



**21ST CENTURY
CHINESE
LITERATURE**

**STREET WIZARDS
AND OTHER NEW FOLKLORE**

Editor Liu Tao



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STREET WIZARDS



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21st Century Chinese Literature — Points of Departure

By Wang Meng

The *21st Century Chinese Literature* series aims to introduce contemporary Chinese literature in English, French and other languages to readers all over the world.

Chinese literature's recent path, along the country's trajectory, may not resemble a smooth highway, yet it is still the main channel toward understanding China and the daily lives and inner world of the Chinese people.

China has been experiencing soaring development, and its links with the rest of the world have been growing closer. Even if you might not know anyone from China, "made in China" still can now be found in most aspects of your life, or as expressed in a Chinese idiom, "Look up, and see it everywhere." News about China appears regularly in newspapers, on TV and the Internet, trying to tell you what is happening in this remote yet near country called China, and what China is thinking and planning. In this way, peoples of the world have developed their general views of China.

Many of those views are often insightful. Chinese writers, like myself, have also been keeping an eye on the world. We often discuss the US, Japan, Russia, South Africa, Italy and other countries, as well as the interesting or ingenious views about China held by peoples of such countries. But we feel much regret to find

Wang Meng is an illustrious writer and China's former Minister of Culture.

sometimes that others' views about China are full of illusions and misunderstandings, more often than not, preconceived, arbitrary and overgeneralized. Thus, my fellow citizens and I have become powerfully aware of how little the world really knows about China, and thus we feel that the world is so near, yet still so remote.

Literature can draw us closer to communicate views and imagination about the world and life, and share each other's joys and sorrows beyond language barriers, different cultures and backgrounds, or long distances. It can make you feel that people living afar are like your next-door neighbors, as you perceive and share the secret interiors of their lives and dreams. To illustrate this point, I shall borrow a poetic line from the current Indian ambassador to China, Mrs. Nirupama Rao:

*“...making sense of each other,
even as realization glimmers
that, we are little morsels
tossed by the history of these parts.”*

It elucidates the point of departure of this series. Readers from all over the world, who are used to learning about China through foreign newspapers, TV and the Internet, may now open up these books to see China through the heartfelt thoughts and writings of Chinese people themselves. The many authors of these new short stories, living in this rapidly developing and changing, yet ancient nation, have strived to describe all that is happening in and around themselves, to give genuine dynamic expression to the intricate recent experiences of the Chinese people. Through the power of their words you will be able to catch glimpses of the

real, complex and living China, as well as other possibilities for all humanity, including yourself.

The Foreign Languages Press has long devoted itself to enhancing mutual understanding between China and the rest of the world. China followers in every country probably still remember *Panda Books*, mainly published in the late 20th century. Those books collected a wide range of contemporary Chinese literary works. The *Panda Books* series helped many Chinese writers become known to the world. *21st Century Chinese Literature* can be regarded as the continuation of *Panda Books*, though its selection and editing methods vary greatly from the old series. All the volumes of new short stories were edited by Chinese scholars, with in-depth understanding and research in contemporary Chinese literature, whose judgment and views are highly respected among Chinese writers and readers. They accomplished this editing work independently, conducive to this new series better reflecting the highly diversified spiritual quests and artistic creativity of contemporary Chinese literature.

Thus, the other vital impact of this series is to provide international sinologists and Chinese literary researchers with the view from inside, from within the Chinese literary circles widely recognized among Chinese writers and readers. These points of view are likely to differ from the general views held by other countries toward contemporary Chinese literature. It is this very difference that engenders the great potential for new knowledge and discovery.

Modern Chinese writers have been deeply influenced by literature from all over the world. We have been deeply convinced by Goethe's concept of "World Literature." We are committed to

the invaluable dream of a “Tower of Babel” promoting mutual understanding among all the peoples of the world. I believe the *21st Century Chinese Literature* series will provide our own enduring great bricks in this skyward “Tower.”

Introduction

**Wonders and Wizards
in the World of Our
Everyday Streets**

Liu Tao

Liu Tao. Born in 1982 in Jiaozhou, Shandong Province, he is currently completing his doctorate in the Chinese Department, Fudan University, with his research interests in twentieth-century Chinese literature and Western aesthetics. His writings have been published in *Academic Monthly*, *Southern Cultural Forum*, and *Modern Literary Magazine*.

Wonders and Wizards in the World of Our Everyday Streets

I

The everyday world is the place where we are born, grow up and get old, where we live out our whole life. The customary world is full of extended monotony and tedious trivialities, mostly associated with disparaging descriptions, such as of customary routines and basic vulgarities. Yet all of us yearn for surprises, wonders and novelties. It seems that surprising events and people can animate the prosaic world, quenching the thirsting soul and appeasing the uneasy heart. The everydayness of the customary world may produce anxiety and lethargy, yet the ordinary urban streets and rural byways of China are also filled with wizardry and wonder that may bring consolation and rejuvenation.

The everyday world only appears to be incompatible with a sense of wonder. Fiction can certainly contain wonders, since it is serendipity or "coincidence that makes a story," but there are practical limits to the degree of wondrous wizardry. Fiction merely mechanically reflecting the everyday

world is not desirable either. Good fiction deftly and even seamlessly handles the relationship between the everyday world and the world of wonders. Aristotle said that philosophy begins with a sense of wonder. It is the same for fiction, but fiction takes root in the everyday world, from which flowers of wonder bloom. Such fiction hence carries realism's weight and substance as well as the imagination's intriguing flights and lightest grace.

Among the numerous genres of fiction, stories of enduring folk customs can provide apt illustrations of the harmonious relationship between the mundane world and the world of wonders and wizardry. Although in a quickly modernizing world these folkways may be inconspicuous or hidden and even considered quaint or rustic, they are still significant and close to real life. Literary writing without the "chase," or the pursuit of novelty, ends up too practical, weighty and historically important; while fiction without vulgarity is more insightful, refreshing and vigorous. These folk stories of modern China are free of either eccentricity or vulgarity. Folkways and living traditional arts carry a unique combination of everydayness and wonder, current realities and long history.

In an age of abundance in things weird and wonderful, along with quests for literary novelty, it is in any case necessary to reaffirm the relationship between everydayness and wonder; and thus it is important to reinvigorate folklore, which can serve as an antidote to the high fever for constant novelty and bring sobering winds from history, to achieve special climes and creative terrains.

In this sense, "*minsu*" or folk customs constitute the foundation for fiction and the soil for the growth of literature. Fiction in Chinese originally referred to talk on the streets and hearsay, all regarded as folklore. Today folk customs still remain relevant to local lifestyles, festivals, etiquette, traditional arts, crafts or artifacts and

pastimes, rather than so much through personal experiences and daily routines. The scope of folklore in modern times has therefore contracted or become shrunken, to become more specific or focused. Literary writing centering on local lifestyles, festivals, etiquette and traditions are termed “*minsu*” fiction or folklore. Stories by famous modern Chinese writers Lu Xun, Wang Luyan, Fei Ming, Shen Congwen, Gu Hua, Liu Shaotang, Wang Zengqi and Lu Wenfu all fall under this genre.

II

When becoming a part, or the background or foreground, of fiction, folklore will certainly change the style and features of short stories. But modern folklore is not necessarily all wonderful or free from the quest for novelty. It depends on the author's skill to turn folk customs into an opportunity or a burden. The short story might be a delightful work if the writer is able to make good use of the artistic opportunity. Otherwise, the story will definitely fail under trying to carry the weight of folk traditions.

If the authors are unaware of the old sense of folk customs and its possible connections with the new contracted sense, then their fiction may still remain unrefined and unfocused. Because folk customs in the new contracted sense, upon losing the original basis in the minutiae of everyday life, will tend to become objects for novelty quests in fiction. In such stories, the real substance and historical accrual of folkways are abandoned, so that folk customs merely serve as symbolic signs and superficial decoration. I came across quite a few such stories when I was selecting fiction for this collection. Many reviews and studies on literary folklore also stay trapped at this level.

A comprehensive understanding of folkways, in both the old broad sense and the new contracted sense, helps the authors to achieve both wonder and grounding in common life, which are two essential components of good fiction. In this way, folk customs may lend vitality and profundity to fiction, instead of acting as only signs and decorations. The genuine substance and historical accrual of folkways will inject inspiration and ethos into short stories, and thus create masterpieces.

I have chosen fourteen short stories from literary periodicals since 1995 and arranged them in this collection by time sequence of publication. I intend to demonstrate that fiction can remain serious, without falling into the quest for novelty, and draw readers' attention back to ordinary life to witness all the wonders in our everyday world. Real wonders exist nowhere but in the lives of ordinary people. Zhuang Zi, an influential Taoist philosopher in ancient China, advocated staying in the "Realm of Human Interaction," instead of standing aloof from human affairs.

All of the selected fourteen short stories in this collection center on commonplace subjects, but are expressed through discoveries of spectacle and wonder. Chinese festivals, though celebrated repeatedly year after year, have accumulated tremendous power through the past thousands of years. We all have also experienced or witnessed plenty of wedding ceremonies, but we rarely think about the close relationship of wedding customs with the *Book of Rites*, which records the etiquette code of the pre-Qin period (21st century BC – 221 BC). Pre-Qin etiquette has evolved and transformed, to be passed on to this day. The highbrow arts of music, Chinese chess, calligraphy and painting, along with the more "lowbrow" or popular crafts of mending bowls with clamps, repairing paper fans and papercutting are equal in terms of being quintessential folk arts