

Contemporary Chinese Women Writers

The Mountain Flowers I Have Bloomed Quietly



Lu Xing'er

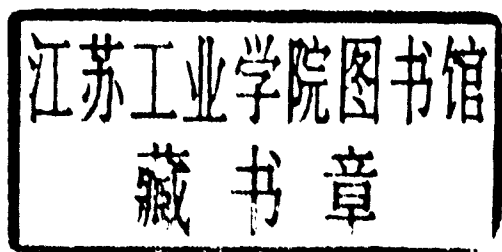


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Lu Xing'er was born in Shanghai in 1949. In 1968, at the age of nineteen, she was sent to do farm work in the Great Northern Wilderness, and in 1978 entered the Central Drama Institute. Her first story, "The Ox Horn", appeared in Heilongjiang Literature 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 Wildness*.

Editors' Note

WHEN the Cultural Revolution came to an end in 1976, especially after 1978 when China adopted the policy of reform and opening to the outside world, one tidal wave of creative writing after another has washed over the face of Chinese literature. Chinese women writers have added their indelible inscriptions to this New Age Literature. Their works present a good cross-section of life in China. Among these writers are Shen Rong, Wang Anyi, Zhang Jie, Cheng Naishan, Tie Ning, Lu Xing'er, Chi Li, Zhang Xin, Fang Fang, Chi Zijian, and Bi Shumin, to name only a few.

The late 1970s and the early 1980s was a period of literary renaissance, thanks to the relaxed political climate and growing democracy in China. Many women writers emerged, dealing with all kinds of subject matters and attracting widespread attention. The school of "wound literature" took shape, which mainly focuses on people's lives during and after the Cultural Revolution. Shen Rong's "At Middle Age" raises the problems of middle-aged professionals, who enter the new age with marks left on them by the Cultural Revolution and who have to divide their time between career and family and more often than not neglect one or the other. Cheng Naishan, perceptive, objective, penetrating, and compassionate, captivates her readers with stories about the lives and loves, the destinies and the emotional entanglements of the industrial and business families of China's metropolis, a class which has weathered political vicissitudes before and during the Cultural Revolution. "The Blue House," her representative work, is one such story

describing the turmoil going through the Gu family, the former steel giant in Shanghai who owned the Blue House.

Women writers were truthful spokesmen for the youth who suffered during the Cultural Revolution. Problems of the young people of the time were frankly dealt with, such as their disrupted education; lack of interesting employment; the difficulties met with by boys and girls sent from town to the countryside; the low incomes and overcrowding which threaten to break up young couples' marriages; their mental confusion after the turbulent years in which traditions were thrown overboard and bureaucracy, nepotism and corruption were rampant. Zhang Jie's "Love Must Not Be Forgotten" had aroused considerable interest as well as much controversy. Boldly unconventional, idealistic and intensely romantic, the story sheds interesting light on the changes in the attitude to love in socialist China, still strongly influenced by feudal ideas about marriage at the time.

While reform was still dawning on the Chinese horizon, Zhang Jie captured the historic social changes of this mood of reform in her important novel, "Leaden Wings." First published in 1981 and an instant bestseller, the story has as its central theme the modernization of industry. The publication of this book aroused further controversy. Exposing various abuses and man-made obstacles to modernization, it came under fire for "attacking socialism." But many readers welcomed it as painting a truthful picture of modern Chinese society of the time.

In the mid-1980s, seeking out and examining the roots of Chinese culture became the dominant trend, hence the term "root literature." Leading this trend was Wang Anyi's novella "Xiaobao Village," which dissects the rights and wrongs of traditional moral values by portraying what happens behind closed doors in a tiny village that is generally extolled as a paragon of humanity and justice. The author's rich choice of language and her profound

grasp of the cultural life and nature of people in a small village, places "Xiaobao Village" on a par with Ah Cheng's "The Chess Master" and Han Shaogong's "Father."

Wang Anyi, who represents the writers whose formal education was disrupted by the Cultural Revolution knows from first-hand experience the problems of young people who have returned from communes to the cities. In her stories, a sense of humanism appears. She is not one simply to condemn or write off the 10 years of her generation lost because of the Cultural Revolution. In her creative world, authentic human feelings live through the traumatic days of the Cultural Revolution. They are perpetuated along with — perhaps in tandem with — the old class relations, with all their old prejudices, suspicions, and tolerances, too. Wang Anyi analyzes China with an imagination that seems nourished by both pre-revolutionary and post-revolutionary culture. Her stories are alive with such tensions and contrasts. Her stories "Lapse of Time" and "The Destination" have won literary prizes in China.

In the late 1980s, Neo-realism came in vogue in Chinese fiction, of which Chi Li, author of "Trials and Tribulations," and Fang Fang, who wrote "Landscape," are both hailed as founding members.

Chi Li is an active writer on the Chinese literary scene. Her stories, like the above-mentioned "Trials and Tribulations" and "Apart from Love," mostly focus on the female world, their love and marriage, though her attitude has nothing to do with feminism. The detailed and earthy descriptions conjure up a vivid picture of life in the late 1980s.

Fang Fang began by writing humorous stories, which are full of caustic and witty remarks. She then turned to stories about magic in which her characters summon up wind and rain like spirits. But she later changed her style again. She is sort of unpredictable, constantly surprising readers and critics because she does not confine herself to a certain style. One of the most popular female

writers in present-day China, she is best known for her stories about urban life, with characters ranging from intellectuals to laborers. Her "Landscape" depicts the relationships between an illiterate docker and his nine children, and the hardships they endure in a raw struggle to survive.

During the transitional 1990s, New Age Literature came to an end. The transformation of social and economic patterns in China has given rise to multiple literary patterns with writers of various pursuits locked in a keenly contested competition. The principle of literature has changed from serving life to serving man's existence, and from presenting people's aspirations for life and the historical destiny of collectives to depicting ordinary people's existence in this world. Works by women writers started to describe the petty vexations of people working to earn and survive in the mundane world. Neo-realism, first appearing in the late 1980s and represented by Chi Li and Fang Fang, has developed to a new height. Chi Li's relatively recent stories, "To and Fro" and "Life Show," have presented a vivid, realistic picture of the life of women in the fast-changing Chinese society. Bi Shumin, a doctor-turned woman writer, focuses on specific social and economic phenomena, revealing the contradictions in modern society and the true nature of man in the face of the social and economic reforms in China. But her works don't just stop there. Her novella "An Appointment with Death" and full-length novel *The Red Prescription* aim for a broader philosophical meaning beyond the superficial implications of subjects like hospice care, life and death, drug use and rehabilitation.

Today, China's relaxed political climate and growing democracy have resulted in more truthful writing and a wider range of themes. Love, social injustice, the value of the individual, humanism and other subjects formerly taboo are being fearlessly tackled by women writers—often with an unabashed display of emotion.

As editors, we hope that this series of women writers' works,

compiled and published by Foreign Languages Press, will open a door to the world of Chinese women writers and to the everyday life of ordinary Chinese, for our readers who are interested in Chinese literature and China as well.

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,