


LU WENFU

THE
GOURMET

and Other Selected Writings

 FOREIGN LANGUAGES PRESS



图书在版编目(CIP)数据

美食家: 陆文夫作品选: 英文 / 陆文夫 著

北京: 外文出版社, 2009 (熊猫丛书)

ISBN 978-7-119-05897-9

I. 美... II. ①陆...②喻... III. ①中篇小说-作品集-中国-当代-英文
②短篇小说-作品集-中国-当代-英文 IV. I247.7

中国版本图书馆CIP数据核字 (2009) 第123396号

责任编辑: 刘芳念 佟 盟

封面设计: 周伟伟

印刷监制: 韩少乙

美食家 陆文夫作品选

陆文夫 著

喻藩琴 等 英译

© 2009 外文出版社

出版人: 呼宝民

总编辑: 李振国

出版发行: 外文出版社

中国北京百万庄大街24号

邮政编码 100037

<http://www.flp.com.cn>

印制: 求是印务中心

开本: 850mm × 1168mm 1/32 印张: 8

2009年第1版 第1次印刷

(英)

ISBN 978-7-119-05897-9

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江苏工业学院图书馆

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藏书章



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First Edition 2009

ISBN 978-7-119-05897-9

© Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, China, 2009

Published by Foreign Languages Press

24 Baiwanzhuang Road, Beijing 100037, China

<http://www.flp.com.cn>

Distributed by China International Book Trading Corporation

35 Chegongzhuang Xilu, Beijing 100044, China

P.O. Box 399, Beijing, China

Printed in the People's Republic of China

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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A Weak Light

IF you look at it from a certain angle, writing isn't really a good profession since writers are forever torturing themselves. This world is never as writers would wish it to be, nor are human souls entirely as writers portray them. Yet they constantly overrate their own abilities and diligently toil away, burning their hearts' blood to emit a weak light. They are seldom content, seldom composed, and drive themselves relentlessly, their anxieties outweighing their consolations, experiencing extreme emotions that sometimes even breed crises.

I had a lot of wonderful aspirations when I was young, but none of them was to become a writer. This isn't to say that I saw it as a bad profession. On the contrary, I thought people who could write books were terrific — if they weren't actually gods, then they at least inhabited the same terrain. When I was seven I started to study the works of Confucius, and even my teacher bowed before the sage's tablet. From childhood onwards my imagination was prone to run wild. Imagination is always closely tied to literature, which can give a child's mind an accessible and limitless universe.

Imagination needs inducement and my first inducement was a great river — the Yangtse. I was born on March 23, 1928 in a small village on its north bank. The river was only two hundred metres from my house

and every day I was woken up and lulled to sleep by the sound of its rolling waves. Every day I sat gazing out from the dyke, watching boats heave into view on the horizon and then disappear slowly again into the distance. This aroused a wonder about what the world was really like. But I couldn't quite imagine. Looking eastwards there was water and sky, to the west sky and water, a vast blank expanse which couldn't fully nurture my daydreams.

When literature came into my life, it made my imagination take root and develop. It gave me a multifaceted world in which there were monsters and fairies, then love and friendship, happiness and tears, dastardly deeds and noble acts, robbery and righteousness. I was totally bewitched and wanted to experience all of this myself. But none of these things happened in my village, nor in the small county town where I went to school. The most distant settings were faraway lands, the closest Shanghai, Nanjing and Suzhou. Suzhou I could get to; my aunt had a shop there.

In late spring of 1944, I arrived in Suzhou wearing a long gown and a hat. Always known as a paradise on earth, it was even more beautiful than I had imagined. Like history or classical poetry, it was the source of all kinds of beautiful stories. In a way, I seemed to have read them already. A young man who had toured the world in his imagination had finally found a resting place. I stayed to spend three years there at secondary school and have loved the city ever since.

At the end of that three years I realized that Suzhou was like a beautiful lake, that it had a lot of dirt beneath its clear surface. The city had a lot of beautiful women but many of them rode in rickshaws pulled by

emaciated, gasping old men. In those years of corrupt and incompetent Kuomintang rule, Suzhou's beautiful exterior could no longer hide its people's sufferings. My interest and imagination turned to society, to fighting for a better social system so that its people could live in a real paradise.

After graduation, I didn't go to college and left instead to join the guerrilla forces. But before I fought a single battle the Kuomintang collapsed. I went back to Suzhou with the army and worked as a journalist on the *Suzhou Daily* for eight years, during which time our country made great progress. I warmly praised the new order in reports, articles and commentaries. But this kind of journalism didn't satisfy me, for it was based purely on fact and made me feel as if I had something stuck in my throat. I suddenly decided to try my hand at writing stories. Though based on real life, they could still be fictitious. Imagination could bring an artistic perfection to fact. By this time I no longer considered writers sages, for a writer and a journalist were not that different. I was twenty-five then, and fairly quick off the mark. To be honest, I thought of writing fiction partly to praise the new society, partly for the fun of it and partly to gain the limelight. It certainly never occurred to me that writing could turn out to be a dangerous game.

I worked morning till night for over a month writing a story which I sent to the *Literary Monthly* in Shanghai. This first attempt wasn't accepted, but the kind editor wrote a three-page letter saying that my writing showed promise and encouraging me to continue. I liked compliments in those days (now I'm rather wary of them) and was spurred by this editor's opinion to

make another attempt. My next story, *Honour*, was given a prominent spot in *Literary Monthly* and was accompanied by a complimentary review. There weren't that many short-story writers then, and this piece turned me into a writer and a member of the East China branch of the Chinese Writers' Association. I went to its first national conference of young writers in Beijing and met a lot of the people who made their names in the fifties and are now quite distinguished. After that I couldn't stop. I published another story, *Deep Within a Lane*, which caused a sensation because most of the stories then were about fighting, production, model workers and military heroes while mine was about the life and love of a prostitute, about humanism, and was written in fine language. According to the contemporary vernacular, it was full of petty bourgeois sentiment. In the spring of 1957, when a professional writers' group was established under the Jiangsu branch of the Federation of Literary and Art Circles, it recruited people who had made some headway in literature in the province. I was no longer a journalist and became a professional writer in Nanjing.

It had never really occurred to me that I would be a professional writer, but now I had to give the idea some consideration: what was it that a writer actually did, what were his responsibilities towards society, what should he write and how? With me were Gao Xiaosheng, the late Fang Zhi, Ai Xuan, Ye Zhicheng, Mei Rukai and Chen Chunnian. We put our heads together and decided that literature ought not only to praise, it should intrude on life in all its aspects and should use creative methods other than socialist realism. It should be about people and should look at the

course of human events rather than be about political policies and movements. We also felt that excessive class struggle had already destroyed normal human relationships and shattered the fabric of our social life. These views — acceptable now — were outrageous twenty-eight years ago. Yet we not only stated them verbally, we decided to publish a magazine called *Explorers* to realize our views through art. We wrote a foreword expounding our ideas, but before the magazine was published the 1957 anti-Rightist movement began. Calamity befell us. We became an anti-Party clique and were criticized, struggled against, asked to examine our thinking and sent out of the city. Chen was sent to a labour farm, Gao back to his village, Ai to work in an orchard in the Western Hills, Fang and Ye to a steel mill. I was ordered to return to Suzhou to be an apprentice in a machine plant. None of us came out to the good. This was the "Explorers' Incident", notorious in Chinese cultural circles in the fifties. After less than half a year of the writer's life, I tumbled right down into the abyss. Writing was hardly a wonderful career.

I worked at a lathe for two years, during which time I genuinely learned a great deal from my fellow workers. Like writers, they were human beings, yet their laborious and also creative work was totally unsung. There was a lot for intellectuals to learn from. In those days, life was hard for a Rightist or an anti-Party element; if you saw a friend you didn't dare acknowledge one another. But workers didn't pay attention to that sort of thing, and provided you were honest and hard-working, they befriended you and secretly sympathized with you. They praised my hard work and I even won

several prizes, including a track suit and a large enamel basin. Good fortune hadn't entirely forsaken me in my disaster. Yet this good fortune harboured misfortune too; who could define what was good and what was bad....

In the summer of 1960, after the three years of natural disasters, an economic readjustment took place and the cultural world came back to life. A professional writing group was set up again in Jiangsu Province. Since my work at the factory had been outstanding enough to indicate that my reformation had been successful, I was transferred to Nanjing to be a professional writer again. My tumble had sharpened my wits. I became extremely careful and knew my place. But it was hard to write stories when class struggle was foremost. All the heroes were robust giants, three or four times bigger than ordinary people. I couldn't really fall in with this, because I was only 1.74 metres tall and had never seen such giants myself. Maybe they existed up in heaven, but I had never even been on a plane. So I wrote about ordinary labourers, about their work and about their outlook. From my more than two years in the factory, I broke fresh ground in my work and was quite prolific. I once again attracted attention in the literary world and got a lot of complimentary reviews. Wasn't that wonderful? Wait.

In 1964 when the economy picked up a bit, class struggle began again. Writers and artists became more and more tense and writing became difficult. Anxious, the heads of the Writers' Association convened a meeting in Beijing to discuss which approaches to literature were most suitable. The meeting was attended by Mao Dun and other famous writers and literary theore-

ticians. I was present too. Mao Dun expressed a lot of interest in my stories, saying that they indicated a promising future. The review he published in the *Literary Gazette* couldn't have come at a worse time, though, for literature and art were being criticized for their revisionist tendencies. And who was Lu Wenfu? On investigation I was discovered to be one of the 1957 "explorers" — an anti-Party element. The appearance of such a person on the literary scene was itself an expression of class struggle. I had to be denounced.

This time I really got it; the attacks were much more severe than in 1957 and went on for six whole months. A lot of newspapers carried condemnations. Two whole pages in a Jiangsu newspaper were devoted to long articles about me. I was totally bewildered. It seemed only the day before I had been praised for my writing and now I was suddenly accused of being anti-Party and anti-socialist. Was this reasonable? Of course, those who criticized me (they were only carrying out orders) gave their reasons, claiming that I depicted mediocre characters, that I talked about the dark side of society and about humanism instead of class struggle, and that I still clung to my views as an "explorer". My new errors as well as my old 1957 ones were jointly denounced. At first they couldn't convince me I was in the wrong but later, overcome by despair, I almost threw myself off the Linggu Temple. In the end I didn't, stopped by a desire to see what would happen to literature and art. I couldn't write any more, nor did I want to; I only wanted to watch. In the summer of 1965 I was kicked out of the literary world again, back to Suzhou where I became a mechan-

ic in a cotton mill. I didn't read or write; I just drank half a bottle of wine a day and hummed the *Song of Lake Baikal*, written in the days when the Chinese Red Army had been forced to retreat across the Soviet border. My tearful hoarse voice always drove my children out of the house. During the "cultural revolution" I had an even harder time. I was struggled against, forced to confess my crimes and paraded through the streets with a placard around my neck. I myself was already numb to the pain, and only worried about when this disaster for my country would end. Every step socialism made was difficult, while destruction was so easy. When would that happy society I had dreamt of as a boy be realized? A worker could always make a living by working. But they wouldn't even let me be a worker for long and told me to go off and be a peasant. In late 1969, my whole family was sent to the countryside and we had to leave Suzhou with five days' notice. A person who had dreamt of building up that paradise was once again banished from it.

My wife and I and our two daughters went to the Yellow Seacoast, the poorest part of Jiangsu, known to the banished as the Siberia of Jiangsu. Here I built a hut and farmed for nine years. During my spare time I drank and talked with old friends of mine who'd also been sent there. We talked about current affairs, about our experiences and about the Marxist texts we'd read, trying to analyse our own and our country's experience. As far as I'm concerned, those nine years weren't entirely wasted; I had the chance to think a lot. We believed that the "gang of four" would one day fall from power, but it was difficult to say when. Would it be in our lifetime?

That day finally came and the "gang of four" was smashed. Like everyone else in the country I was excited beyond words. After a three-day drinking spree with friends, I went and hunted for my fountain pen. I had to write; the urge to do so had to find an outlet. But I hadn't written anything for thirteen years, I'd forgotten a lot of words and couldn't even remember how to write. Like an invalid who'd been bedridden for thirteen years, I made my way along by clinging to the walls. I started by writing a few practice essays and playscripts to gradually reactivate distant memories, and then I put my energies into writing a short story. The former editors of the revived *People's Literature* were hunting everywhere for old writers, and when they located me I had already finished a story called *Dedication*. This was later published in the magazine and won a 1980 best short story award.

My family returned to Suzhou from the coast, and at fifty I became a professional writer again. It had taken me twenty-five years and three rises and two falls to fully enter this unenviable profession.

Strictly speaking, fifty was the age at which I really began to write; the preceding twenty-five were just a rehearsal and a tempering period. In the eight years since the "gang of four's" downfall I've published numerous novellas and short stories, won four awards and been elected a Jiangsu provincial people's deputy. I've also been given the title of "model worker" by Suzhou municipality. At the fourth congress of the Chinese Writers' Association, I was elected a vice-chairman of the association. All this has made me extremely happy, happy because Chinese intellectuals have finally emerged from their suffering and are starting to re-