

WU ZUXIANG

GREEN  
BAMBOO  
HERMITAGE

*and Other Selected Writings*



FOREIGN LANGUAGES PRESS



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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

I am pleased that Panda Books has put together a collection of my writings from the thirties. According to convention I should say a few words about my writing at the beginning of this book, for the information of my readers. But I do not have much to say about my writings, so I will just share a few of the thoughts I have had about literature during my life.

From my days as a little boy studying the *Trimetrical Classic* at a private school, I remember the lines: "Silkworms spit out their thread, and bees toil to make honey." The teacher said, "People who do something with their lives are like this too." What he said started me thinking, and it left a deep impression on me. At that young age, I was already beset by sadness at how transitory human life is. I felt there was not much meaning to life in this world. What my teacher said reminded me that while a person is alive he should endeavour to do something for others. "I'm not going to let those measly insects outdo me!" Later I became aware of the backwardness of our people and the benightedness of society, the misery in people's lives and the imminent destruction of our country. This made me feel even more that I must not spend the years of my life in vain. I had to rouse myself to work hard at a real task to contribute something to my people and my society.

I loved literature, so I learned to write compositions.

There was a composition class in elementary school, and later, with the benefit of added years and experience, I wrote compositions in middle school. As I felt about for ways to improve my writing, I drew further insights from "Silkworms spit out their thread, and bees toil to make honey." That is to say, first, that silkworms by nature eat mulberry leaves, and bees gather pollen from flowers. They accumulate these things over days and months without ever stopping. Second, they approach the eating of leaves and gathering of nectar with great intensity. They are never lax or careless. Third, after they eat their leaves and gather their nectar they break these things down by the process of digestion. They get rid of useless material and extract an essence, which they dissolve into a fluid. Only then can they make silk or honey. I use this metaphor to show my belief that real life is the source of creativity. The author must have his own understanding and an immediate personal sense of the materials he employs. He must merge them with the feelings in his own heart. He cannot simply be an onlooker or collector or recorder of life. That is why I say that a literary work is a reflection that is distilled and purified from life.

Silkworms and honeybees are handiworks of Nature. And in truth, all of Nature is a wondrous source of instruction. It is not just the changes of season, the moods of weather, the riot of colours that open our eyes to beautiful forms and designs. Even concerning human attitudes and methods, the infinite inner makeup of Nature is the highest sort of artistic guidance for us. The ancient Chinese thinker and educator Confucius spoke day after day to his disciples of benevolence and righteousness. He spoke of personhood and the principles of dealing with human affairs. But one day he

suddenly said, "I wish I could be done with talking." He must have said this because he felt that his incessant preaching did not have much of an effect. His disciples became worried at this and said, "If the Master did not speak, what would we have to pass on to others?" Confucius answered, "The Way of Heaven does not speak, and yet the four seasons follow their course and the thousand things are born. What need has Heaven of talking, I ask you?" This was a remarkable insight on Confucius' part. Actually his near contemporary Lao Zi had already said that "Great virtue takes no purposive action," and recommended the "practice of wordless teaching". "Wordless teaching" means teaching through actions. Contemporary educators also put a great deal of importance on teaching by example, or letting the facts speak for themselves. This is why our ancient writers, artists and theorists always advocated restraint and a "meaning beyond words" in writing. It is not desirable to fall into the language trap: that is, in writing poetry or prose it is not good to express the moral or judgement in direct terms. Instead one should reveal things through particular descriptions, so that "a finite number of words may point to a meaning that knows no bounds." The most eminent of China's ancient historians also called for the narration of men's words and deeds, "pronouncing no words of judgement, but keeping one's assessment clear in one's own mind." Engels, in his discourses on literature, was also against coming out directly and stating the message of a piece. He felt that it could be revealed through the unfolding of plot and concrete description. Our great writer Lu Xun was also against "effusions" and pedantry.

Writing literature also requires abundant learning and artistic cultivation. Most important is a selected heritage from one's own culture, and appreciative read-

ing of famous works from world literature. Literature demands innovation, but it does not spring out of a vacuum. Human civilization is the long-term accumulation of knowledge and experience. If we are in the dark about tradition and our own age, we will have no basis from which to innovate.

One can only form a particular style of one's own by blending and unifying the essences of a number of different influences. The Chinese people have their own long history, during which they have never stopped absorbing culture from the outside, thus shaping one of the world's cultural systems. When we bring out a literary work, it should carry the resonance of a particular way of life. Readers should be able to recognize right away that "this is Chinese".

To make a work have this quality you cannot overlook language. Literature takes language as its tool; it is the artful use of language. Once I asked an old carpenter friend of mine: "You have trained many apprentices. How do you judge when they are ready to set up shop on their own?" His answer was: "When an apprentice is handy with his tools — his plane, adze, saw and knife — then he can set up shop." In China the ancients also said, "If an artisan wishes to do his work well, he must first sharpen his tools." Sharpening one's tools is the same general idea as what the old carpenter called "being handy with your tools". Both tell us the importance of the instrument literature employs.

Whatever our works contain can only be expressed through language. If pains are not taken with language, the content cannot come across. Since ancient times we have taken great pains to make our language streamlined and graceful. Paring away excess words and getting rid of padding is a must. I have also grown aware

that dialogue is the best expression of mood and character. If dialogue is neglected, one of the most important means of artistic expression will be lost. But unfortunately these remarks are superfluous here: the Chinese language has richness and uniqueness which most literary translations, sadly enough, do not manage to convey.

Many people who are partial to my way of looking at things criticize me for not writing enough. I am sorry to say that I got married early, and by the time I attended college I already had three children. I had my mind set on being a writer, but the occasional payments I got for manuscripts were not enough to support my family. For this reason and others I had to engage in teaching work. And so I comfort myself with this thought: "Better to write a few good pieces than many mediocre ones." The pieces I have written are indeed few, though, I am afraid, not necessarily good.

*Wu Zuxiang*

*Translated by Denis Mair*



## Green Bamboo Hermitage

AH Yuan and I arrived home on the tenth day of the fifth month of the Chinese lunar calendar. It was the trying damp season in our province, scorching sun alternating with relentless rain, an ordeal unimaginable for those who have never gone through it. Mother told us that Second Aunt had inquired about our return and sent a verbal message saying, "I am so ill-fated that even my nephew and his bride neglect me." This meant she would like us to visit her and stay for some time.

I had been to Second Aunt's home only once in my childhood. That was more than ten years ago before I left home to live in another world of electric lamps, cinemas, books in stiff foreign-style covers and asphalt roads. My old home had seemed a legendary place in my recollection, and my impression of Second Aunt's home was even more hazy, like a wisp of cloud or a streak of pale smoke. Her large, sombre house with three courtyards, the study littered with moth-eaten, mildewed old books and the pond, bamboos and plants in the garden were all as unsubstantial as a dream in my memory.

The tale of Second Aunt's past seemed to have been taken out of a story-teller's script. Of course I never saw her in the prime of her beauty. But what I saw of her later in her life — the way she carried herself, her tall slender figure, the pallor of her comely face, her narrow sorrowful eyes and reticent melancholy — all

fitted in perfectly with the sad story of her past.

We need not go into the details of her story now. As a matter of fact, my knowledge was fairly limited, for all my elders had always avoided the subject. The little I did know was gleaned from hints they let fall in casual conversation through long months and years.

It seemed many years ago there was a clever young boy studying under my grand-uncle. He was the sole heir of a man who was an only child himself. Because he noticed the many attractive butterflies embroidered on the canopy, the brush sheath and the large square of brocade in my grand-uncle's room his heart warmed towards the girl who had embroidered them. And his admiration was reciprocated by the girl, who often heard him mentioned with approval by my grand-uncle. I did not know how the hero and heroine came to meet each other, and few of the older generation knew this either. From the scraps of material I had gathered, I learned the climax of the sad story: one balmy spring day at noon my grandmother, who had gone into the deserted back garden to admire the peonies in bloom, caught, by accident, a pair of naughty children fumbling in confusion with their belts in the artificial rock cave.

When this comedy of beauty and talent became known, the girl so much admired for the butterflies she embroidered was suddenly scorned even by serving maids. My broad-minded grand-uncle tried his best to make a match of it but did not succeed. Several years later, the young man, on his way to take the imperial examination in Nanjing, was drowned in the Yangtse River, when his boat capsized in the storm rising with the autumnal tide. The girl who embroidered butterflies was nineteen at that time. When the news reached her she tried to hang herself from a cassia tree but was



rescued by the gardener. The young man's family thought there was some praiseworthy quality in the girl after all. They got the consent of her family and amid wedding music took the girl home to receive the young man's coffin. She went through the wedding rituals in mourning dress and red bridal shoes, and holding a wooden tablet inscribed with the name of the deceased young man, paid homage to ancestors in the family temple.

This story would not have been so interesting had it not concerned Second Aunt, nor would we have been so eager to visit her had she not been the heroine of this story.

Mother urged us to go, of course, saying that we were newly-weds and we seldom returned home. We should not grudge Second Aunt, lonely all her life, what little enjoyment she hoped to get out of our visit. But Ah Yuan was more than a little afraid of the old ladies in my home. My uncle's wife was a good example of these old ladies, she loved to pull Ah Yuan down to sit on her knee, to call her pet names, kiss her cheeks, pretend to bite her and caress her arms. She even wanted me to show her how I kissed Ah Yuan. Whenever she had time, she would come to sit in our room, a water-pipe in her hands, to stare at us with a beaming face and to utter all sorts of embarrassing compliments. I personally didn't mind it so much. But Ah Yuan was often so embarrassed that she didn't know where to look. Hence her reluctance to visit Second Aunt.

Since I knew the crux of the matter I assured Ah Yuan that Second Aunt was not such an outspoken and merry old lady. Besides, I knew how to intrigue romantic young girls. I added many touching episodes to Second Aunt's story so that Ah Yuan was moved to