

FANG FANG

ONE  
GLITTERING  
MOMENT

*and Other Selected Writings*



FOREIGN LANGUAGES PRESS





# ONE GLITTERING

MOVEMENT  
and Other Selected Writings  
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## Preface

Literature may reflect the ethos of a country or a nation, while at the same time it can transcend the limits of time and space to most widely resonate a truly universal humanity. Literary works of art that move hearts may even inspire the compassion of strangers toward a people or country...

This “Panda Series” of books, expertly translated into English, compiles the works of well-known modern and contemporary Chinese authors around themes such as the city and the countryside, love and marriage, minority folk stories and historical legends. These works reflect the true spirit and everyday lives of the Chinese people, while widely resonating with their changing spiritual and social horizons.

Published from the 1980s, through more than 100 titles in English, this series continues to open wider the window for readers worldwide to better understand China through its new literature. Many familiar and fond readers await the latest in this “Panda Series.” This publication of the “Panda Series” consolidates and looks back at earlier released literary works to draw new readers, while stirring the fond memories of old friends, to let more people share the experiences and views of the Chinese people in recent decades. We express our sincere appreciation to all authors, translators and editors who have engaged in their dedicated and meticulous work over the years to bring out these works. It is their passion and endeavor that have enabled this series to appear now in luminous distinction.

## Foreword

*Han Shaogong*

You can attain real freedom only if you don't strive to lead a life similar to, or different from, that of others. Fang Fang began by writing humorous stories, full of caustic and witty remarks. She then turned to stories about magic in which her characters summon up wind and rain like spirits, but by the time readers were applauding and demanding more, she had already changed her style. In other words, Fang Fang is unpredictable, constantly surprising readers and critics because she does not confine herself to a certain style in order to retain her name, or to bathe in the lime-light forever.

A clear-headed and far-sighted author speaks and writes from his or her own mind. Of the new realistic writers in China who have attracted the attention of both readers and critics, Fang Fang has distinguished herself by her creativeness and singular approach. Critics find it difficult to classify Fang Fang as a writer of what is termed "new realism". Fang Fang should derive pride from their dilemma, which is proof of her individuality as a writer, and an indication that her sources of inspiration are not limited by the opinions of critics. Fang Fang's recent works are very easy to understand, only too easy in fact, to be fully analysed. I can see that she writes without any sense of

competing with other writers. After feeding her baby and clearing away the dishes, she picks up her pen and puts down whatever comes into her mind. Her subject matter is always something near to her, something commonplace, and thus her writing emits the warmth of everyday life. Highly sensitive to the material difficulties of ordinary people, Fang Fang does not promise any spiritual elevation in her works. Her characters remind her readers of themselves, their neighbours, colleagues, relatives and friends, and their hopes and despair. In Fang Fang's works there is no boundary between literature and actual life. She is like those modern artists who turn trivial odds and ends into works of art. She refuses any rational judgment of value, any super-rational metaphor or symbolism. She faces life itself, with all its basic odours and colour; she faces the world of good and evil, of honour and disgrace, of happiness and sadness. Like her readers, she is unable to explain such all-too familiar experiences with existing concepts, for life itself is too complicated for us to fully comprehend. The question "What does this mean?" raised by Xingzi, heroine of "One Glittering Moment", has perplexed philosophers past and present, and will continue to do so. A good novel is as rich, complete and powerful as life itself, and it should force us to look at life in a new light.

Fang Fang does not seem to have used any new techniques in her recent works, which are therefore difficult for some formalist critics to make clear comments on. Like a popular fiction writer, Fang Fang uses everyday language that is direct and easy to read. Her stories lead the readers' eyes naturally to all angles of view and to all kinds of landscapes. Reading her

stories is like taking a leisurely walk: you don't need to walk with any special step. The narrator is not there to distract attention. Some people argue that a modern writer should emphasise his or her presence in a literary work, or that the writer should be the real hero of the work. They say that "what is said" is not as important as "how it is said", and that the best content should generate the best format. Although I have on several occasions expressed my keen support for these ideas, I'd also like to stress something opposite, something that is now rarely mentioned but is deserving of attention. In other words, the best format should also offer us the best content, and "how something is said" should not always be as important as "what is said". The best writers should remain invisible behind their characters, for only when a writer has achieved a state beyond consciousness of the self, is his or her status as a successful author guaranteed.

Such "shedding" of the self is not a style, but an attitude. Such a writer is unaffected, honest, and does not strive to please the public with nonsense. Writers as these are not necessarily far-sighted or highly sensitive; they simply speak honestly to the world. Where money is changing more and more faces into lies, honesty is the hand of salvation we should grasp; it is the most basic grammar of the language of any great art. In this sense Fang Fang, like many other outstanding writers, does not belong to any one school of literature; she belongs to her heart and soul, which is her god.



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# One Glittering Moment

## 1

Xi sat listlessly on the edge of the bed listening to the see-sawing battle of words between his parents. His left foot was crossed over the right and jiggled in spite of himself.

Xi was depressed. Whenever he was in a mood he would think of a song he liked, and hum it to himself. It was his way of lessening the depression.

It was raining. Unlike the other times when it came down like a fine spray, this was the first real down-pour of the year. Let it rain as hard as possible, Xi was thinking, hard enough to demolish the house. Then, maybe his family would find peace. Forever and ever. The moment that thought flashed through his mind, he felt guilty.

His mother was saying, "You have the gall to come back to this house! Anyone but you would have jumped in the Yangtze before crossing it."

The father replied, "Why shouldn't I come back? This is my home. You are my wife. Xi is my son, and there are my daughters Hua and Juan. Where else would I go?"

The mother rebutted, "You have the cheek to mention your children, and being a husband and father! You never thought of them or me in the first place!

Why should you think of your duty as husband and father now?"

Although his mother was a mathematics teacher, she became nonsensical in an argument, and that struck Xi as funny. But when he thought of Hua and Juan, how wan and haggard they looked, how rough and chafed their hands were, the laughter welling inside subsided.

The father was saying, "Do you remember those times? I was under so much pressure. If I hadn't gone, it would have been the death of me."

The mother's smile was chilly. "You're full of good reasons... So why did you go off without a word? And why...why did you take every cent we had?"

His mother would always hate that incident. Her hatred was like the colour of the bricks in the wall that remained fresh and bright despite years of exposure to wind and rain. That day his mother had been beyond tears. In a moment everything had become crystal clear. She had seen through everything. Nothing had been the same since. Xi's eyes travelled from his twitching foot to the teeming rain outside the window. The rain seemed to have cleared the air, but then it also made it murky. The rain-soaked red bricks of the house seemed to take on an indescribable lustre.

His father argued, "I was set adrift. What was I to live on? At least you could still manage on your salary. What about me? All I had was the label of 'counter revolutionary'. Nothing else. Why don't you try and put yourself in my shoes? In that situation, other people would have sold or pawned everything they owned so that their husband wouldn't go short. You thought only of yourself and your

savings."

The mother blanched with rage. "You louse!" she cried.

"Arguing is one thing, but being personal is another," the father replied. "You call me a louse. I could call you shameless. We could go on insulting each other and be no better than a butcher or a garbage collector!"

The mother burst into tears. When it came to an argument she was never a match for her husband. Now she turned a pleading glance toward Xi for help.

Xi wagged his hand at her. There was nothing he could do. He thought perhaps he ought to side with his mother. After all, his mother had had twenty-odd years of hard times. On that point his father really was good for nothing. Xi subconsciously balled his fists. He knew the only way he could help his mother was to give his father a good thrashing.

Xi's father was sitting on a low bamboo stool, the same stool that Xi had bought from a farmer years before when he was still a schoolboy sent to the countryside to be re-educated through labour. He remembered that at home they used to have a wooden stool. Once when his mother stood on it to stack cotton quilts on top of a wardrobe, it broke. Afterwards, whenever she did the laundry, she would squat, shifting her weight from one foot to the other. Watching her, a thought flashed through his mind, but Xi said nothing. Later he bought the stool from the farmer with whom he boarded and gave it to his mother. Though he turned away quickly, he thought he caught a gleam in his mother's eye.

Xi's father's back must have been itching. For he

was constantly twisting his body, as though he was trying to scratch himself with the rough material of his shirt. The bamboo stool squeaked with each movement. Xi's father was gaunt, looking at least twenty years older than his actual age. In his early sixties, he was frailer than Accountant Zhao across the way who was eighty-seven. His father had serious problems with his eyes, the result of cataracts which hadn't been properly treated. His hands were so swollen and gnarled that they looked like dragon claws in a painting. He was dressed like a peasant and even spoke like one. It was hard for Xi to associate this man with the memory of his father in by-gone days at Chongqing University. The passage of time had not eroded his mother's bitterness, but it had certainly altered his father. Looking at his father's face, his eyes, his hands, his clothes, the shabby sneakers on his feet, Xi's arms went slack. There was no way he could raise a hand to this man.

Xi made a face and got to his feet. Xi said, "There's no sense in arguing. In the end you still eat out of the same pot, so why bother. And Father, couldn't you give in a little?"

Xi's father replied, "And who is going to give in to me?"

The mother said, "You ask him to give in to me? Not in this life! Ask him if he has ever given in to anybody? Certainly not to his family. Not even to your sister Hua. Why does Hua hate him? Because he has never been a father."

"Hua hates me because you taught her to," Xi's father retorted.

Xi said, "Father, can you please hush up?"

"Isn't that strange! I've said a lot less than your mother but you're always telling me to hush up," the father said. "Why don't you tell her to?"

"You're a man. Mother is a woman," Xi said.

The father countered, "So you think, 'A good man doesn't fight with a woman, just as a good person doesn't fight a dog.'"

Xi was about to respond, but his father cut him off. "Firstly, since I'm neither a good man nor a good person the old adage doesn't fit. Secondly, there is no law that says a man must give in to a woman in an argument. I'll conduct myself according to the law and not some silly old saying."

Xi was annoyed. "How can you be like that!" he exclaimed.

Xi's mother remonstrated. "Never mind him, Xi. Leave him alone, otherwise he'll give you no peace for days and days."

"I never say anything unreasonable or illogical. Don't try to make out that I go on and on like one of the shiftless creatures in the street."

"You're made of the same stuff," Xi's mother replied coldly, "except you're good at camouflage. Xi, you better go. Xingzi might be home today, and will be looking for you. It wouldn't be fair to have her walk in while this good-for-nothing is raising Cain. Go, quickly!"

At that, Xi's father became abusive to his mother.

Xi's ears ached.

He glanced at his watch. It was almost four-thirty. If Xingzi was coming from her university, she would be at the dock any moment.

Xi pulled on a jacket and took his raincoat from

behind the door. As he left, he told his mother softly that he wouldn't be home for dinner.

"Relax," the mother said. "Enjoy yourselves."

"Who is this Xingzi?" the father asked. "Is she our future daughter-in-law?"

"Don't talk nonsense!" the mother retorted.

Xi carried the old, rusty woman's bicycle down to the street from the second floor where they lived.

It was still raining hard. He had only been peddling a few minutes when his trouser legs were soaked through. His father's words still echoed in his head: "Who is this Xingzi? Is she our future daughter-in-law?"

Xi sighed. He was thinking, she isn't but I wish she were.

## 2

Xi's full name was Lu Xi. Originally his name Xi was not the character meaning chaff or broken kernels of rice, but a similar-sounding word meaning happiness. Xi had two elder sisters. When he was born the Lu family was overjoyed, and he was given that name for good luck. Though country folk from the village whence the family came were fond of names of only one character, they were also in the habit of lengthening them by adding the sound *lo* after them. To the Lu's who were city dwellers that *lo* sound became an embarrassment. They dropped it. In time they got quite used to calling his sisters just Hua and Juan. They liked the fresh ring it had. Xi's second year was an unhappy period for his father. One day in a burst of inspiration he decided to change Xi's name. From

that day on the character for his name was changed from Joy to Broken Kernels of Rice.

People used to wonder about the meaning of his name. Xi himself didn't know so he looked it up. What he discovered threw him into a blue funk. In common usage it meant the chaff or debris left after rice had been polished, which was used for animal feed.

Xi was convinced that in his father's eyes he was nothing but animal fodder. That idea depressed him for a long time.

One night a year ago, he had suddenly woken from a dream and in the split second when he sat up in bed, his father and his name flashed through his mind. He thought his father's estimation of him was dead on.

Xi tried conjuring his father in his imagination. His father left when Xi was three years old. Xi didn't remember him at all. However, neighbours often used to remark how he resembled his father, and how similar their movements and posture were. Xi came to believe that his father must be as tall and fastidious as he. Xi was one point eight-three metres tall. His clothes were well made. He was clean shaven, and his nails were always trimmed. Therefore, when a stooped old man with a face full of shaggy whiskers that almost covered his ears appeared claiming to be his father, he thought it was a madman playing a prank. It was only when he looked into the man's eyes that he found the resemblance to his own.

Xi had very small eyes. He had suffered from severe acne when he was young, and people used to tease him saying his face was a plateful of red beans with two black ones added. However, those small eyes



seemed to capture the light. Xi's small black orbs were indeed his best feature. Xi used to say, with some pride, that beautiful eyes did not have to be large; they had to be lustrous.

Xi noticed something in his father's care-worn face that others missed. That special quality was also in the eyes.

Xi's father had returned from the countryside upon receiving the government's notice of repatriation. When he arrived Xi was cutting out a pair of trousers for a friend. He was considered quite a good tailor among his peers. Xi drew a basin of water for his father to wash his face, and poured him a cup of tea. His father sipped his tea and glanced at the fabric spread out on the bed board and said it could be a bit longer here and narrower there to give it a better fit. Xi was astonished at the advice.

Xi's father had been a tailor all the years he spent in the countryside. It was the only craft he was able to pick up. He was self-taught, and had supported himself by tailoring for twenty-odd years.

Xi had also taught himself tailoring. Because of this commonality, it occurred to him that despite being abandoned for more than twenty years, he was a lot like his father. For the first time he felt the mysteriousness of life.

Xi's only knowledge of his father was a note that he left before he went away. Xi had asked his mother for it, and stowed it away carefully. Once he showed it to Xingzi who had rummaged through a stack of books but couldn't find its origin. Finally, Xi's mother told him it was a lyric from the Yuan Dynasty.

That lyric became engraved in Xi's heart, something