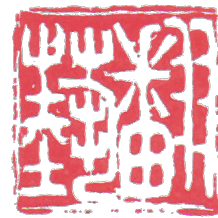


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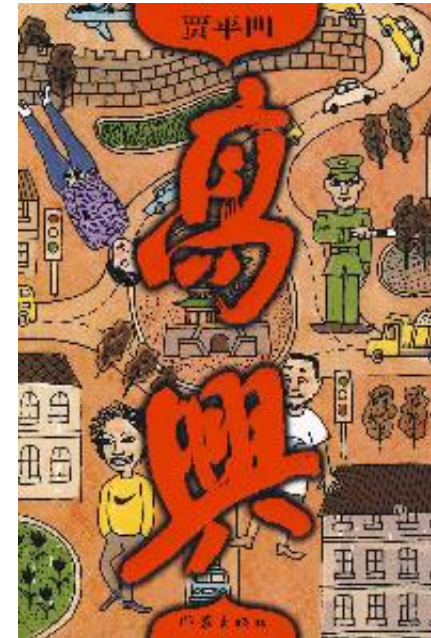
Contents

<i>Happy † Jia Pingwa</i>	I
<i>Abandoned Capital † Jia Pingwa</i>	4
<i>Screwed † Han Dong</i>	6
<i>Truth and Variations † Li Er</i>	8
<i>Northern Girls † Sheng Keyi</i>	11
<i>Common Sense † Leung Man-Tao</i>	13
<i>Ball Lightning † Liu Cixin</i>	15

Happy, by Jia Pingwa



2007
Writer's Publishing House
320pp



Jia Pingwa

Jia Pingwa is the last of China's contemporary literary greats to be discovered in English. His influence and reputation within China is on par with that of Mo Yan, Yu Hua and Su Tong: he is a regular recipient of most of the country's top prizes for liter-

ature, and each of his books is eagerly anticipated by readers, critics and journalists. Though the English translation of his novel *Turbulence* won the Pegasus Prize for Literature in 1991, he is better known in other languages, particularly French.

Jia Pingwa's oeuvre is extensive and varied, including novels, novellas, short stories and essays. Both he and his writing are identified with China's countryside—not the bleak scrabble of Great Leap Forward peasantry, but the bloody, mythic, richly-imagined roots of China's rural civilization. His subjects range from the effects of modernization on Chinese society (*Ruined Capital*), to the ancient agrarian sensibilities at the heart of Chinese culture (*Qin Opera*), to the tragedies and absurdities of urbanization (*Happy*). The majority of Jia's work is set in and around Xi'an, once the capital of China's fabled Tang dynasty, now something of a backwater. His use of Xi'an and its surrounding countryside as a setting in which to examine China's rural/urban divide gives his works a depth and relevance beyond the spectacle of development limited to Beijing and Shanghai.

Happy

Happy begins as Liu Hawa, aka 'Happy', tries to smuggle the body of his friend Wufu home on the train. Happy and Wufu are peasants who came to Xi'an from the countryside in search of a better life, and from the opening chapter the story backtracks to their arrival in the city and their early days as trash collectors, roam the streets of the modern metropolis, gawp at fancy hotels and even fancier

women, dreaming of the day when they might rise high enough in the ranks of the trash-collecting hierarchy to become "trash kings". Wufu and Happy are not equally ambitious, however—Happy is a dreamer, prone to ferociously optimistic flights of fancy, whose sole ambition is to become a "city man" (and who believes that his sale of a kidney to a Xi'an resident has secured him that right). Wufu, on the other hand, has humbler aspirations, and can't shake the feeling that he was never meant to leave behind the simple pleasures of village life.

Jia Pingwa's latest novel *Happy* is a departure from his signature lyric, semi-mythic style. The majority of the work consists of the episodic adventures of Happy and Wufu as they navigate their baffling new home, encountering a wide cast of characters both cruel and kind, wooing women far above their status and doing battle with corruption and bureaucracy. While the story as a whole tends towards the tragic, individual chapters are narrated in a spare, comedic style, exhibiting Jia's mastery of scene and character, and disguising a penetrating critique of social transformation as a rollicking picaresque.

The deep-seated spiritual anxiety caused by China's transformation into an urban society has been a common theme in Chinese literature of the past few decades, but few writers can match Jia (who continues, somewhat tongue-in-cheek, to identify himself as a peasant) for insight and perspective. In

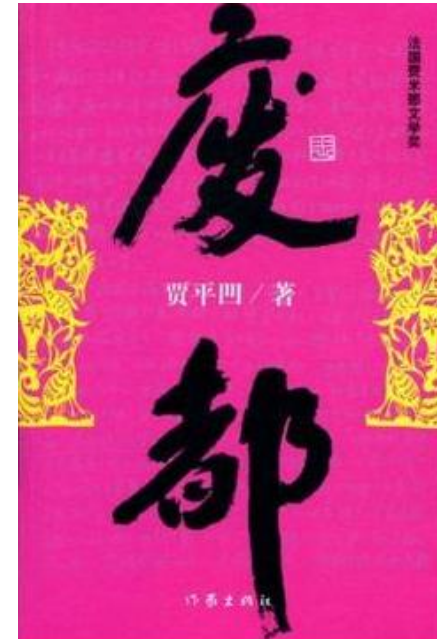
the character of Happy the author has concentrated all the ambitions, misconceptions, vanity, earnestness, pride and principle that describe the psychology of China's newest urban population.

A film version of *Happy*, directed by Ah Gan (*Ghosts*, 2002), and starring Guo Tao (*Crazy Stone*) was released in February, 2009.

Abandoned Capital, by Jia Pingwa



1994
Writer's Publishing House
300pp



Please see Jia Pingwa's author profile on page [1](#).

Abandoned Capital

The book that gained Jia Pingwa his reputation as a Chinese literary giant, *Abandoned Capital* created enormous controversy upon its publication in 1994,

resulting in a soft ban that lasted until the publication of a new edition in 2009. Though the controversy centered around (relatively harmless) sexual content, creating a reputation for lasciviousness that unfortunately persists today, it is not for the naughty bits that this novel is considered one of the masterpieces of modern Chinese literature. The char-

acters of Zhuang Zhidie, the literary lion of Xi'an, and Zhou Min, the young challenger from the countryside, have become bywords in the discussion of Chinese culture and its discontents, and the book's richly textured narrative style has served as a model for many authors who came after.

Though written in the 1990s, *Abandoned Capital* is more in company with European literature of the 19th century: the social and psychological tapestry

of George Eliot, the dense realism of Thomas Mann. Its closest correspondence might be to Stendahl's *Rouge et Noir*: the story of an idealistic young man's journey to the center of culture and learning, where he finds not the elegance and elevation he had dreamed of, but instead a slightly sordid collection of hypocrites and libertines basking in the fading glow of an earlier golden age.

Screwed, by Han Dong



January 2010
Shaanxi Normal University Press
250pp



Han Dong

Born 17 May, 1961 in Nanjing. Han Dong's parents were banished to the countryside during the Cultural Revolution, taking him with them. Following the Cultural Revolution he studied western philosophy, and became a full-time writer in 1993.

Han Dong has been well-known since the 1980s

as one of China's most important avant-garde poets, and is now increasingly influential as an essayist, short story writer and novelist. He is steadfastly opposed to the Party-controlled writing "establishment" and the wholesale "commercialization" of contemporary literature. His deceptively simple,

subtle style of writing has acquired a cult following among young Chinese writers and readers.

His chief works include collections of poetry, essays, short stories and novellas, and four full-length novels. Among these, *Banished!* won the independent 'Chinese Language Media Novel Prize' in 2003. Its English translation, by Nicky Harman, was published by the University of Hawai'i Press in 2008 and was long-listed for the Man Asia Literary Prize that year.

Screwed!

A Chinese *Midnight's Children*? A post-modern take on *Metamorphosis*? There are many resonances in Han Dong's fourth novel, *Screwed!*, yet this is a wholly original work.

In 1968, Xiaofei, along with millions of other high school students, is sent on Chairman Mao Zedong's orders to settle in remote villages. To relieve the monotony of their new country life, he and his friends start rumours that they have been screwing the villagers' only ox, Girlie. The joke goes wrong when Girlie falls sick, and the blame is pinned on Xiaofei. He is brutally interrogated and found guilty of sabotaging production by raping the animal. For this offence, he faces execution. Coincidentally, that day there is a fight in a village compound shared by two brothers and their families. The younger brother is accidentally killed. Before the death can be officially

reported, some of the villagers concoct a plan: to install the hapless Xiaofei as a substitute husband. Xiaofei is released and guided through pitch darkness to the widow, who eventually succeeds in seducing and "marrying" him. The next morning, the brother's corpse is discovered in the river, and hurriedly identified as that of Xiaofei. Xiaofei assumes the identity of the dead brother, enabling the elder brother to escape justice.

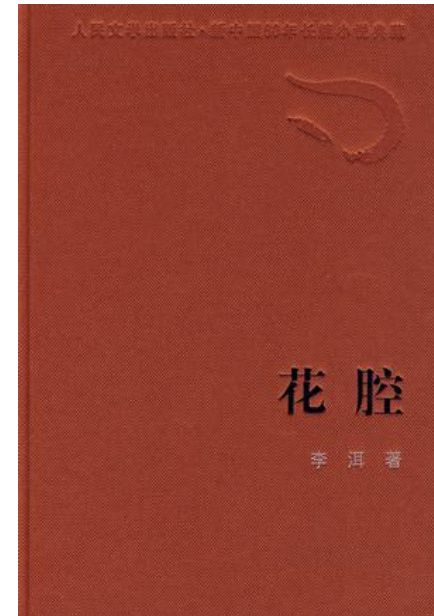
Six years pass with Xiaofei in semi-hiding, and Mao's policy of sending all high school students to the countryside is reversed. But to return to Nanjing and his former life, Xiaofei needs documents which, of course, can't be obtained since he has been declared dead. He tracks down his former persecutor, the sinister Party official, Wang, who bullies him into confessing to the subterfuge. The surviving brother is then finally arrested for murder...

Han Dong is well-read in contemporary Western literature, citing Kafka, Murakami, Kundera and Garcia Marquez as influences, yet his is a wholly original voice. In *Screwed!*, Han Dong's experiments with the novel form have produced a distinctive and highly readable narrative. The story moves with assurance between the credible and the incredible, realism and fantasy, and builds suspense right up to the last page. Like much of Han's previous work, *Screwed!* is bitingly satirical, yet also softened by affectionate, even lyrical descriptions of country life.

Truth and Variations, by Li Er



January 2002
People's Literature Publishing
House
303pp



Li Er

Novelist and short story writer Li Er was born 1966 in Henan Province. Despite his modest claim that he is “not very prolific”, he has published five story collections, two novels and approximately 50 novellas and short stories—most within the last

decade. His work appears regularly in most major mainland literary journals. Although Li Er is still relatively unknown outside of China, he is widely respected in Chinese literary circles and has acquired a passionate—one might even say rabid—fan base of

highly literate and intellectual readers. He has also attracted a great deal of attention among literary critics for his inter-textual and stylistic experiments.

Truth and Variations

*Who once was me, the mirrored-man...
whose was my reflected life?
Was I the red rose growing in the
darkness
or the blue flame flickering in the
breeze?*

*Who warned me from the shadows,
who stepped forward from the crowd?
Who smashed the mirror into shards
and made a multitude of me?*

Li Er's genre-breaking historical novel *Truth and Variations* is often cited as one of the most original works in contemporary Chinese literature. Comprised of faux-historical documents, invented archival materials, snippets of poetry and pseudo-interviews spanning the Chinese civil war, Communist Revolution, Cultural Revolution and present day, the book recounts the search for the "historical truth" (a very fluid concept, according to the author) about the life and death of its fictional protagonist, the revolutionary poet Hu Man.

A trio of biased and unreliable narrators—a doctor, a political prisoner and a judge—spin a com-

elling mystery about Hu Man, who was reportedly killed in a raid by soldiers of the Japanese Imperial Army. But by 1942, rumours begin to surface that Hu Man may have escaped the raid, turned his back on politics and revolution, and gone into hiding in a remote mountain region. These rumours are potentially embarrassing for the Chinese Communist Party, because they directly contradict the myth of Hu Man as a heroic revolutionary martyr. Party leaders decide to release Hu Man's best friend, accused Trotskyite Dr. Bai, from prison and send him to track down, and perhaps eliminate, Hu Man. This sets in motion a series of events that will be disputed, discussed, dissembled and denied by generations of observers for years to come...

Truth and Variations is that rarest of reads: a big, ambitious, high-stakes novel that manages to be both illuminating and entertaining, heart-breaking and hysterically funny, boldly experimental and yet never gimmicky. In this outstanding debut, Li Er has earned his place as one of China's finest novelists: a humanist, satirist, literary craftsman, relentless chronicler and keen-eyed observer from whom we should expect great things.

"Li Er's *Truth and Variations* is a reflection on the tragedy of the death of the individual in the course of modern revolution."

Zhang Qinghua, Professor of Modern and Contem-

porary Chinese Literature, Beijing Normal University (author of China's Contemporary Avant-garde Literary Movement).

“I reserve an honorary mention for Li Er, the young Henan novelist [...] In his usual style, he plays all kinds of ironic stylistic games on a deadly serious theme. The narrative is carried by three different persons in a kind of partially overlapping relay, in the manner of Lawrence Durrell's Alexandria Quartet. But the theme that careful read-

ers could find in the end, when the true hero of the novel finally lets himself be seen, is a revolutionary intellectual tired of rhetoric and of power struggles. I am personally very impressed by the novelist's profound sense of historicity, something the 'historiographical' Chinese culture can now hardly claim to possess.”

Henry Y.H. Zhao, "The river fans out: Chinese fiction since the late 1970s", published in European Review, Vol. 11, No. 2, 193-208 (2003).

Northern Girls, by Sheng Keyi



2004
*Changjiang Wenyi Publishing
House*
248pp



Sheng Keyi

China's most prominent young female writer, Sheng Keyi falls between the early waves of "feminist" Chinese authors (such as Wang Anyi and Bing Xin), and the youngest crop of writers in their twenties (eg Chun Sue and Zhang Yueran). Sheng Keyi

has benefited from being caught between generations: she is free to build upon new modes of fiction pioneered by older writers—interiority, feminine psychology—while remaining unafflicted by the self-regard and childish solipsism of the younger. Her

influences are immensely varied: as a young woman she moved from a small town in Hunan to the southern Chinese city of Shenzhen to look for work, and her observations of the ad hoc creation of that massive new metropolis, and the formation of its new migrant societies, made a deep impression on her. She is also a voracious reader, both of translated foreign literature and Chinese traditional works, and as a result is one of the most versatile experimenters in style and voice in China today. Though her writing tends to begin with female characters and themes she is comfortable with a wide range of subject matter, and is known primarily for her keen and unsentimental appraisals of psychological and social subtleties.

Since she began writing fiction in 2002, Sheng has published five novels, one collection of non-fiction, and two collections of short stories. She is the recipient of the first Chinese Literature Media Prize along with many other awards, and currently lives in Shenzhen, where she writes full time.

Northern Girls

Sheng Keyi's first full-length novel, *Northern Girls* is drawn from her experiences as a job-seeking migrant in the early 1990s. Its main character, Hong, is no different from the thousands of other country girls who are moving to Shenzhen to seek work, with one exception: she has an extraordinarily full

bosom. She finds herself caught up in the chaos of Shenzhen, a city that hardly existed ten years previously, where the mad rush of economic growth has destabilized moral norms and shredded the fabric of society. With hardly a thought in her head but to make her way in the world, she discovers that her body has already opened some doors and closed others, shaping her fate before she's even had a chance to gain her footing.

After arriving in Shenzhen Hong and her friend drift at the edges of society, working in hair salons, shops, factories and hotels, owning absolutely nothing in the world but their labor and their bodies. As migrant worker girls they are doomed to be scorned by local women and humiliated by local men, but as Hong's companions slowly begin to turn down the path of least resistance, Hong herself sticks to her own idiosyncratic principles, stubbornly insisting on her own brand of integrity, and the bosom that has caused her so much grief becomes a symbol of her irrepressible vital force.

Written in a lively, raunchy style, *Northern Girls* seems to mirror Hong's own attitude towards life: a country girl's nonchalance about sexuality, a migrant's fascination with the strangeness of her surroundings, a survivor's will to live. An excerpt from *Northern Girls* appeared in German translation in the collection *Neue Träume aus der Roten Kammer*, published June 2009.

Common Sense, by Leung Man-Tao



2009

Guangxi Normal University Press

367pp



Leung Man-Tao

Hong Kong's special colonial past, as well as the economic and political status it enjoys today, have given rise to a uniquely cosmopolitan culture which is hard to imagine anywhere else in China. Leung Man-Tao, prolific current affairs writer and TV

commentator has grown from this environment into something of a cultural icon, and has succeeded in making a name for himself throughout the Chinese-speaking world.

Leung was born in 1970 in Hong Kong and ed-

ucated in Taiwan. He later returned to Hong Kong where he now combines writing and blogging with working as media entrepreneur, lecturer, film critic and book reviewer, campaigner on AIDS and the environment, and film producer.

China may have ‘opened up’ in the last 30 years, but comment on China is still heavily influenced by ideology, whether it comes from the West or the East. In this atmosphere, Leung’s incisive commentary comes as a breath of fresh air. He combines a lively writing style with an uncommon breadth of knowledge, writing prolifically on topics ranging from the American presidential elections to racism within mainland China, from the plight of Chinese human rights lawyers to food culture.

Recent books include collections of interviews, personal reflections and current affairs articles.

Common Sense

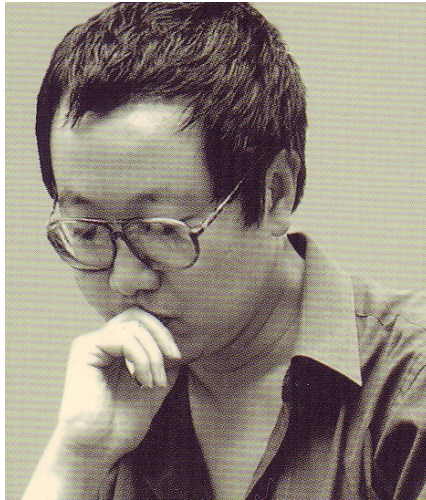
An explicit homage to Thomas Paine’s book of the same name, *Common Sense* represents a rare and risky attempt to introduce real soul-searching into China’s cultural discourse. Merely scanning the titles of the essays – “Saying Goodbye to ‘100 Years of

National Humiliation”, “China Threat: What Exactly is it We’re Exporting”, “Voting: Not the Expression of Popular Will, But the Execution of Popular Will” – makes it obvious that Leung is not afraid of directly addressing many of the sacred cows of Chinese society.

Informed by his dual identity as Chinese citizen and Hong Kong resident, Leung remains rooted in the cosmopolitanism of the latter, while possessing an intimate understanding of events and conditions on the mainland. While Leung’s Hong Kong origins have provided a convenient excuse for his many mainland critics to dismiss his writings out of hand, they also make his writing all the more accessible to foreign readers unaccustomed to the excessively circumspect style of traditional Chinese non-fiction. This collection represents the first steps towards a mature public discourse in China.

Originally written as newspaper and magazine columns, the fact that these essays and their subject matter are still current is, to Leung, a cause for deep regret: “Only under one circumstance does social criticism have lasting value: when the things you’ve written about continue to take place...”

Ball Lightning, by Liu Cixin



July, 2004

*Sichuan Science and Technology
Press*

282pp



Liu Cixin

An engineer by trade, Liu Cixin began writing science fiction in the early 1990s and published his first short story in 1999. Over the past decade he has won multiple awards for his fiction and has become China's most popular domestic science fiction

author. Liu's recent novels, beginning with the inclusion of *Ball Lightning* as part of *Science Fiction World's Nebula* series, have led to increased mainstream attention to the genre. The second volume of his *Three Body* trilogy, *The Dark Forest*, made

a number of year-end best-of lists in 2008, and his work has been critiqued in literary journals such as *Book City* and *Fiction World*.

The sense of the importance and beauty of science that permeates Liu's fiction is tempered with skepticism about the ability of scientists, world leaders, and the general public to handle technological developments responsibly. In addition to the military-themed work found in his recent novels and short stories such as "Barrage Jamming" (2001 Galaxy Award), many of Liu's stories are populated by ordinary characters drawn from contemporary Chinese society: an instructor at a poor rural school in "The Village Teacher" (2001 Galaxy Reader's Award), a migrant worker whose career path as a window-washer takes him into outer space in "Chinese Sun" (2002 Galaxy Award), and a group of schoolchildren thrust into world leadership positions in *The Supernova Era* (2003).

Liu brings these themes together in the *Three Body* trilogy, a story loosely tied to the *Ball Lightning* universe that narrates events between the first cryptic messages Earth receives from extraterrestrial life and the eventual arrival, four centuries later, of a far more technologically advanced alien force. The first volume, a race against time to discover who the aliens are and why they have recruited a cult on Earth, is followed by an ambitious second volume that explores humanity's preparations for an invasion by a vastly superior civilization, one that has

brought a halt to scientific progress on Earth and is capable of eavesdropping on all of the planet's communication. Liu's inventive, fast-paced storytelling, imaginative, well-grounded science, and memorable characters have made the forthcoming third volume one of China's most anticipated science fiction novels.

Ball Lightning

When Chen's parents are incinerated before his eyes by a blast of ball lightning, he devotes his life to discovering the secret of this mysterious natural phenomenon. His search takes him to stormy mountaintops, an experimental military weapons lab, and an old Soviet science station. The more he learns, the more he comes to realize that ball lightning is only the beginning of an entirely new frontier in particle physics.

Although Chen's quest provides a purpose for his lonely life, the chase for his elusive quarry brings him into conflict with soldiers and scientists who have motives of their own: a beautiful army major with an obsession with dangerous weaponry, and a physicist who has no place for ethical considerations in his single-minded pursuit of knowledge.

Ball Lightning, by award-winning Chinese science fiction author Liu Cixin, is a fast-paced story of what happens when the beauty of scientific inquiry runs up against a push to harness new discoveries with no consideration of the possible consequences.