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SEVEN CONTEMPORARY CHINESE WOMEN WRITERS

RU ZHIJUAN

HUANG ZONGYING

ZONG PU

SHEN RONG

ZHANG JIE

ZHANG KANGKANG

WANG ANYI



Panda Books



当代女作家作品选
熊猫丛书

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《中国文学》杂志社出版
(中国北京百万庄路24号)
中国国际图书贸易总公司发行
(中国国际书店)

1982年(26开)第1版

1985

编号: (

¥4.50

10-E-1615P

Seven Contemporary
Chinese
Women Writers



Panda Books

Panda Books
First edition 1982
Second printing 1983
Third printing 1985
Copyright 1982 by CHINESE LITERATURE
ISBN 0-8351-1600-x

Published by Chinese Literature, Beijing (37), China
Distributed by China International Book Trading Corporation
(GUOJI SHUDIAN) P.O. Box 399, Beijing
Printed in the People's Republic of China

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Preface

"WOMEN scientists and writers are few in our country," states Huang Zongying in "The Flight of the Wild-geese". True, compared with men they are few, but their number is growing. There are 220 women in the Writers' Association who, while drawing regular salaries from the editorial board, film studio or writers' association to which they are attached, spend most of their time on creative work. In this volume we introduce seven representative women writers, whose stories and reportage present a good cross-section of life in China.

Although the writers selected vary considerably in age, experience and background, all show a strong sense of social responsibility. In China, literature is not viewed as a form of entertainment or simply as a source of aesthetic enjoyment, but as an effective means of education, of inspiring readers with high ideals and the belief that these can be attained. This revolutionary idealism is a feature of all seven pieces presented here.

At the same time these stories reflect reality. China's relaxed political climate and growing democracy in the last few years 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 now being fearlessly tackled — often with an unabashed display of emotion. Social

problems dating from or arising after the "cultural revolution" are the themes chosen by most women writers.

However, one problem not dealt with explicitly is that of the status of women in China today. There is no militant writing about the issue of women's emancipation. According to the constitution, women and men have equal rights in China; but this cannot be fully carried out in practice yet, although the position of women is now vastly improved. These stories tell us indirectly a good deal about their status.

It is significant that the heroines of "At Middle Age" and "The Flight of the Wild-geese" are skilled professionals, the surgeon Dr Lu and the botanist Qin. After the founding of the People's Republic intellectuals were seldom cast in leading roles in literature, for emphasis was placed on presenting workers and peasants as the heroes of our times. Lu and Qin are devoted to their work and serve the people with great technical skill, but neither receives official recognition for her contribution. Indeed Qin is under a cloud because she has been labelled as a landlord's daughter and has offended certain bureaucrats. Her Party secretary, who should have a high ideological level and give political guidance, makes the revealing male-chauvinist remark, "Although she has her faults, we must make allowances for her being a woman."

Dr Lu works overtime in the hospital and at home bears the brunt of housework and minding the children, yet feels guiltily that she is a bad wife and mother. Many Chinese professional women have this sense of guilt. All women, even those with small children, work after their 56-day maternity leave. In a materially backward country like this, there are few labour-

saving devices, housework is wearisome and time-consuming, and in the cities people often spend hours queuing up to buy vegetables. Many women age prematurely trying to be good housewives while at the same time improving their technical skills. Zhang Jie has said to me on several occasions, "To be a woman is hard!" But there is no women's liberation movement in China, partly because women's position is infinitely better than before, partly because they see their problems in the general social context and are working for modernization to lighten their burdens. This explains why their difficulties are presented as something peripheral, not as the central theme of most of these stories.

What concerns our women writers most is the younger generation. Zong Pu describes the generation gap between certain old intellectuals attacked during the ten years of chaos and the younger generation who suffered on account of their parents. These young people seem cynical, flippant, materialistic, but they have their ideals too. "Melody in Dreams" shows some of them risking arrest by denouncing the feudal fascism of the "gang of four" during the Tiananmen Incident in 1976, and scoffing at their elders who urge them to play safe.

Other problems of young people are frankly presented: 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 revolutionary traditions were thrown overboard and bureaucracy, nepotism and corruption were rampant. . . . Women writers are truthful

spokesmen for the youth. If they have not experienced for themselves the problems of the young, they do their homework conscientiously. Thus before writing "The Path Through the Grassland" Ru Zhijuan went to live for a period in the Daqing oilfield.

Shen Rong, before writing "At Middle Age" about the difficulties of middle-aged intellectuals, familiarized herself with a hospital in Beijing. Embarking on a story like this took courage, because there is still some uncertainty about the dividing line between positive exposure of problems and abuses and anti-socialist writing. This work aroused attention to problems for which there can be no rapid solution — how to improve the material conditions of overworked professionals.

Courage of the same kind is shown in Huang Zongying's sensitive reportage "The Flight of the Wild-geese". The woman botanist Qin has the same high sense of responsibility, professional expertise and idealism as Dr Lu. But for years she has been considered politically backward. A reporter following up her case to establish the truth might well offend the higher authorities.

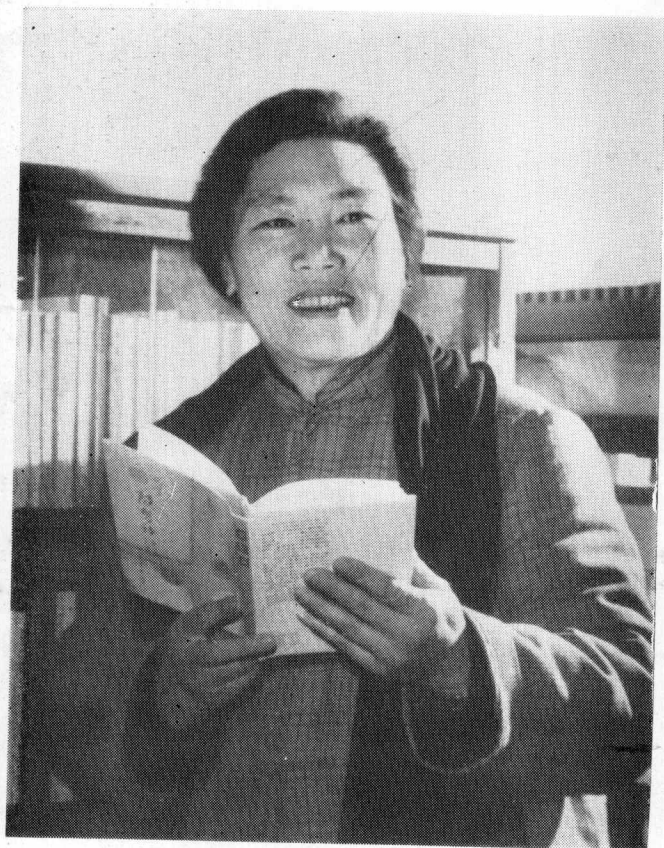
Zhang Jie's "Love Must Not Be Forgotten" aroused considerable interest as well as much controversy. It has been included in this selection because she considers it one of her most representative works. Boldly unconventional, idealistic and intensely romantic, it sheds interesting light on the changes in the attitude to love in socialist China, still strongly influenced by feudal ideas about marriage.

Many of the stories here stress human sympathy or love and friendship even during sharp class struggles. This is a positive feature following a period during

which relations between individuals were affected by the current political line — a man in trouble might be divorced by his wife and repudiated by his children, even if they believed that he had done nothing wrong. The botanist Qin, for example, is not a black or white stereotype, but a complex human being, principled and dedicated to serving the people, yet over-sensitive and liable to lose her temper. Although she is labelled as the daughter of a landlord, the mountain villagers love her for her concern for them and her selfless work to improve their livelihood.

The ultra-Left line in literature in the past encouraged writing according to set formulas, and the ten years of turmoil deprived young would-be writers of a good education and the access to classical Chinese and foreign literature needed to raise the quality of their work. This is evident from the immaturity, lack of sophistication and verbosity of certain stories. But the last few years have been a period of experimentation in finding fresher forms and styles, and women writers are paying attention to this. However, their works are above all significant because of their subject matter and the honest picture they present of life in China today.

Gladys Yang



Ru Zhijuan in 1979

Ru Zhijuan

RU Zhijuan, born in Shanghai in 1925, lost her mother when still a small child. Brought up by her grandmother, she was forced by poverty to leave primary school after only four years of study.

In 1943 she joined a theatrical troupe in the New Fourth Army and carried out propaganda at the front. In '50 she published her first short story. In '55 she became a member of the Chinese Writers' Association and helped to edit *Literary Monthly*. Many of the earlier themes of her stories were drawn from the War of Liberation, but she now writes on a wide range of subjects. Her stories are well constructed, felicitously written, and the characters' psychology is subtly conveyed. A council member of the Chinese Writers' Association, she is now on the editorial board of *Shanghai Literature*.