

**21ST CENTURY
CHINESE
LITERATURE**

★CHI ZIJIAN★SUN HUIFEN★CHEN ZHONGSHI
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GOING TO TOWN

AND OTHER RURAL STORIES



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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

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 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

Dreams and Realities of Going to Town

Zhang Yiwu

Zhang Yiwu is a Professor and PhD supervisor at Peking University's Chinese Language and Literature Department, and Deputy Head of the Peking University Cultural Resources Research Center. He specializes in teaching and research in Chinese contemporary literature, mass culture and critical theory. Since the 1990s, Zhang has engaged in a series of pioneering research examining the "relationship between globalization and China's contemporary mass culture," offering insightful interpretations of current cultural phenomena in Chinese society during this transitional phase. His main works are: *Searching at the Margins*, *The Big Turn*, *From Modernity to Post-modernity*, *Images of "New New China,"* and *Globalization and Chinese Film in Transition*. He also compiled *Cultural Development History during Thirty Years of China's Reform and Opening-up*.

Dreams and Realities of Going to Town

1

Rural genres remain a critical mainstay in modern literature in China. From the May 4th Movement in 1919, such earlier works reflecting a modern metropolitan point of view as those launched by Lu Xun mainly examined and exposed the backwardness and isolation of life outside the cities. A concurrent trend in *xiangtu* or “native soil” literature, represented by Fei Ming and Shen Congwen, however, upheld the warmth and humanity in the countryside, of a patriarchal family ambience, against the unremitting pace of the city. Though the two perspectives of village and native soil differ, they were both imbued with conflicting rural and urban preconceptions.

The meaning of “rural” exists as complementary to the idea of the “urban,” both losing identity without the other. The specter of the metropolis in *xiangtu* or “native soil” literature has always been a key dynamic in curbing its development, and still remains so today. In a sense, the two styles have dominated rural narratives in China’s modern and contemporary literature, where-

in the contradictions of village and town, of both tradition and modernity, intertwine and project a diversified and complex tableau.

Modern life and writing based in the native soil underwent major changes after the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949. The opposing values of tradition and modernity were infused with sensitivity towards issues contested in the arena of the intense class struggles taking place across the vast lands of China's rural expanses, between the exploiting classes and the proletariat. The varied and complex characteristics of the people of these immense rural terrains were dramatically simplified into the distinctive divisions of such epic contention in real life. Even landscapes and local customs were stamped with seals of the boundaries of class. The literary genre was renamed "rural" literature, as "native soil" fiction disappeared in China's literary world. The evil shadow of metropolitan society and the revulsion towards its way of life (though not necessarily toward its industry) turned out to be a major check on the progress of rural literary writing. This dilemmatic duality of people's envisioning of the modern city – welcoming its industrial development while standing vigilant against its lifestyle – evoked a complex response in the creation of rural literature at that time, and still retains some of its valuable aspects even today.

2

In the 1950s, the government set up a dual system, marking distinctive and exclusive boundaries between urban and rural areas. As with the depiction of the relationship between Western prosperity and China's underdevelopment, the flourishing of urban life in China created ample space for villagers' imagining of the contrasts. The sentiments of jealousy and resistance aroused exactly mirrored Chinese people's mixed feelings towards the better-off world far-

ther west. With the quickening of China's reform and opening-up and the process of marketization, both urban-rural disparity and regional differences (between inland areas and the more developed southeastern coastal and Yangtze River regions) led to the transfer of rural migrant labor to the cities, leaving a profound imprint on the rural literary writing of the 1980s, to make it markedly different from earlier modern "native soil" writings.

These nine stories in this selection are all new "native soil" narratives of China's 21st century. The city, in contrast to and parallel to the countryside, serves as an important channel for rural people to "see" the world and experience innumerable ventures, as well as determining their mindset and behavior. "Going to Town," by Liu Qingbang, is a highly symbolic "native soil" narrative. The protagonist Song Jiayin obsessively forces her husband toward the town, leading to no more than the traumatic experiences she suffered from men of that town. Song has a simply constructed circular logic. After losing her virginity to an urban charlatan who promised her new status through marriage (a symbol of urban citizenship), her subsequent physical and mental trauma only deepens her desire to "go to town." The town is thus the goal towards which she calculates and struggles, sacrificing love, family and the joy of life. Song evokes the character of Cao Qiqiao in *The Golden Cangue*, classic novel of the 1940s by Zhang Ailing (Eileen Chang), who spends her life caught in her golden chains and shackles. The city emerges as a metaphor, a symbol and a sign of suppression, which imprisons young lively souls. It is interesting to notice the infiltration of the "go to town" obsession throughout the recent three decades, from the "cultural revolution" to the 21st century. These thirty years have witnessed tremendous changes in modern China, but through the eyes of this rural woman, it has simply represented a displacement from

countryside to town. For Chinese farmers, these changes have often meant no more than the possibility of going to town and staying in town. Obviously, this represents a major challenge to traditional narrative values.

Yet the reality is the town does not truly welcome the farmers. The traumatic experiences of Song Jiayin – the pain her body endures – presage the city's relentlessness. The prickly passage to town is destined to be arduous and heartbreaking, taking the life of her brother-in-law, and exhausting her husband Yang Chengfang, who drifts about the city for a good twenty years accomplishing very little. These two examples in Song's family best expose the city's sham hospitality to peasants, who appear tattered and remain marginalized as a sideshow to certain townsfolk. However, this does not stop the generations of dream seekers still flowing undeterred into the towns.

In Sun Huifen's novella "Two Women in Xiema Mountain Village," women dominate the mountain village, given the men's transient existence between their annual departures for work and seasonal reunions. Yet there are no male roles lacking in the story, which from a feminine perspective narrates the rural residents' intertwined feelings of unending pain along with the itch of temptation. The two heroines, Li Ping and Pan Tao, are in effect two contradictory sides of one person. Pan is a romantic woman with high hopes and dreams for her life, while Li plays it low and is more practical about life. The two mainly represent women who yearn to go out from the village and then have come back. For Li, her unsuccessful experiences with the city augur her heartbreaking fate as a humiliated and injured character. With their own men not residing in the village, the boundaries of their characters blur as the two women forge a temporary alliance to while their time away. How

will this fragile alliance survive the men's regular year-end return? Will she become a loser again? The significance of what awaits the failed returned village woman is still hardly known.

Wang Xiangfu's "Upper" is very much a fable. As fellow villagers keep moving from the upper-side (up the mountain) to the lower-side (down the mountain), Liu Zirui and his wife stayed attached to the upper-side, even when only the two of them are left in the abandoned village. What they keep expecting is the return of their son, who may perhaps never return. He has fought his way down into the town through education and exams, and has become rooted in the city, leaving his parents behind – up on the mountain. Yet, if the truth be told, he is an adopted child. Does this mean that only orphans can really walk away from the mountain into city? Or to say, perhaps only people who sever all bonds with their native soil can be truly accepted by the city? Actually, the answer is obvious, since going to town means not only spatial displacement, but also a change in one's identity and status. The city accepts only those who have bid farewell to their rural homes and identify themselves with the city. Yet, is this not truly a lifelong paradox which can become impossible to handle? The devoted warmth of family life and of parents delighting in their son permeates through the story. True, the old couple may be doomed to a seemingly hopeless future, but they enjoy their days waiting with happy memories and free imagination – perhaps this is how they endure life up on the deserted mountain. Their presence adds a flavor to the dilapidated village: "... as the village loses its vitality and crumbles, it has gained a special ambience. Though it seems a little ridiculous to say that only when a village is in ruins does it acquire a certain flavor, ruins can really be beautiful. And people are amazed that amidst the ruins there is a family living there, and stranger still, it is two old heads." What a