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PRIZE-WINNING STORIES FROM CHINA 1978-1979

by Liu Xinwu, Wang Meng and Others

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Publisher's Note

The great changes that have taken place in the field of literature in China in recent years have brought forward a large number of good short stories. The 18 short stories in this book are only a selection of them.

With the publication of The Teacher by Liu Xinwu at the end of 1977, a new situation in short story writing emerged and writers began to present readers with works dealing with social problems concerning people's lives. by Lu Xinhua, published in August 1978, aroused a strong response and was soon followed by a series of works known as "scar literature" exposing the crimes committed by Lin Biao and the "Gang of Four". However, the fact that within a short period of time, so many works were written on people's suffering and grief and describing such a wide range of terrible experiences, does not mean that Chinese society in this period had sunk into a deep abyss. On the contrary, it was only when the dark clouds had been dispelled and the cold night had given away to a warm and bright dawn that people began to pour out their grievances, their indignation and their hope for the future; it was only after they had woken up from a nightmare that people began to produce moving and vivid revelations of what they had gone through. "Scar literature" could not have been produced when the wounds were still being inflicted. It came out only when the wounds had begun to heal and the body had begun to recover. It is precisely the message of recovery that such an expression of pain brought forward. The appearance of "scar literature" indicated a common desire and determination of the whole nation to prevent any recurrence of the tragedies that took place during the ten-year-long Cultural Revolution. It announced that the old era was being or already had been buried and a new era had just begun.

The appearance of so many works on similar themes is nonetheless a phenomenon of a particular historical period. Since 1980, there has been a new trend of diversification in literary creation in terms of choice of material, technique and style of writing. The past few years have seen the most flourishing development of literary creation since the founding of the new China in 1949. This, however, is not to say that all our new works are mature and faultless. There are still shortcomings and weaknesses, and as is often the case both in China and abroad, in the past and in present, the appearance of fine works is inevitably accompanied by mediocre or even seriously flawed works.

In a word, literature in China is set on a sound course of development, and will continue to develop and unceasingly explore new areas of experience.

班主任

THE TEACHER

Liu Xinwu

1

How would you like to get to know a young hooligan, moreover put up with him every day? I doubt you would like it. You probably find the very question ridiculous.

But Zhang Junshi, the teacher of a third-year junior high school class, did not find it so odd when Old Cao put this question to him in the Party branch office. As the tanned and fit Old Cao, Party Secretary of Guangming Middle School, peered at him with a trustful eye, Zhang reflected seriously for a moment before answering curtly: "All right. I'll meet him. . . ."

A few days earlier, Song Baoqi, a juvenile delinquent, had been released from detention. He had been arrested for involvement in criminal gang activities. During questioning, he sat drenched in sweat, facing the authorities, his quivering lips making a full confession. The confession included information about the crimes committed by the leader of the gang. Because of the specifics of his case—the fact that he had willingly confessed, that the crimes were not terribly serious, and that he was not yet 16 years old—the Public Security Bureau let him go on the stipulation that he be reeducated. His parents felt they could not face their neighbors

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any more so they moved. It so happened the closest school near their new home was the Guangming Middle School, and according to the new regulation, "enrollment by proximity", it was this school that he should attend.

Song was of age to enroll in the third year, and one of the third-year classes with Zhang as the teacher had a vacancy. Zhang had more than ten years of experience in teaching in addition to being the only Party member among the third-year teachers. After evaluating the situation, the Party branch committee finally agreed to accept the boy's request for enrollment. So Old Cao now asked Zhang what he thought, "What do you say? Will you take him?" Zhang's eyes met Cao's and found encouragement in them. He agreed.

2

What was this Zhang like? Let's have a closer look at him as he cycles towards the Public Security Bureau in the dusty spring wind to find out more about his new pupil.

He is 36 years old this year, quite ordinary-looking, of medium height and slightly overweight. His clothes are obviously old, but clean and tidy. Every button is buttoned up to the collar. His face is oval-shaped, his forehead creased, and his eyes, though not large, can flash when he is angry. Students who tell lies are very afraid of that look. What the students respect most, however, is Zhang Junshi's mouth. It is popularly held that people with thin lips are very knowledgeable, but Zhang's lips are thick, and in the spring and winter months they are usually dried and chapped from the wind. But what is issued from between these lips is always full of passion and verve, sharp and fluent like a seeding machine planting in the minds of the students seeds of revolutionary thought. It is also like a broom, tirelessly and mercilessly sweeping out the dust that collects in their minds.

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On the ride over, Zhang wore a rather impassive face. It was only after he arrived at the bureau, heard the details about young Song's case from the public security official, and looked over the case file that he became animated. His feelings were hard to identify, but they bordered on indignation, disgust and scorn. Later, these would give way to determination, worry and a strong feeling of responsibility.

It was three o'clock in the afternoon by the time Zhang got back to school. He wiped the sweat from his brow with a neatly folded handkerchief as he walked into the teachers' staffroom. Everyone knew that young Song was to join Zhang's class the next day. Yin Dalei, the math teacher, confronted Zhang immediately, and thus initiated the first skirmish of the Song Baoqi affair.

3

Yin and Zhang were the same age, graduated from the same teachers' training college, both joined the staff of the Guangming Middle School, and often taught the same classes. They always confided in each other about everything. Even when they argued, they did so without tip-toeing around each other's feelings. Between them, there was nothing left unsaid.

Yin Dalei was tall and slender, but his facial features were very tight-knit so that he could not escape the nickname "baby-face". It was a good thing that he had a pair of thick glasses perched on the bridge of his nose for it helped him command respect from the students.

In the spring of 1977, Yin was in good spirits and had high hopes for the future of education in the country, his school and his classes. He felt that all injustices should and could be righted since the "Gang of Four" had been

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overthrown the previous October. Education was moving ahead rapidly. It was what he had longed for as a teacher.

But the imminent arrival of Song Baoqi infuriated him and as soon as Zhang entered the room Yin attacked him. "Why the hell did you agree to admit that punk?" he blasted forth. "You know damn well all our third-year classes are trying to improve their work and study harder. If we teachers have to cope with that little delinquent as well, we'll have our hands full just keeping an eye on him. How can we pay attention to improving our teaching methods as well? A rotten apple spoils the basket as the saying goes. Why didn't you consider this before you agreed to take him? Really, I can't fathom it!"

Some of the other teachers agreed with Yin's point but not with his severe attitude. Others felt Yin meant well but disagreed with him. A few had not formed any opinions on the subject and merely sympathized with Zhang for his extra burden. But all of them, whether standing or sitting, stared at him without uttering a sound. Even a model of the ear used in biology class which rested on top of a bookshelf seemed to be waiting expectantly for Zhang's reply.

Zhang felt there was some truth to what Yin was saying but that it was extreme. Zhang thought for a moment before answering, "Well, we can hardly send him back into detention or to his former school. I'm his teacher, so it's my responsibility to help him. . . ."

His words were cool. If they had been harsh and defensive, it might have led to a violent argument. But Zhang's mild response caught Yin off guard and he could not react. Other teachers were also moved, many of them thinking to themselves, "If Song Baoqi were to end up in my class, what would I do?"

Zhang was preparing to begin work at once when suddenly Xie Huimin, the young secretary of his class' Youth League branch, came to see him.

Xie Huimin was a good head taller than most of the boys in her class. She carried herself very erect, and had a healthy athletic look. Once when the basketball coach saw her walk past the gymnasium, he thought he had discovered the makings of a promising player. Imagine his disappointment when this oval-faced, wide-eyed girl turned out to be stiff and un-coordinated and had no interest in sports whatsoever

In fact, she had few outside interests besides going to the movies or singing popular songs she had picked up from the radio. Her studies were mediocre and sometimes she didn't finish her homework but her teachers and classmates excused her for they knew she was busy with activities for the Youth League.

The first year Zhang taught the class, Xie was already the secretary of the Youth League branch. Soon after that, it was the class' turn to go to the countryside to work and live with the peasants for a short period. On the day they headed back home, they had traveled over two kilometers when Xie noticed a boy waving a stalk of wheat in his hand. She angrily demanded of him, "Why did you take wheat from the peasants? Give it to me. It must be returned." The boy defended himself, "I want to show my parents how well the wheat is growing." An argument ensued among the students. Most of them thought that Xie was making a mountain out of a molehill. In the end, it was naturally up to Zhang to settle the matter. Holding the wheat in her hand, Xie looked at Zhang, her lips parted expectantly.

To everyone's surprise, Zhang supported Xie. Heated arguments and whispered conversations buzzed around as Zhang watched Xie's solitary figure race back along the muddy dirt track to the village. Zhang was strangely moved. Perhaps Xie could have handled the situation differently, but

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she had had only three months' experience in the Youth League and her determination to let the peasants lose not a single grain of wheat revealed her pure and lofty feelings.

But the sinister influence of the "Gang of Four", which so oppressed and damaged all of China, also affected the everyday life of teachers and students. The municipal Youth League, which was controlled by the "Gang of Four" had sent liaison personnel to Guangming Middle School and hoped to make a "model" out of one of the third-year classes. Xie was often summoned to meetings about this plan. Being very naive and sincere, however, she failed to see their motives. It was not her habit to speculate about politics. She found, however, that some kind of unexplained contradiction arose between herself and her teacher.

For instance, once Xie reported that two of the five members dozed off at a Youth League meeting. Zhang, instead of criticizing them, suggested, "Perhaps it's because all you do is read the newspaper. Why not do something different for a change? What about a mountain-climbing competition. I guarantee they won't fall asleep." Xie blinked in astonishment. She could hardly believe her ears. "A mountain-climbing competition! What kind of activity is that?" she protested. "We were reading articles of mass criticism. . . ."

Another time, after class, all the girls hovered by the window to get a breath of fresh air in the suffocating heat. Zhang called Xie over to one side. Looking her up and down, he said, "Why are you wearing a long-sleeved blouse in this hot weather? You should set an example by wearing short sleeves. Besides, you girls should all be wearing skirts." Xie, suffocating as she was from the heat, blushed with annoyance. For the life of her, Xie could not understand what he was driving at. There was only one girl in the whole class who dared to wear a colorful, short-sleeved blouse and skirt, and she was Shi Hong, the Youth League branch mem-

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ber in charge of propaganda. In Xie's eyes, she was under the influence of the corrupt style.

After the fall of the "Gang of Four", some, but not all of the differences between her and Zhang were bridged. This time, Xie looked for Zhang to report, "We hear that Song is going to join our class. The boys say that he used to be part of the block gang. Some of the girls are scared and say that if he comes, they won't attend the school any more."

Zhang was stunned. He had not expected this. He decided he had to solicit the help of the Youth League committee. "Are you yourself scared?" he asked Xie Huimin. "What do you think we should do?"

Tossing back her two short braids, Xie replied, "Afraid of what? It's a question of class struggle. If he makes trouble, we'll take care of him."

Zhang was stirred and flashed back to the figure darting along the dirt track with the stalk of wheat. In a softened tone he suggested, "Let's call a meeting of the Youth League branch and the class monitors."

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At about twenty past four the meeting ended. Everyone had left except for Zhang, Xie and Shi Hong.

Shi sat facing the window. The afternoon sun shining on her round cheeks made them appear even rosier than usual. Her chin rested in the palm of her hand as the pupils of her eyes rolled about. This was the look she adopted when she was thinking of a particularly ingenious way to solve a math problem, a look to which her teacher had become quite accustomed. This time, however, it was not a math problem she was working on, but rather the lines of a poem that she was preparing to read to everyone in the class including Song Baoqi, entitled "A Call to Arms".

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Meanwhile, Zhang and Xie were engaged in conversation. Preparations for young Song's arrival were already under way. The male League members had the job of explaining to the other boys that Song was not so much a "hero" of the Caishikou gang but a person who had done wrong and so needed a lot of help. Instead of isolating him by making him the object of either curiosity or worship, they should all do their best to help him. The girls were sent to the homes of those who refused to attend school the next day, whether it be out of fear or disgust. They promised to protect them from Song's bullying. They pointed out that avoiding him would only make things worse. They should all attempt to educate him and transform him into a useful member of the society.

Zhang would later visit Song and talk to him and his parents. Shi Hong, in her poem, was encouraging her classmates to help China advance under the guiding principles of order and discipline.

Zhang and Xie had ended their discussion just as Shi Hong was touching up her poem. Zhang gathered up the objects on the table. They were all the things found after Song had been arrested and had just been brought back from the Public Security Bureau for inspection by the League members and monitors. There was a long bicycle chain which he used as a weapon in fights, a pack of worn-out playing cards, a stylish metal-plated cigarette case with a lighter attached and a novel with the cover torn off. When the students saw the items, they turned their noses in disgust. Xie proposed, "Tomorrow we'll call a meeting of the Youth League members and activists among the classmates and show them these things and criticize them." Shi supported the idea. Zhang also agreed, saying, "O.K. We'll use this opportunity to educate the students against corruption."

But an unexpected argument arose as Zhang was packing the things in his bag. It was the last object, the coverless novel, which he had not had time to examine carefully before. THE TEACHER 11

He was astonished to find it was a book published before the Cultural Revolution by the China Youth Publishing House, a translation of the work *The Gadfly*.

Xie quickly grabbed the book, having never read or even heard of it before. An illustration of a foreign man and woman embracing made her cry out in horror, "Ugh! How obscene! We must condemn this piece of trash tomorrow."

Zhang knitted his brows in thought. He remembered when he had been a Youth League member in middle school, and the book had been recommended to him. Once, around a bonfire, they had taken turns reading it aloud with much youthful passion. During an outing to the Great Wall they had heatedly discussed Gadfly's merits and faults. The novel, written by a British woman, Ethel Boole Voynich, had greatly moved Zhang and his peers. They especially derived inspiration from the protagonist of the novel. It was possible they had underestimated the book's weak points, or perhaps failed to fully understand its true meaning. Still. . . . He turned to Xie and replied sharply, "The book is not obscene."

Xie frowned in indignation. Glaring at him, she demanded angrily, "Not obscene? If this isn't, then what is?"

Xie was totally convinced that all books obtained outside of bookstores and libraries were automatically subversive or pornographic. How could she think otherwise, having grown up during the time when the "Gang of Four" exercised a fascist dictatorship over culture? Xie had naively and trustingly swallowed all that had been printed, devoutly reading the newspapers and magazines which were full of the gang's tainted writings. If only someone very close to Xie could have pointed out at that time that the "important articles on theories of proletarian dictatorship" by members of the "Gang of Four" like Zhang Chunqiao and Yao Wenyuan were dubious and not authoritative Marxist-Leninist writings. But for various reasons no one ever did. Her parents urged their children to follow Chairman Mao, listen to the broadcasts,