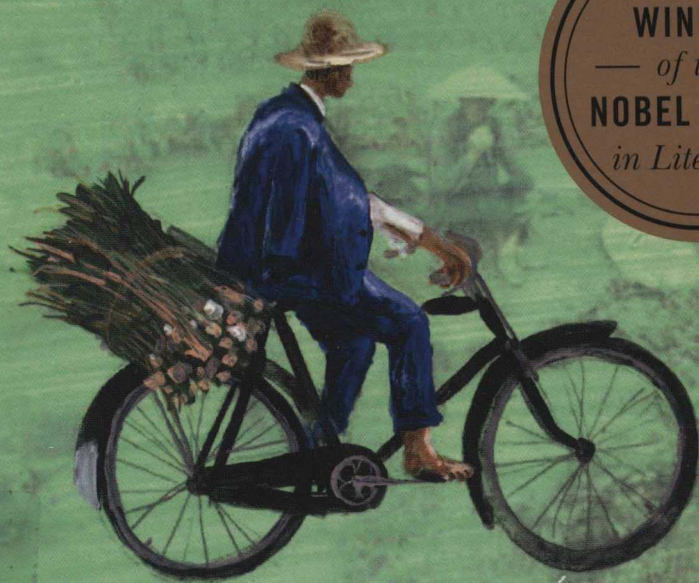


# THE GARLIC BALLADS

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## MO YAN

author of the acclaimed *BIG BREASTS & WIDE HIPS*

# THE GARLIC BALLADS

A Novel



TRANSLATED FROM THE CHINESE  
BY HOWARD GOLDBLATT



ARCADE PUBLISHING  
NEW YORK

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This is a work of fiction. Names, places, characters, and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

This work was originally published in China in different form by Writers Publishing House, Beijing, 1988. A portion of this book first appeared in the magazine *October*, no. 1, 1988.

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10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available on file.

ISBN: 978-1-61145-707-0

Printed in the United States of America

THE  
GARLIC BALLADS

Also by Mo Yan

*Big Breasts & Wide Hips*  
*The Republic of Wine*  
*Shifu, You'll Do Anything for a Laugh*  
*Life and Death are Wearing Me Out*

*Northeast Gaomi Township:  
I was born there, I grew up there;  
Even though there was plenty of misery,  
These mournful ballads are for you.*

*Novelists are forever trying to distance themselves from politics, but the novel itself closes in on politics. Novelists are so concerned with "man's fate" that they tend to lose sight of their own fate. Therein lies their tragedy.*

—Joseph Stalin

THE  
GARLIC BALLADS



## CHAPTER 1

*Pray listen, my fellow villagers, to  
Zhang Kou's tale of the mortal world and Paradise!  
The nation's founder, Emperor Liu of the Great Han,  
Commanded citizens of our county to plant garlic for tribute. . . .*

—from a ballad by Zhang Kou, Paradise County's blind minstrel

### 1.

"Gao Yang!"

The noonday sun beat down fiercely; dusty air carried the stink of rotting garlic after a prolonged dry spell. A flock of indigo crows flew wearily across the sky, casting a shadowy wedge. There had been no time to braid the garlic, which lay in heaps, reeking as it baked in the sun. Gao Yang, whose eyebrows sloped downward at the ends, was squatting alongside a table, holding a bowl of garlic broth and fighting back the waves of nausea rising from his stomach. The urgent shout had come in through his unlatched gate as he was about to take a sip of the broth. He recognized the voice as belonging to the village boss, Gao Jinjiao. Hastily laying down his bowl, he shouted a reply and walked to the door. "Is that you, Uncle Jinjiao? Come on in."

This time the voice was gentler. "Gao Yang, come out here for a minute. I have to talk to you about something."

Knowing the consequences of slighting the village boss, Gao Yang turned to his blind eight-year-old daughter, who sat frozen at the table like a dark statue, her black, beautiful, sightless eyes opened wide. "Don't touch anything, Xinghua, or you might scald yourself."

Baked earth burned the soles of his feet; the intense heat made his

eyes water. With the sun beating down on his bare back, he scraped caked-on dirt from his chest. He heard the cry of his newborn baby on the kang, a brick platform that served as the family's bed, and thought he heard his wife mumble something. Finally, he had a son. It was a comforting thought. The fragrance of new millet drifted up on a southwestern breeze, reminding him that harvest was approaching. Suddenly his heart sank, and a chill worked its way up his spine. He wanted desperately to stop walking, but his legs kept propelling him forward, as the pungent odor of garlic stalks and bulbs made his eyes water. He raised his bare arm to wipe them, confident that he wasn't crying.

He opened the gate. "What is it, Uncle?" he asked. "Owl . . . Mother—" Emerald bits streaked past him, like millions of green garlic stalks swirling in the air; something struck his right ankle, a dull, heavy, gut-wrenching blow. Momentarily stunned, he closed his eyes and assumed that the sound he heard was his own scream as he slumped to one side. Another dull thud behind his left knee. He screamed in pain—there was no denying it this time—and pitched forward, winding up on his knees on the stone steps. Dazed, he tried to open his eyes, but the lids were too heavy, and the pungent, garlicky air drew tears. Still, he knew he wasn't crying. He raised his hand to rub his eyes, only to discover that his wrists were snared painfully by something cold and hard; two faint metallic clicks knifed into his brain.

Finally he opened his eyes. Through the film of tears—I'm not crying, he thought—he saw two policemen in white tunics and green pants with red stripes down the legs; they towered over him, pale smudges on their pants and dark stains on their tunics. But what caught his attention were the pistols and the dark nightsticks that hung from wide, cordovan-colored, artificial-leather belts cinching up their tunics. The buckles glinted in the sun. He looked up into the men's expressionless faces, but before he could utter a sound, the man on the left waved a sheet of paper with an official red seal in front of him and said with a slight stammer, "Y-you're under arrest."

That was when he noticed the shiny steel bracelets on his sunburned wrists. They were linked by a slack, heavy, silvery chain that swayed lazily when he raised his hands. A powerful shudder wracked him. The blood flowed sluggishly through his veins, and he felt himself shrinking: his testicles retreated into his body and his guts knotted up. Chilled drops of urine on his thighs informed him that he was peeing his

pants, and he tried to hold it back. But the lilting, mournful cries of the blind minstrel Zhang Kou's two-stringed *erhu* reached his ears, and his muscles turned slack and useless; an icy stream of urine ran down his leg, soaked his buttocks, and washed the callused soles of his feet as he knelt. He actually heard it slosh around in his crotch.

The policeman on the left took Gao Yang's arm in his ice-cold hand to help him up. Another slight stammer. "G-get up."

Still dazed, Gao Yang reached for the policeman's arm, but the handcuffs, clanking softly, dug into his flesh and forced him to let go. Fearfully, he held his arms stiffly out in front, as if cupping a precious, fragile object.

"G-get up!" The policeman's order rang out. He struggled to his feet, but was no sooner standing than a searing pain tore through his ankle. He lurched sideways and fell to his hands and knees on the stone steps.

The policemen grabbed him under the arms and picked him up. But his legs were so rubbery that his gangly frame dangled in their grasp like a pendulum. The policeman on his right drove his knee into Gao Yang's tailbone. "Stand up!" he growled. "What happened to the hero who demolished the county offices?"

The comment was lost on Gao Yang, but the rock-hard knee against his tailbone helped him forget the pain in his ankle. With a shudder he planted his feet and stood up. The policemen loosened their grip, and the one with the stammer said softly, "G-get moving, and h-hurry."

His head was swimming, but he remained confident that he wasn't crying, even as hot tears welled up and spilled over to cloud his vision. The handcuffs dug deeply into his wrists each time he was shoved forward, and he suddenly—finally—realized what was happening. He knew he had to find the will to force his stiffened tongue to move: not daring to address his tormentors, he gazed pitifully at Gao Jinjiao, who was cowering beneath an acacia tree, and said, "Uncle, why are they arresting me? I haven't done anything wrong. . . ."

Wails and sobs followed. This time he knew he was crying, even though no tears flowed from his now dry, burning eyes. He must plead his case to the village boss, who had tricked him into coming outside in the first place. But Gao Jinjiao was rocking back and forth, bumping against the tree like a penitent little boy. A muscle on Gao Yang's face twitched. "I haven't done anything, Uncle, why did you trick me like

that?" He was shouting. A large bead of sweat on the village boss's forehead refused to roll down. With his yellow teeth bared, he looked like a cornered man about to break and run.

The policeman again drove his knee into Gao Yang's tailbone to get him moving. "Comrade Officer," he protested, turning to look into the man's face, "you've got the wrong man. My name's Gao Yang. I'm not—"

"W-we've got the right man," the stammerer insisted.

"My name's Gao Yang. . . ."

"Gao Yang is who we want!"

"What did I do?"

"At noon on May twenty-eighth you were one of the leaders of a mob that demolished the county offices."

The lights went out as Gao Yang crumpled to the ground. When they picked him up again, he rolled his eyes and said timidly, "You call that a *crime*?"

"That's right—now get moving!"

"But I wasn't alone. Lots of people were involved."

"And we'll catch every last one of them."

He hung his head, wishing he could butt it into the wall and end everything. But he was being held too firmly to squirm free, and he could hear the faint strains of Zhang Kou's moving yet dreary ballad:

*In the tenth year of the Republic*

*A hot-blooded young man came out of nowhere*

*To hoist the red flag in Paradise County*

*And lead the peasants in a protest against unfair taxes.*

*Village elders dispatched soldiers to surround them,*

*Arrested Gao Dayi and sent him to the executioner's block.*

*He went to his death proudly, defiantly,*

*For the Communists, like scallions, could not all be felled.*

He felt a warmth in his belly as the strength returned to his legs. His lips trembled, and he felt strangely compelled to shout a defiant slogan. But then he turned and stared at the bright red insignia on the policeman's wide-brimmed cap, and lowered his head again, overcome with shame and remorse; letting his arms fall slack in front of him, he followed obediently.

Then he heard a tapping sound behind him and strained to see what it was: his daughter, Xinghua, was walking toward him, tapping the

ground with a scarred and scorched bamboo staff that banged crisply against the stone steps and resonated painfully in his heart. He grimaced, as hot tears gushed from his eyes. He was truly crying; there was no denying it now. A scalding liquid stopped up his throat when he tried to speak.

Xinghua was clad only in a pair of red underpants and plastic red shoes whose frayed laces were held together by black thread. Dirt smudged her naked belly and neck. Pale ears beneath a boyish crewcut were pricked up alertly. The scalding blockage in his throat wouldn't go down.

She took high, arching steps—he noticed for the first time what long legs she had—as she crossed the threshold and stood on the stone steps where he had knelt a moment earlier. Her staff was a foot or so taller than she, and he was suddenly and surprisingly aware of how tall she had grown. He tried again to force down the gooey lump in his throat as he gazed at the two shiny black dots in her cinder-streaked face. Her eyes were a dense, demonic black, seemingly with no white at all, and as she cocked her head, a strange expression of mature worldliness settled over her face. She called out to him softly, tentatively, before a scream tore from her throat: "Daddy!"

Moisture gathered in the corners of his mouth. One of the policemen prodded him hesitantly. "C-come on," he said gently, "get moving. They may let you out in a day or two."

Spasms wracked Gao Yang's throat and guts as he stared at the stammering policeman, with his smug, ingratiating look; Gao Yang's teeth parted, and out gushed a stream of white froth streaked with pale-blue threads. He wasted no time, now that his throat was clear: "Xinghua! Go tell Mommy—" His throat closed up again before he could get the rest out.

Gao Jinjiao slinked up to the gate and said, "Go home and tell your mommy that your daddy's been taken away by the police."

Gao Yang watched his daughter drop down on the threshold and rock backward, barely catching herself with a hand on the ground. With the help of her bamboo staff, she stood up again; her mouth was open, as if screaming, though Gao Yang heard nothing but a rumbling noise that might have been far off or could have been right next to him. Another wave of nausea hit him. His daughter looked like a chained monkey being whipped and dragged roughly along, leaping silently but wildly from side to side. Her staff tapped the stone threshold, tapped the

rotting wood around it, tapped the hard, dry earth, leaving a track of pale scars in the ground.

His wife's tormented screams from the yard pounded in his ears. "Village Chief Gao," the policeman said, "you lead the way. Let's get out of here." They lifted Gao Yang by the arms, as they would a stubborn, spindly little boy, and dragged him toward the village as fast as their legs would carry them.

## 2.

They dragged him until his heart was racing, until he was gasping for breath and he sweat-stank. To the west of a dark line of acacia trees he saw three buildings with red roofs, but since he seldom ventured beyond the village, he wasn't sure who lived there. They dragged him into the acacia grove, where they stretched and caught their breath. He noticed that their clothes were sweat-soaked under the arms and around the midriff, which earned for them both his respect and his pity.

Gao Jinjiao slipped into the grove. He spoke in whispers. "In the room . . . peeked through the window . . . sprawled across the kang fast asleep . . ."

"H-how should we take him?" the stammering policeman asked his partner. "Have the village chief trick him into coming out? It won't be easy. He used to be a soldier."

Now he knew who they were after. It was Gao Ma; it had to be Gao Ma. He glared at the balding village boss, and would have bitten him if he could.

"No, we'll rush him. We can always bring him down with our prods if need be."

"You don't need me anymore, Officers, so I'll be on my way," Gao Jinjiao said.

"D-don't need you anymore? You have to watch *him*."

He glared at Gao Jinjiao.

"I can't watch him, Officer. If he got away, you'd say it was my fault."

The stammering policeman wiped his sweaty face with his sleeve. "Gao Yang," he said, "you g-going to try to run away?"

Feeling suddenly and perversely defiant, Gao Yang snarled through clenched teeth, "Just you watch me!"

The policeman grinned, revealing two shiny incisors. "D-did you hear that? H-he says he'll take off! The monk can run away, but the temple stays." Removing a ring of keys from his pocket, he fiddled with the handcuffs for a moment. *Snap!* They popped open. He grinned at Gao Yang, who already was rubbing the purple welts on his wrists, a flood of gratitude engulfing him. Once again tears spilled from his eyes. Let them flow, he consoled himself. I am *not* crying.

He gazed into the policeman's face with a look of rapturous anticipation. "Comrade," he said, "does this mean I can go home?"

"Home? We'll send you home all right, just not now."

The policeman signaled his partner, who walked behind Gao Yang and shoved him up against a tree, so hard he banged his nose against the rough bark. Then, before he knew what was happening, his arms were jerked forward until they girded the tree, where the stammering policeman snapped on the cuffs. He was now embracing a tree so big around he couldn't see his hands. He and the tree were one. Enraged by this turn of events, he banged his forehead against the trunk, sending leaves fluttering and cicadas flying, their chilled urine wetting the nape of his neck.

"Didn't you say you were going to r-run away?" the policeman mocked. "Go ahead. P-pull the tree up by its roots and take it with you."

As Gao Yang strained to move, a thorn pricked him in the belly—all the way to his guts, it seemed, since they chose that moment to knot up. To separate himself from it, he had to lean back as far as his arms would allow and let the cuffs dig into his wrists. Then, by arching his back and letting his head droop, he was able to confirm that the blackish-red thorn was no longer stuck in him. White fibers dangled from the tip, and a single drop of blood, also blackish red, oozed from the tiny puncture wound. Now that the crotch of his pants was nearly dry, he noticed the crusty edges of a urine stain that wound around the seat of his pants like a cloud formation. He also saw that his right ankle was swollen and discolored; dead skin had curled back to the edges of the swelling, like transparent sloughed-off snakeskin.

He shifted his body away from the thorn and glared with defensive

loathing at the policeman's black leather boots, which shone beneath spattered mud. If they had been wearing cloth shoes, he was thinking, my ankle wouldn't be all puffy. He tried flexing it, but that only sent the bone-crushing pains shooting up his leg. Even as his eyes puddled he reminded himself, Gao Yang, your tears may flow, but you are not crying!

The policemen, one with his pistol drawn, the other holding a black prod, tiptoed up to Gao Ma's yard, where the eastern wall had crumbled until the bricks stood no more than two or three feet high; they could nearly step over it. Inside the yard, a pair of ailanthus "trees of heaven," with droopy leaves, stood at the base of the western wall, creating slivers of shade for a handful of chickens wilting under the scorching sunlight that settled upon piles of rotting garlic like molten silver. Nausea welled up inside Gao Yang. After the price of garlic plummeted the month before, he had begun to associate the long, sleek plants with maggots on a manure pile; the nausea refocused his mind in that direction.

A cracked iron pot lay upside-down beneath the window of one of the red-roofed houses, and he saw the policeman holding the black prod—the one with the stammer—stand on it and crane his neck to see Gao Ma sleeping on his kang. The village boss, Gao Jinjiao, leaned against a tree and bumped it rhythmically with his back. Chickens with mud-encrusted white feathers were squatting in a clump of grass under the blazing sun, stretching out their wings to soak up its energy. "Chicken wings absorbing rays, it'll rain within three days." That was a comforting thought. By craning his neck, Gao Yang caught a glimpse of sky through a fork in the branches. It was bright blue and cloudless; purple rays of sunlight streamed earthward, making the chickens stir and part the grass with their claws. The stammering policeman's partner was right behind him, revolver at the ready, its blue metal glistening. His mouth gaped as he held his breath.

Gao Yang lowered his head, sending drops of cooled sweat sliding down the tree to the ground. The policemen exchanged glances; then the pushing and shoving began: You first. No, you. Gao Yang knew what *that* was all about. Then it was settled, apparently, for the stammering policeman hitched up his belt, and his partner clamped his lips so tightly that Gao Yang saw only a thin, shiny slit in his face. A long, languid fart fanned out under Gao Jinjiao's tree. The policemen tensed like tomcats about to pounce on a mouse.

"Run, Gao Ma, run! It's the police!" The moment the shout left his



mouth he felt cold all over and his teeth chattered. It was fear, no mistaking that. Fear and regret. Squeezing his trembling lips shut, he stared straight ahead. The stammering policeman spun around, tripped on the rusty pot, and all but crashed to the ground. His partner, meanwhile, burst into the room, pistol in hand, the stammerer hard on his heels. A crash; then the clang of something hitting a wall.

"Hands up!"

"Put your hands up!"

Gao Yang's eyes were awash with tears. I'm not crying, he reassured himself, I am *not* crying. He could all but see a pair of gleaming bracelets like the ones he had now encircling Gao Ma's powerful wrists. His hands felt puffy and heavy, although he couldn't see around the tree trunk to confirm that. The sensation was one of blood distending the veins until they were about to release geysers of the dark red liquid.

Following a brief but noisy scuffle, the window banged open and a shadowy figure burst through. It was Gao Ma, wearing only a pair of olive-drab underpants. He stumbled over the upturned pot but scrambled back to his feet. The linked actions were clumsy: with his rear end sticking up in the air and his feet and hands clawing at the ground, he looked like a baby that has just learned to crawl.

Gao Yang's lips parted, and from somewhere deep in his cranium he heard a voice, similar to his own yet somehow different, say, You're not laughing, did you know that? You're not.

The rainbow vanished, the sky turned blue-gray, and the sun blazed.

*Pow!*

The stammering policeman jumped through the window and embedded his booted foot in the overturned pot. He fell to his hands and knees, one foot stuck in the pot, the other resting against it; one hand was empty, the other grasped the black prod. His partner ran out the door, pistol in hand. "Stop right there!" he screamed. "Stop or I'll shoot!" But he didn't shoot, not even when Gao Ma leapt over the crumbling wall and took off running down the lane, sending the sunning chickens scurrying from their grassy redoubts, only to close in behind him like a squawking shadow. The stammering policeman's wide-brimmed cap, dislodged on his way out the window, perched precariously on the sill