# SOME-

liu zhenyun

TRANSLATED BY HOWARD GOLDBLATT AND SYLVIA LI-CHUN LIN

WINNER OF THE MAO DUN LITERARY PRIZE

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# SOMEONE

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TALK

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# SINOTHEORY

A series edited by Carlos Rojas and Eileen Cheng-yin Chow

# SOMEONE

**TO** 

TALK

T0

A NOVEL

# LIU ZHENYUN

Translated by Howard Goldblatt and Sylvia Li-chun Lin

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### SERIES EDITOR'S PREFACE

Carlos Rojas

Anytime you ask me something I'll still give you a straight answer.

—Yang Baishun, in Someone to Talk To

Yang Baishun (a.k.a. Moses Yang, a.k.a. Moses Wu, a.k.a. Luo Changli) is a man of few words, which is to say he is not particularly good at "shooting the breeze"—to borrow Howard Goldblatt and Sylvia Li-chun Lin's translation of a local Henan expression that Liu Zhenyun uses repeatedly in his 2009 novel *Someone to Talk To.*<sup>1</sup> Yang's life, however, is characterized by a series of twists and turns that lend themselves perfectly to Liu Zhenyun's elliptically prolix narrative style, which delights in tracing the complex interrelations of seemingly independent plotlines.

The winner of China's prestigious Mao Dun Prize, Someone to Talk To is divided into two halves. The first half follows a tofu peddler named Yang Baishun, who repeatedly changes his name and occupation as the narrative unfolds. He eventually marries a widow, who subsequently leaves him to run off with another man (leaving her five-year-old stepdaughter with Baishun). While Baishun is half-heartedly looking for his estranged wife, his stepdaughter Qiaoling is kidnapped, whereupon Baishun immediately shifts his attention to a desperate search for the girl. The second half of the novel, meanwhile, is set seventy years later and revolves around a thirty-five-year-old man by the name of Niu Aiguo and his attempts to learn about his mother's past. The two halves of Liu's novel have a number of parallels, including the fact that they both feature a "fake" search that subsequently evolves into a real one. Wedged between the male protagonists of each half is the figure of Qiaoling, meanwhile,

whom we barely see in person but whose disappearance ends up haunting the remainder of the story.

The narrative style of *Someone to Talk To* and other works by Liu Zhenyun may be viewed as a postmodern twist on Chinese "linked-chapter" novels like the Ming dynasty classics *Water Margin* and *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. These linked-chapter novels tend to have a distinctive narrative structure that may be likened to a billiards game, in the sense that the main narrative typically follows one character through several episodes until he or she has an encounter with a second character (like a billiard ball colliding with another), whereupon the narrative line then veers off and follows this second character through several more episodes until the second character has an encounter with a third, who then becomes the new object of narrative focus.

In macrostructural terms, Liu Zhenyun's *Someone to Talk To* adopts a version of this billiard-ball structure, in that the first half of the novel follows one character, while the second half follows a different one—who, it turns out, is related to the first in a somewhat mediated manner. In microstructural terms, meanwhile, Liu's novel implodes this traditional narrative structure—and rather than following one figurative billiard ball until it bumps into another, the work instead features many passages that gesture elliptically to the complex chains of reaction produced when various narrative strands simultaneously ricochet off one another. The result is a work that closely tracks individual characters, while at the same time offering a wide-angled panoramic view of the network of the complex chain reactions that end up determining their fate.

Someone to Talk To is the first volume in our Sinotheory series, which will include theoretically informed analyses of Chinese cultural phenomena as well as translations of Chinese literary works that make theoretical interventions in their own right. In this novel, Liu Zhenyun explores the way in which social reality is shaped by the interwoven narrative threads by which we attempt to make sense of our surroundings. At the same time, however, the work also examines the role of dialogue in structuring people's lives, together with the remarkable efforts people often make to find someone in whom they may confide.

Liu Zhenyun, who teaches literature and creative writing at Beijing's Renmin University, is notable not only for a focus on the role of narrative within his works but also for the way in which his works have frequently played a critical role generating social narratives in their own right. Liu's 2007 *I Am Liu Yuejin*, for instance, helped bring attention to the fate of the migrant laborers who increasingly pour into China's cities seeking work. His 2003 novel *Cell Phone*, meanwhile, sparked a national dialogue about confidential (and poten-

tially explosive) private information that is frequently stored on people's cell phones and other digital devices.

Liu began writing fiction in the early 1980s, but his career really began to take off when the director Feng Xiaogang adapted two of Liu's stories (Working Unit and Chicken Feathers Everywhere) into a popular television series. Now one of China's most successful directors, Feng Xiaogang has adapted several of Liu Zhenyun's other novels into blockbuster movies—including I Am Not Madame Bovary (2016), about a woman who is falsely accused by her husband of having an affair; Remembering 1942 (2012), about a famine in Liu's home province of Henan during the Sino-Japanese War; and Cell Phone, about a woman who discovers her husband's infidelity from text messages stored on his cell phone. In an interesting marketing maneuver, Feng Xiaogang's cinematic adaptation of the latter work, which was sponsored by the cell phone company Motorola, was released simultaneously with the original novel itself. Someone to Talk To, meanwhile, is also being adapted for the screen. The director is Liu Zhenyun's daughter, Liu Yulin, and the adaptation, which focuses on the second half of the novel, is scheduled to be released on November 11, 2017, which is "singles day" in China-fitting for a work that revolves around themes of loneliness and a continuous search for "someone to talk to."

### Note

1 The original Chinese title, *Yi ju ding yi wan ju*, literally means "a [single] sentence is worth ten thousand sentences."

# PART I

# LEAVING YANJIN

Yang Baishun's father was a tofu peddler. Everyone called him Old Yang the Tofu Peddler, though in the summertime he also peddled those bean-starch noodles called *liangfen*. Old Yang and Old Ma, a carter from Ma Village, were friends, though their friendship did not make a whole lot of sense, since Ma was often unkind to Yang. He did not curse or hit him, nor did he cheat him out of any money. No, he just held him in low regard, something that normally would stand in the way of a friendship. But Ma found it necessary to be around Yang when he told a joke. For Yang, when the topic of friends came up, Ma was at the top of the list, while Ma never once claimed the tofu and liangfen peddler from Yang Village to be his friend. No one knew why this was, and people simply assumed that they were friends.

When Yang Baishun was eleven, Blacksmith Li held a birthday celebration for his mother. Li made ladles, cleavers, axes, hoes, scythes, rakes, shovels, door hinges, and other metal implements in his Prosperity Blacksmith Shop. Most blacksmiths tend to be impatient men, but not Li. It took him up to four hours to hammer out a rake tine, but his slow, methodical work produced wares that were second to none. Before quenching, he stamped the word *Prosperity* on all his ladles, cleavers, axes, hoes, scythes, rakes, shovels, and door hinges. He was the only blacksmith for miles around, not because others could not match his skill, but because they were unwilling to put in the effort. People with placid dispositions tend to brood a lot, and brooders never forget a slight. Customers

were always coming and going at Li's shop, and there was the danger that a careless comment would offend him. But the only person who could get under his skin was his mother, whose high-strung nature may have been the reason he was so unflappable. At the age of eight, he once took a slice of date cake without asking, for which she hit him on the head with a metal spoon, causing a wound that bled profusely. Most people forget the pain of an injury once it's healed, but he held a grudge against his mother from that day on. Unrelated to the wound itself, the grudge resulted from what she did after she hit him: she talked and laughed as if nothing had happened and went into town with friends to watch an opera. In reality, the grudge was not actually related to trip to the opera. But once he reached adulthood, they never again saw eye to eye on anything. Li was forty when his father died; five years later, his mother went blind. After taking over Prosperity Blacksmith Shop, he continued to tend to her daily needs, but he ignored all her requests. Most blacksmiths prefer a bland, coarse diet. So his blind mother would say things like "This food is tasteless. I want some beef."

"You'll have to wait."

Nothing would happen.

Or, "I'm bored. Yoke the donkey and take me into town, where there's something to do."

"You'll have to wait."

Again nothing would happen. He was not trying to provoke his mother; he just wanted to cure her of her impatience. It was time for her to slow down. He was also afraid that if he gave in to her demands, he would never hear the end of it. But the year his mother turned seventy, Old Li decided to hold a celebration.

"Don't waste your time celebrating the birthday of someone who won't live much longer," she said. "I'll be happy if you'll just treat me a little better." She poked him with her cane. "I wonder what you're up to with this so-called celebration."

"Don't think so much, Mother."

In fact, he was not planning the celebration for her sake. A month earlier, a fat blacksmith from Anhui named Duan had set up shop in town. He called his business Fatso Duan's Blacksmith Shop. Li would not have worried if Duan had turned out to be an impatient man. But he wasn't; like Li himself, Duan was unflappable. He too would take up to four hours to hammer out a rake tine, and that concerned Li. So he decided to show Duan what he was up against by celebrating his mother's birthday. It would be one way to show the newcomer that an out-of-town dragon should never try to outdo a local snake. No one else knew what was behind the birthday celebration. All anyone knew was that Li

had not been a filial son, and they assumed he'd had a change of heart. So on the day of the party, they came bearing gifts. Yang and Ma, both friends of Li, were among them. Yang, who had been selling tofu away from the village, arrived late. Since Ma Village was close to town, Ma was on time. Believing that the tofu peddler and carter were friends, Li left the seat next to Ma empty for the tardy Yang. Pleased with his attention to detail, he was surprised by Ma's objection.

"No, you have to seat him somewhere else."

"You two always talk up a storm, so that will liven things up," Li said.

"Will there be liquor?" Ma asked.

"Three bottles at each table, and no cheap stuff," Li replied.

"It's like this—joking with him when he's sober is fine. But as soon as he has a few drinks under his belt, he pours his heart out. It makes him feel good, and I wind up depressed." Ma added, "That has happened way too often."

Li realized that they were not best friends after all. For Ma, at least, if not for Yang. So his seat was moved to another table, next to a livestock broker, Old Du. Yang Baishun, who had been sent by his father to fetch water during the party, overheard the remark by Ma. The next day, Yang complained that he hadn't enjoyed himself at the banquet and carped that he'd wasted a good gift. His quibble had nothing to do with the food; he complained that he'd had nothing to say to Du, whose head smelled bad and whose shoulders were covered with dandruff. Yang assumed that he had been seated next to Du because he had arrived late. When his son told him what he'd heard, he slapped the boy.

"That's not what Old Ma meant. You've made whatever he said sound bad." With his head in his hands, Yang crouched down in front of the tofu room while his son cried and said nothing for the longest time. Over the next two weeks he ignored Ma and refused to utter the man's name. But a couple of weeks later he was talking and joking with Ma again and went to see him whenever he needed advice.

Peddlers ply their trade by shouting, but not Yang. There are common shouts and there are refined ones. If you're selling tofu, then "Tofu for sale" or "Get your Yang Village tofu" are common shouts. For the refined variety, you need to make music and exaggerate your wares, like this: "This tofu, I ask you, is it tofu or isn't it? It is, but you can't treat it as mere tofu . . ." So what was it, this special tofu? It was touted as white jade, or pure agate. Not born with a silver tongue, Yang could not make up something like that; yet, though he hated common shouts, he tried out a couple—"Tofu fresh as can be, with none of this or that." But that just made him sound angry, so he chose a drum instead. By alternating between beating the skin and banging his stick against the sides, he was able to

produce a bit of variety. He was blazing new trails, substituting a drumbeat for a shout as he peddled his tofu. Something brand new. When the villagers heard the beat of a drum, they knew that Old Yang the Tofu Peddler was on his way. In addition to selling tofu in the village, on market days he set up a stall in town, where he sold tofu and liangfen, which he combed into thin strips with a bamboo grater, dumped into a bowl, and added scallions, some herbs, and sesame paste. He made a fresh bowl for each customer. Old Kong of Kong Village sold flatbreads filled with donkey meat in the stall to his left. And to his right was Old Dou of Dou Village, who sold spicy soup and cut tobacco. Yang beat the drum in the village and in town, a steady tattoo from morning to night. At first it was new; but after a month of that, both Kong and Dou had had enough.

"'Thud, thud, thud' one minute and 'crack, crack, crack' the next. Old Yang, you're turning my head into liangfen," Kong complained. "Peddling a little food isn't leading troops into battle, so is all that noise really necessary?"

Dou, who was more excitable than Kong and less given to speech, simply walked up with a scowl and put his foot through the drumhead.

Forty years later, when Old Yang was bedridden from a stroke, his eldest son, Yang Baiye, took over as head of the family. Most strokes affect the sufferer's brain and the ability to speak anything but gibberish. But Old Yang, whose mind was clear as ever, despite the paralysis of his body, had no trouble speaking. Prior to the stroke, he had been inarticulate and often got things all jumbled up; now his mind was clear as a bell, his tongue glib, his ability to keep things straight extraordinary. Spending all day in bed, he needed help for even the simplest activity, and this was where the stroke took its toll. His eyes and his mouth got the worst of it. He welcomed anyone who came into his room with a fawning gaze and answered every question he was asked deferentially. Before the stroke, he had lied as often as he'd told the truth; after the stroke, every word he uttered came straight from the bottom of his heart. If he drank too much water, he had to get up at night, so he drank nothing from afternoon on. Forty years had passed, and his old friends were either dead or busy with one thing or another, so no one came to see him. But then, on the fifteenth day of the eighth lunar month, Old Duan, who had sold scallions in the marketplace, came to see him, with two boxes of pastries. Yang reacted to seeing an old friend after all those years by clutching his hand and weeping. He quickly dried his eyes with his sleeve when a family member walked in.

"Can you recall the names of peddlers in the market, from east to west?" Duan asked.

Yang's brain was working fine, but after forty years, he had forgotten most of the friends he'd worked near. Starting from the east, he was able to count up to the owner of the fifth stall on his fingers, but no further. He recalled Old Kong, who sold flatbreads filled with donkey meat, and Old Dou, who sold spicy soup and cut tobacco, so he focused on those two, passing over the others.

"Old Kong had a thin voice; Old Dou was excitable. He destroyed my drum. But I got even by kicking over his cauldron and spilling his soup all over the ground."

"Old Dong, the castrator from Dong Village, remember him?" Duan asked. "Besides castrating animals, he also repaired cook pots."

Yang knitted his brow as he tried to recall, but he had no memory of the man who castrated animals and repaired cook pots.

"How about Old Wei from Wei Village? The west end of the market, the one who sold raw ginger, always laughing, struck by one thing or another, but no one ever knew what."

Yang could not recall him either.

"How about Old Ma, the Ma Village carter; you must remember him."

"Of course I remember him. He died two years ago." Yang was relieved.

"Back then it was all about Old Ma with you. No one else mattered. Were you aware that while you called him your friend, he was always badmouthing you?"

Yang quickly changed the subject.

"How can you recall something from so long ago?"

"I'm talking about the overall situation, not an isolated incident. You spent your whole life trying to get on the good side of people who did not consider you a friend and had no use for people who did. Everyone hated the way you beat that drum, but I liked the sound. I bought your liangfen just to listen to you beat that drum. I'd have liked to talk to you, but you ignored me."

"Not true," Yang quickly replied.

"See what I mean?" Duan clapped his hands. "You still don't consider me a friend. I came today to ask you one question."

"What?"

"You've lived a long life. Have you made any real friends?" Duan added, "You never thought about that before, but how about now that you're laid up?"

Yes, Yang finally got it. After forty years, when Old Duan, who could still walk, knew he was paralyzed, he'd come for revenge. He spat an answer to Duan: "Old Duan, I was right about you all along. You're no damn good."

Duan walked off smiling. Yang was still cursing him after he was gone. Yang's eldest son, Baiye, walked into the room. He was in his fifties. As a youngster, he was always doing something stupid, for which he'd received many whippings from his father. Now, forty years later, his father was bedridden and he had taken over as head of the family. Anything Old Yang wanted had to meet with his son's approval. Baiye picked up where Duan had left off.

"Old Ma drove a cart, you sold tofu, so there was no need to have anything to do with one another. Why in the world did you do everything you could to make him like you when he refused to treat you as a friend?"

Old Yang had no trouble getting angry at Duan, but his son was a different matter. If Baiye asked him a question, he damned well better answer. He sighed.

"I had my reasons. I wouldn't have been afraid of him otherwise."

"Did you cheat him, or was there something he could use against you?"

"There was nothing he could use against me if I had cheated him, and no way he could blackmail me if he had something on me, because I could just ignore him afterward. He outsmarted me the first time we met."

"Over what?" Baiye asked.

"We met at the farm animal market. He was there to buy a horse, I went to sell a donkey, and we struck up a conversation. Whatever we talked about, if I could see a mile down the road, he could see ten miles. If I could look ahead one month, for him it was ten years. I did not sell the donkey, and from then on he had the advantage any time we talked." He shook his head and continued. "No matter what it was, he could always outtalk me, so I looked him up when I needed advice."

"I see. So you took advantage of him whenever you needed a fresh pair of eyes. But what I don't understand is, why did he have anything to do with someone he felt was beneath him?"

"Do you think there was anyone else who could see ten miles down the road and ten years into the future around here? Old Ma never had any friends either." He heaved an emotional sigh. "He shouldn't have had to drive a cart all his life."

"What should he have done?" Baiye asked.

"The blind fortuneteller, Old Jia, said he was slated to start a peasant uprising, like Chen Sheng and Wu Guang at the end of the Qin dynasty. But he didn't have the guts. He was afraid to go out after dark, which kept him from being much of a carter, if you want the truth. It cost him a lot of business." He was getting increasingly excited. "A gutless man like him thought he was better than me. Shit, I was better than him! He never treated me like a friend, but it should have been the other way around!"

Baiye nodded with the understanding that those two were fated to be friends. It was lunchtime by the time they finished talking about Old Ma. Since it was the fifteenth day of the eighth lunar month, they ate flatbreads called *laobing* and a meat-and-vegetable stew. Laobing had been one of Yang's favorites all his life, but by the time he was in his sixties, and had lost most of his teeth, they were off the menu. The stew simmered till the meat and vegetables were mushy; he softened the laobing by dunking them in the hot soup. As a young man, he'd always eaten laobing on holidays, but after his stroke, he was no longer the one who decided whether or not he could eat them. Baiye had already settled on laobing and stew for lunch before they started talking about Ma, but Yang assumed that the decision had come as a reward for his straight talk about the years he sold tofu and liangfen. He ate till his forehead was bathed with sweat. He looked up at his son and flashed him a fawning smile through the steam from the boiling pot. His meaning was clear.

"Anytime you ask me something, I'll still give you a straight answer."