

**21ST CENTURY
CHINESE
LITERATURE**

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JADE STREETLIGHTS

AND MORE STORIES OF LONGING



FOREIGN LANGUAGES PRESS



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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 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

Small Stories in a Great Epoch

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*.

Small Stories in a Great Epoch

I

Over the past 30 years, China and the world at large has experienced astonishing, rapid changes. The reform and opening-up begun in the late 1970s actually marks a “second revolution,” giving birth to a fresh image of a New China desiring to integrate into a new world. No longer defined as a victim or resistor to the world order, the country now participates in the new world, to share in its responsibilities and benefits. China has bid farewell to its century-long misery and humiliation, as the country’s status in the world has changed. China is becoming a new source of growth in the global economy, attracting large amounts of capital inflow, as a major constituent of the new world order.

II

Midst the historical backdrop of this “new New China,” the narratives of contemporary Chinese literature have also experienced enormous changes. At the close of the long twentieth century, the glorious historical mission of its “New Literature” seemed to have come to an end overnight.

The “New Literature” featuring national legends was initiated by the May Fourth Movement in the early twentieth century, the starting point of China’s New Democratic Revolution. As China developed peacefully and rapidly, the nationalist stories typified by the image of China as a weak nation and a third world country, along with the May Fourth Movement, gradually disappeared, as the ideals and passions of revolutionary literature became things of the past. With the eradication of its century-long humiliation and misery, contemporary Chinese literature could eventually throw itself into expressions of consumerism and new desires. The movement away from revolution has been so swift, Chinese people have been left with hardly time for hesitation or reflection. The replacement of the old by the new has brought us opportunities and excitements as well as bewilderment and perplexity – all faithfully recorded in this newest literature.

Urban literature enters a wholly new realm for contemporary China. Although urban subjects were quite common in modern Chinese literature, real urbanization in its contemporary sense did not emerge in Chinese literature until recent times. Such urbanization signifies a focus shift to the cities of the literary imagination itself, rather than merely using the cities as background. Contrasts and conflicts between the countryside and the town were the central concerns of modern Chinese literature. Many writers themselves came from the countryside, and the memories of an agricultural life once served as an inexhaustible source of literary imagination. The concept of the city was defined by the countryside and thus existed only in contrast with the countryside. Few earlier works described real, intrinsic urban experiences except those by neo-sensationalists, and writers such as Eileen Chang.

Today, urban experiences as expressed by the middle-income

stratum, also referred to as the *petite bourgeoisie* or the middle class, are completely different from any such experiences of the past. An urbanization process entirely independent of the countryside has become the main theme of literature. The definitions and details of urban life have become separated from rural memories. Urban experiences are expressions of the inner life of urban dwellers. The middle-income layer, often with no connections to the countryside, has no rural experiences at all. Such people live in a network of cities and participate in a globalized life through the metropolitan networks. Within the framework of globalization, the values, cultural tastes and demands of this middle-income group become dominant. Their literature usually emphasizes the significance of daily life, as their common desires become justifiable goals of life.

The urban sentiments like the literature of the middle-income layer involve extremely complex factors. On the one hand, they reflect the dynamism of China's development and of Chinese literature; yet on the other hand, the serious problems disclosed pose challenges to more conventional observations of literature. Faced with this new phenomenon and changes in literary language, we cannot rush to judge their merits. Instead, we should ponder the complex questions arising from the phenomenon and observe from every perspective. We need to deliberate upon the rationality of its existence and the incisiveness of the criticisms of it. This genre of literature has exhibited significant energy and life force. Yet we must examine and question its general indifference to the lower classes and to the historical memories of the revolution underlying our urbanization.

III

Most stories in this collection, centered on love and longing in urban settings, reveal the inner secrets of the new middle-income

families in China. These stories are no longer grand narratives focusing on national destiny, but rather, they mirror daily life involving secret love affairs and trivial pursuit characterized by exchange schemes. Urban sentiments are almost dominated by the values of this middle class. Between the pursuit of indulgences and freedoms, as well as the often elaborate plots and arrangements, between a release from ethical restrictions or pressures and resolute respect for reality and clear limits, affairs outside marriage become merely the secrets of middle-class families as in the stories of Gustave Flaubert and Honoré de Balzac, but no longer symbols of anti-feudalism and freedom. Compared with the grand narratives, these stories can appear rather too trivial and mundane.

"There's No Waiting for Some People" was written by Zhang Xin, a veteran writer who is very skillful at depicting urban longing and angst. The story unravels a fascinating contemporary romance using a subtle language of delicacy and an intricate plot of suspense. Is not a prison officer falling in love with a prisoner or a "victim" falling for a "suspected rapist" almost becoming common urban legends? The author writes in the story: "The destiny of a person's life is too difficult to predict in this era of great ups and downs, an era with sudden so-called great freedoms. The more seriously we contemplate Kant's writings about heaven and moral philosophy, the more doubtful and difficult it becomes to understand this world, aside from the surprise and awe his philosophy inspires." In this consumerist age, the neon lights in the city flash powerfully yet capriciously, rather like its people overwhelmed with desires. The emotional games centered on money and gains and losses are exhausting, yet the rat race continues. "What should have happened, had not. What should not have happened, had transpired. People who should have stories did not have any. Those who should not

have stories were now writing brilliant stories.” Are such stories about fate or true love? Perhaps neither. There is no need to wait for someone who will never be with you.

The title story, Xu Yiguo’s “Jade Streetlights” also contains elements of suspense. The story starts with a sudden burglary, but is not intended to be a detective story. Instead, it is an urban tale focusing on the sentiments of modern people. It is a crucial matter in the eyes of the heroine, whether her beloved man fights or yields in the face of the armed burglars. She says, “A woman always hopes that a man will be brave, that he will be courageous enough to protect his own family, to protect all he loves.” However, the ways of protection and the values of the new middle class in the story clash vehemently with conventional norms. Both the policeman Xie Gao and the protagonist Qiaobei have to withstand the great pressures resulting from the clash between new and old values. Jiezi seems unable to transcend the changes in values. She is like a desert monkey that cannot resist turning over rocks, though every time it sees a snake underneath, it swoons. She cannot go back to the old times or retrieve old feelings. Even if she surrenders to the new values, will the wounds in her heart not remain forever?

“Shades of Autumn on All the Trees” tells a story of a female professor who longs for love who becomes entangled in threads of emotional uncertainty and deceit. The storyline follows the flirting of a sly student with this professor well above the average age for marriage. The cat-and-mouse game is carried on over the phone. Is it possible the professor sees through the game? She realizes that at the beginning everything goes so naturally, but later on she feels it becoming weirder. After plenty of sweet words, how does the man give the game away and reveal his despicable intentions? Do cruel social realities decide that a seemingly romantic story is doomed