a writer renowned for his keen perception, and I put to him the question of the lyrics. He explained, "It's quite simple. It describes a blow suffered by childlike innocence at the hands of powerful human nature. In fact, while this song might be described as unpretentious and unadorned, it does not have a very powerful effect." I asked suspiciously, "Then why has it come down to us over the years?"

Also, why do I always feel it lingering in my heart?" He smiled and pinched my thick arm indulgently: "Because you are already mature. Understand, Bayanbulag? It's because of the beauty of love itself. She attracts you."

I never thought that long afterwards I would not sing, but rather would myself relive, this ancient song!

When I lift my head up out of the deep grass where it has been hidden, stare at the blue expanse of sky and cock my ears to listen to the low, muted musical phrases which move among the layers of clouds and ripple along the tops of the grasses, searching in the hush for the invisible genius, I gradually come to feel that those frenzied and distant codas, that rare sentimentality, that unpretentious tragedy and that deep and lasting love are all nothing but excuses and empty form, or one might say they are only the colour and tone the genius uses to make itself into music. The true spirit inherent in the ancient song is much more obscure and complex. It is this spirit which gives us and our ancestors a deep and lasting emotional experience, but which at the same time never allows us the opportunity to plumb its depths. I stare blankly at the sky into which the song has disappeared. A wild goose wings past with a cry, cutting short my ruminations. I think of the writer I admired for so long, and am aware for the first time of the superficiality of the famous....

Yes, now it is time to pose this question again. I want to ask myself, and others as well — to ask those friends whom I have never seen but whose hearts beat as one with mine: what is the song *The Black Steed* really about, anyway? Why has this old song

been sung from ancient times down to the present day?

1

*He's beautiful, he runs well — my fine black steed
Hitched outside the door — to the elmwood cart*

In a spot deep in the desolate grasslands, far from Aobao where ancient tribes' leaders met, the Mother Lake and the Xilin River, you may find a small, sparkling clear river called the Bergen. The herdsmen jokingly speculate that somebody's sister-in-law must have gotten famous here somehow, giving the river its interesting name. But once I heard a white-haired granny say, even before our nomadic Mongol ancestors arrived here with their herds, the Bergen was the river where the family of a bride would "give" her to her husband's family and say their farewells.*

I forded the stream on my horse, splashing through the current. Looking out for its own interests, my horse stopped in the middle of the crystal-clear stream and drank long and deeply. Raising my head, I gazed at scenery which was new to me and yet familiar. After twenty years, the Bergen River was as I remembered it. The first time I ever saw the river, I remember how my father pushed down my head with his hand and shouted, "Hey! Bent down, you little bull calf! Drink a few mouthfuls — this is the water of our home, the

*Bergen: In modern Mongol, the word means "sister-in-law", but linguistic evidence suggests that it is a borrowing from Tujue, a Turkic language. It is a nominalized verb with the root meaning "to give". — Author's note

grasslands!”

Not long ago, I accompanied a few specialists from the planning office of the Regional Department of Animal Husbandry here on a trip to investigate values of young stock. When I made a special trip to the People's Committee of the neighbouring banner to see my father, for some reason he lost his temper with me: “Hunh! Accompanying the specialists? Interpreting for them? Hunh! Little calf, don't think that just because you're grown up now I can't take my whip to you.... You scam to the reeds at the edge of the Bergen and soak yourself in the river water for three days and nights to wash off your big translator's, big cadre's stink — then you can come to see me!”

Father, can it be you think only you truly love the grasslands? Don't forget: there is no substitute for experience; we are all living our lives....

At the bend in the river and on the moist patches of grassy ground grow thickly clustered reeds with fluffy white catkins. Wild geese cry in the lofty void as they wing past in fluctuating formation. Riders crossing the patch of reeds can sometimes barely make any progress: the flock of wild geese, some squawking angrily, some honking happily, send up a great spray of river water with their wings and trample the reeds till the air is filled with a crackling noise. The geese are busily preparing warm nests; they are not about to pay the least bit of attention to these men with their careful deliberations in the midst of nature.

As I spurred my horse up the steep bank, familiar scenery filled my eyes. This was the cradle in which I once lived, the grasslands I had left so long ago. My father, when he heard I was coming back here for a