


Classics of Modern Chinese Literature

ing Xin Reader

Translated by Zhao Yuan



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Introduction

Fu Lei, a great translator, wrote in one of his family letters to his son Fou Ts'ong:

I have always borne in mind "the heart of a newborn babe." A newborn babe doesn't know what loneliness is. If it is lonely, it will create a world and many friends of the soul. Keep the heart of a newborn babe forever, and you will never fall behind the ranks, even when you are old, and you will be able to empathize and connect with the innocent hearts throughout the world at any time. That friend of yours is right in saying that the efficacy of artistic expression must stem from the purity of one's heart. How can you have a true understanding of the souls of your predecessors, and how can you touch the souls of your audience, if your heart is not as pure as a bright mirror?

Although not indispensable for every one of us in our lives, childlike innocence is certainly necessary for a person engaged in artistic creation.

Bing Xin, the author of this collection, enjoyed a worldwide reputation as a prolific writer and one of the pioneers of children's literature in modern China. Her

works fully embody her philosophy of love – maternal love, love of children, and love of nature.

Born Xie Wanying on Oct. 5, 1900 into a patriotic family in Fujian Province, Bing Xin had a really happy childhood. It was during the May Fourth Movement that she began writing. After graduating from Yenching University in 1923 with a bachelor's degree, Bing Xin went to the United States for further study in literature at Wellesley College. After she returned to China in 1926, she began teaching at Yenching University until 1936. Bing Xin's literary career spanned over seventy years, and her most well-known works include *A Myriad of Stars*, *Spring Waters*, and *Letters to Young Readers*.

This selection of Bing Xin's writings for children is comprised of a selection (about a half) of *Letters to Young Readers*, the first four letters in *More Letters to Young Readers*, and six short pieces which include Bing Xin's best-known short story "The Little Orange Lamp."

During her stay in the United States, Bing Xin wrote a lot about what she experienced and thought there, and then contributed what she wrote to newspapers. These prose pieces were later published under the title of *Letters to Young Readers* in 1926. Perhaps no one has described the beautiful things in a war-torn world better than Bing Xin. *More Letters to Young Readers*, written during the Anti-Japanese war, is filled with bright sunshine, precious friendship, gratitude towards mothers, and the awe of life, which brought love and hope to the Chinese young readers at that time.

In her earliest years, Bing Xin was exposed to traditional Chinese literature, and her favorite works were *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, *A Journey to the West*, and *The Outlaws of the Marsh*. She said she knew the plots and the characters' names in those novels thoroughly. We can imagine how excited she was when, for the first time in her life, she went to a Beijing opera theater with her parents and saw her favorite characters walk onto the stage one by one in splendid costumes. Her enthusiasm for Beijing opera never faded. In 1959, Bing Xin had an opportunity to visit a Beijing opera school. The children who were learning Beijing opera there were praiseworthy because they were hard-working and self-disciplined. Bing Xin hoped that they "perform on the stage the historical stories of life and struggle and the familiar characters that the people love to see in a more vivid and powerful way."

The Spring Festival is one of the most significant festivals for the Chinese, but nowadays many people complain that they can't enjoy the authentic traditional Chinese New Year. What is the true meaning of the Spring Festival, then? In "The Spring Festivals in my Childhood," Bing Xin presents us with the traditional customs of the Spring Festival in Yantai, Shangdong Province and Fuzhou, Fujian Province.

Bing Xin not only loved the world but felt sympathy for the lower-classes. In "Separation," the two babies, born at the same time and in the same place, are separated from each other owing to difference in class. Bing Xin's

dissatisfaction and indignation about the unfair society is evident in this heartrending story.

In “Good Mother,” a piece with a strong flavor of everyday life, we see a variation of the theme of love for mothers. At the beginning of the story, the speaker, a middle school girl student, has grumbles against her mother. After a visit to their neighbor’s, however, she realizes that she is wrong and that she has a really good mother.

Of all the characters in Bing Xin’s stories, the most impressive one must be the little girl in “The Little Orange Lamp.” The delicate lamp she makes out of a big orange, as well as her calmness, courage, and optimism, provides infinite light for the narrator to move on.

In order for the reader to actually see the dances of the Indian sisters, Bing Xin employed various writing techniques. The result is spectacular, although she asserted that she could only describe their performance “in flat, monotonous language.”

When reading Bing Xin’s works, you feel as if she were sitting before you and showing you a painting which portrays her life experiences. She talks about such immortal things as love, good, and truth, but she never teaches you explicitly what to do or how to do it. Nevertheless, you can draw encouragement from her insights about life.

Bing Xin’s writings have been incorporated into children’s textbooks, and every primary school and high school student in China has read at least one of her

pieces. I still remember a sentence from one of her letters to young readers, which I came across in my school years: “I dare not say what life is; I can only say what life is like.” In that letter, Bing Xin used figurative language to describe vividly what life is like to children, who have not had many experiences about life yet.

Finally, I want to add that every book has a life of its own and that we should read a book as a person. Imagine this situation: when a stranger comes towards you with a smile on his face, how will you respond then? Will you return a smile or walk past him indifferently? Of course, the “stranger” refers to a book, and the “smile” its idea. As a book invites you to read it, how you react to it depends entirely on you. If you think of it only as a conveyer of information, you are reading a book passively. Instead, if you treat a book as a living thinker, with whom you can exchange ideas, then it belongs to you entirely at that very moment. Needless to say, a great work always resonates with its readers. And I do believe that you will have a very pleasant conversation with this little book, which is pregnant with love, joy, innocence, and kindness – things we all need to become better persons and to have better lives.

Li Yu

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Letters to Young Readers (A Selection)



Letter 1

July 25th, 1923

Dear little friends whom I seem to have met before,

As I am in bad health and am going on a long journey, I have thought that, for the next two or three months, I will have to stop writing anything. However, when I saw yesterday that the Morning Post supplement had started a special column called "Children's World," I was so joyful that I set myself, notwithstanding my weak wrist and rusty writing, to correspond with my dear little friends for the first time.

Please permit me, in this very first letter, to introduce myself to you. I am one of those



who fall behind in your innocent group. There is one thing, however, that I am very proud of; that is, I was once a child and sometimes I still am. In order to retain that innocence until I go on to another world, I sincerely hope that you guide and help me. Of course, I will always urge myself to be one of the most passionate and faithful friends of yours.

Little friends, I am leaving for a place



very far from home. I am looking forward to it very much, because traveling may provide me with a lot of material so that I can tell you new things in my following letters. The place I am going to is on the other side of the earth. I have three younger brothers, the smallest of whom is thirteen years old. He has learned enough geography to know that the earth is round. He said to me jokingly, "Sister, if we miss you when you are away, we can poke a hole with a very long bamboo pole to connect our yards, so we can see each other. I'd like to see if you have gained or lost weight." Little friends, do you think it possible? There is another little friend in my family who is four this year. One day he asked me, "Auntie, is the place you are going to farther than the Front Gate?" Little friends, which do you think is farther, the other side of the world or the Front Gate?

I am leaving – away from my parents and brothers, away from all those I love. I feel very sad, although it won't be long before I come back. If you – on a breezy morning



or a rainy evening, in the company of your parents and siblings, or when you are having a happy time – could think of me, a most passionate and loyal friend of yours, who will be tens of thousands of miles away in dreadful weather and unable to enjoy such happiness as yours, then a mere innocent thought of yours from afar, by virtue of the spirit of the universe, would give me infinite blessing and consolation.

Little friends, provided I have time, I will not allow the correspondence between us to cease for long. If the interval is a bit too long, please forgive me, for unless I put pen to paper the moment I regain a child's heart, I dare not write to you with the vexed mind of an adult. This I beg you to understand and pity.

It is about time to bring this letter to conclusion. I have an unspeakable feeling in my heart, but certainly I feel deeply honored.

Yours,
Bing Xin

Letter 2

July 28th, 1923

Dear little friends,

I am extremely unwilling to tell you, at the beginning of the second letter, a saddest story. However, it has made my soul suffer so much since last year that I cannot but repent now in front of my pure little friends.

It was a spring night last year – a leisurely night indeed – and it was after nine. My younger brothers having gone to bed, my father and mother were sitting opposite each other at the round table, reading, eating refreshments and talking. Standing against the back of a chair, I was reading a book too. All was gentle and quiet.

A little mouse sneaked from under the table and began nibbling slowly at the crumbs on the ground. It was a very small mouse; it ate away calmly and innocently, raising its head to look at me from time to time. I cried out both in surprise and for joy, and



my parents looked down. Stared at from all sides, the mouse remained there contented. By the dim light of the lamp, we could see its tiny nimble body, delicate light grey hair, and sparkling little eyes.

Little friends, please allow me to repent! At that moment, I was out of my wits. I bent down and covered it gently with my book. Good Heavens! It didn't move. I could feel through the pages its soft body curling up, unresisting, on the ground.

That was completely out of my expectations. I was pressing its little hand, which was trembling, when my mother said, "Why are you doing this? What a tame and interesting little thing..." She hadn't finished yet when Huer, our puppy, jumped in from outside the door screen. Father said hastily, "Loose it, or Huer'll get it!" I was out of my wits again and took away my book – how I regretted it! The mouse, however, kept still and contented. With a muffled groan of joy, Huer sprang on the mouse and, before I could stop him, went out through the curtain with his prey between his

teeth. From out of the door came a few faint piteous cries from inside Huer's mouth, but before long no sound could be heard. Within a minute, the poor little thing pierced my heart as if it had been hit by an arrow.

When the panic was over, I sighed a deep sigh. Mother put down her book, raised her head and said to me, "It must be too small and too naïve; otherwise, it would have escaped. It went out to look for food for the first time. When its mother found her child hadn't gone back, it's hard to imagine how she would miss it."

Little friends, I have degenerated, really. If I had been your age, I would, at these words, have moved slowly toward my mother and, throwing myself into her arms, cried bitterly. At that time, however, I... Please forgive me, little friends! I pretended to be indifferent and smiled.

When it was time to go to bed, I went back to my bedroom. An assumed smile only added to my sin. I paced up and down, not knowing what to do – I didn't change

