

WANG ANYI

# LAPSE OF TIME

*and Other Selected Writings*

 FOREIGN LANGUAGES PRESS





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藏书章



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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.

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## The Destination

OVER the loudspeaker came the announcement, "The train is arriving at Shanghai terminal. . ."

Dozing passengers opened their eyes. "We're arriving in Shanghai."

"We're nearing the terminal."

The impatient ones removed their shoes and climbed onto their seats to reach for their luggage.

A group of middle-aged men from Xinjiang began making plans. "We'll take a bath as soon as we check into a hotel. Then we'll call the heavy-machinery plant and go out to a Western-style restaurant."

"Right. We'll have Western food." Their spirits rose. They had gone to work in Xinjiang after their university years in Beijing, Fuzhou and Jiangsu. Though they retained their accents, their appearance and temperament were "Xinjiangized," weather beaten and blunt. When Chen Xin asked casually about Xinjiang after he got on the train at Nanjing, they gave him a detailed and enthusiastic account of the region: the humor and wit of Xinjiang's different ethnic minorities, the beautiful songs they sang, the graceful dances and lively girls. They also

described their own life there, how they fished and hunted. Expressive and eloquent, they painted an appealing picture.

"How long will you be in Shanghai?" one of the group, a man from Beijing, asked, patting Chen Xin on the shoulder.

With a smile, he turned around from gazing out the window. "I've come back for good."

"Got a transfer?"

"Right."

"Bringing your wife and children?"

"I haven't any," he blushed. "I couldn't have come back if I'd been married."

"My, you must be determined." Chen Xin's shoulder received a heartier slap. "You Shanghainese can't survive away from Shanghai."

"It's my home," Chen Xin said, justifying himself.

Chen Xin smiled.

"One should be able to find interesting things anywhere. You skate in Harbin, swim in Guangzhou, eat big chunks of mutton with your hands in Xinjiang and Western food in Shanghai... Wherever fate lands you, you look for something interesting and enjoy it as best you can. Maybe that's what makes life interesting."

Chen Xin only smiled. Absentmindedly, he kept his eyes on the fields flitting past his window, fields carefully divided into small plots and planted like squares of embroidery—there were patches of yellow, dark and light green and, beside the river, purple triangles. To eyes used to the vast, fertile soil of the north, the highly utilized and carefully partitioned land struck him as narrow and jammed. But he had to admit that everything was as fresh and clean as if washed by water. This was the



south, the outskirts of Shanghai. Oh, Shanghai!

The train hurtled past the fields and low walls and entered the suburbs. Chen Xin saw factories, buildings, streets, buses and pedestrians. . . Shanghai became closer and tangible. His eyes moistened and his heart thumped. Ten years ago, when classes were suspended during the Cultural Revolution, he and other school-leavers left for the countryside. At that time, as Shanghai faded into the distance, he had not expected to return. No. He probably had thought about it. In the countryside, he plowed, planted, harvested wheat, dredged rivers, and tried to get a job or admittance to a university. . . He finally enrolled in a teachers' college. After graduation he was assigned to teach in a middle school in a small town. Able to earn his own living at last, his struggles should have ended; he could start a new life. But he felt he had not arrived at his destination. Not yet. He was still unsettled and expectant, waiting for something. He only realized what he had been waiting for, what his destination really was, when large numbers of school-leavers returned to Shanghai after the fall of the Gang of Four.

In the past decade, he had been to Shanghai on holiday and on business. But with every visit he only felt the distance between him and Shanghai grow. He had become a stranger, an outsider, whom the Shanghainese looked down upon. And he found their superiority and conceit intolerable. The pity and sympathy of his friends and acquaintances were as unbearable. For at the back of that lay pride. Still he was forced to admire Shanghai's progress and superiority. The department stores were full of all kinds of goods and people dressed in the latest fashions. Clean, elegant restaurants. New films at the cinemas. Shanghai represented what was new in China. But above all there was his

home, his mother, brothers, and dead father's ashes... He smiled, his eyes brimming with tears. He would make any sacrifice to return. He had acted as soon as he learned that his mother was retiring and that one of her children could take her job. He had gone here and there to get his papers stamped, a troublesome and complicated business. He had fought a tense and energetic battle, but he had won.

The train pulled into the station. As Chen Xin opened the window, a cool breeze—a Shanghai breeze—rushed in. He saw his younger brother, now grown tall and handsome. Seeing him, the youth ran beside the train calling happily, "Second Brother!" Chen Xin's heart shrank with regret. He calmed down, remembering how, ten years earlier, his elder brother had run beside the train too at his departure.

The train came to a halt. His younger brother caught up, panting. Chen Xin was too busy talking to him and handing him his luggage to notice that the cheerful group of middle-aged men were bidding him farewell.

"Elder Brother, his wife, and Nannan are here too. They're outside. We only got one platform ticket with your telegram, saying you were coming. Have you got a lot of luggage?"

"I can manage. How's Mum?"

"She's OK. She's getting dinner ready. She got up at three this morning to buy food for you."

A lump rose in his throat; he lowered his head in silence. His brother fell silent too.

They moved quietly out of the long station. At the exit his elder brother, his wife and son, Nannan, took his suitcases from him. They struggled under the weight for a few steps and then gave them back to him. Everybody laughed. His elder brother

took his arm. His sister-in-law followed, carrying Nannan.

"Have you got all the necessary papers?" his elder brother inquired. "Tomorrow I'll ask for leave and take you to the labor bureau."

"I can take him. I haven't got anything to do," offered his younger brother.

Chen Xin's heart trembled again. He turned to him with a smile. "OK. No.3 can take me."

It took three buses to reach home. His mother greeted him, lowering her head to wipe away tears. The three sons were at a loss for words, not knowing how and also too shy to express their feelings. All they could say was, "What's there to cry about?" It was his sister-in-law who knew how to stop her. She said, "This calls for a celebration, Mum. You should be rejoicing."

The tension lifted. "Let's eat," they said to one another. The table was moved from his mother's six-square-meter room to the big room his elder brother and his wife occupied. Chen Xin looked around. The room where he and his two brothers had once lived had a different appearance. The light green wallpaper was decorated with an oil painting and a wall light. Smart new furniture had been made to fit the room. The color was special too.

"What do you call this color?" asked Chen Xin.

"Reddish brown. It's the fashion," answered his younger brother with the air of an expert.

Nannan moved a stool over to a chest of drawers, climbed on it, and turned on the cassette player. The strong rhythm of the music raised everybody's spirits.

"You live well!" The excitement in Chen Xin's voice was ob-

vious.

His elder brother smiled apologetically. After a long pause he said, "I'm glad you're finally back."

His sister-in-law carried in some food. "Now that you're back, you should find a sweetheart and get married."

"I'm old and ugly. Who'd want me?"

That made everyone laugh.

More than ten different dishes were placed on the table: diced pork and peanuts, braised spareribs, crucian carp soup... Everybody piled food onto Chen Xin's plate. Even Nannan copied them. They went on serving him even when his plate was like a hill, as if to compensate for the ten hard years he had spent away from home. His elder brother almost emptied the stir-fried eel, Chen Xin's favorite dish, onto his plate. Though younger by three years, Chen Xin had always been his brother Chen Fang's protector. Chen Fang, tall and slender, had been nicknamed String Bean. His school marks were high, but outside of school he was poor at sports and had slow reflexes. His legs always got caught in the rope when it was his turn to jump. When playing cops and robbers, the side he was on was sure to lose. Chen Xin always fought for him when no one wanted him. "If you don't want my brother, I won't play either. And if I don't play, I'll make sure there'll be no game." And he meant what he said, so the boys compromised, fearing the terrible havoc he'd wreak on the one hand and hating to lose a popular, funny playmate on the other. Later, when Chen Fang had to wear glasses, he looked so scholarly that his nickname became Bookworm. For some reason Chen Xin considered this even more insulting than the previous one. He brought an end to it by bashing anyone who dared to utter it. When classes were suspended during

the Cultural Revolution, he had finished junior middle and his brother senior middle school. The government's policy was clear; only one son could work in Shanghai, the other must go to the countryside. His heartbroken mother had mumbled tearfully, "The palm and the back of my hand. . . They are both my flesh and blood." Feeling sorry for her, Chen Xin volunteered, "I'll go to the countryside. Brother's a softy; he'll get bullied. Let him stay in Shanghai. I'll go. . ." When he set out, Chen Fang had seen him off at the station, standing woodenly behind a group of friends, not daring to meet his eyes. As the train pulled out, Chen Fang moved forward to grasp Chen Xin's hand and run beside the train even after the speeding locomotive pulled them apart.

Chen Xin had finally returned. Overcome by all sorts of emotions, no one was particularly good at expressing them, so they transformed them into action. After supper his elder brother served tea while his wife made up a bed in the hut they had constructed in the courtyard. His younger brother stood in a queue for Chen Xin to go to the public bathhouse. When Chen Xin had eaten his fill and bathed, he lay on the double bed he was to share with his younger brother, feeling as relaxed as if he were drunk. The clean, warm bedding had a pleasant smell. The lamp on the desk beside the bed gave the simple hut a soft glow. Someone had placed a stack of magazines beside his pillow; the family knew and had remembered that he always read himself to sleep. Oh, home. This was home! He had returned home after ten years. Feeling a peace that he had never felt before, he closed his eyes and dozed off without reading. At dusk he woke up. Someone had come in and turned off the light. He opened his eyes in the darkened room and peacefully drifted back to

slumber.

\* \* \*

Early in the morning Chen Xin and his younger brother went to the labor bureau to start the formalities. The triangular lot beside the bus stop was filled with tailors' stalls and sewing machines. A young man with a measuring tape hanging round his neck accosted them. "Do you want something made?" They shook their heads and walked away. Curious, Chen Xin turned to look back at the young man who was dressed up like a model, soliciting customers.

His brother tugged at him. "The bus's coming. They're all school-leavers waiting for jobs. Shanghai's full of them." Chen Xin was astonished. His brother, shoving his way onto a bus, stopped at the door and called out to him, "Come on, Second Brother."

"Let's wait for the next one." The bus filled to bursting and the crowd at the bus stop made Chen Xin hesitate.

"More people will come. Get on quick." His brother's voice seemed to come from afar.

Chen Xin was strong. He could push. He shoved and squeezed until he caught the door handle and placed his feet on the steps. Then he mustered his strength and, amid cries and curses, pushed deeper into the bus to stand beside a window where he could hang on to the back of the seat. But he was crammed in and uncomfortable, bumping against people's heads or backs, having a hard time fitting in. All round him the passengers grumbled.

"Look at the way you're standing!"

"Just like a door plank."

"Outsiders are always so awkward on buses."

"Who're you calling an outsider?" An indignant No. 3 squeezed his way over, ready to pick a quarrel. Chen Xin tugged him. "Don't mind them. It's so crowded. Don't fight."

Softly, No. 3 gave him a tap. "Turn this way. Right. Hold the seat with your left hand. That's better. See?"

It was true. Chen Xin heaved a long sigh. He finally fitted in with his chest pressed against a back and his back against someone else's chest. At least his feet touched the floor. He turned his head to look and noticed a silent understanding among the passengers. Facing in the same direction, they all stood in a straight line, one behind the other. This way, the bus could fill to capacity. He thought of the remote town he had lived in where passengers squeezed in any old way, no scientific method at all. The bus held fewer people while the crowding and discomfort were the same. Shanghainese could adapt themselves to smaller spaces better.

The female conductor's voice came through a loudspeaker in Beijing and Shanghai dialects, "The next stop is Xizang Zhong Road. Those who're getting off please get ready." With royal airs, these women looked proud and disdainful, like strict disciplinarians. But these announcements helped passengers. He recalled again the buses and women conductors in that little town: battered, dusty buses shooting off before their doors were closed; unenthusiastic conductors never announcing stops, closing doors on passengers and catching their clothes in them. They had no rules at all. Things were shipshape in Shanghai. In that sort of environment, you had to do things properly.

When they got off the bus, No. 3 took Chen Xin down a street to one of the city's free markets. There were vegetables, fish, poultry, woollen sweaters, sandals, purses and hair clips, and

stalls with fried food and meat dumplings. Below a placard announcing folk toys were paper lanterns and clay dolls. Seeing a market like that, Chen Xin had to laugh. What a strong contrast with Shanghai's wealthy, modern Nanjing Road.

"There are a lot of markets like this in Shanghai," explained No. 3. "The government encourages school-leavers to be self-employed."

The mention of the unemployed youth made Chen Xin frown. After pausing, he asked, "What was the matter with you, No. 3? Why did you fail the university entrance exam again?"

No. 3 lowered his head. "I don't know. I guess I'm stupid."

"Will you take it again next year?"

After a long silence, No. 3 said haltingly, "I might fail a third time."

That made Chen Xin angry. "You've no confidence in yourself."

No. 3 smiled honestly. "I'm not cut out to study. I forget what I learn."

"Your elder brother and I didn't have the chance to continue our studies. You're the only one in the family who can attend a university. But you've no ambition."

No. 3 fell silent.

"What are your plans then?"

No. 3 gave a laugh but said nothing. Just then someone called out behind them, "Chen Xin!"

They turned to face a woman leading a handsome little boy. She was in her thirties, with long permed hair and stylish clothes. Chen Xin couldn't place her.

"Have I grown so old that you don't recognize me?"

"Why, it's you, Yuan Xiaoxin! You don't look older, just



prettier," Chen Xin laughed.

Yuan laughed with him. "Come on. We were in the same group in the countryside for two years, and yet you couldn't place me. What a poor memory!"

"No. It was just that I didn't expect to see you. Weren't you among the first batch to get a job? Are you still at Huaibei Colliery?"

"No. I came back to Shanghai last year."

"How come?"

"It's a long story. How about you?"

"I returned yesterday."

"Oh." She didn't show surprise. "Zhang Xihu and Fang Fang are back too."

"Good," Chen Xin said excitedly. "So half the group has returned. We must get together sometime. Our hard times are finally over."

She gave a faint smile, revealing fine wrinkles at the corners of her eyes.

"Uncle," chirped the little boy. "You've got white hair like my grandpa."

Chen Xin laughed, bending down to take the boy's hand. "This is your son?" he addressed Yuan.

"He's my sister's son," she explained blushing. "I'm not married. If I were I couldn't have come back."

"Oh." Chen Xin was surprised. Having graduated the same year as Chen Fang, Yuan must be thirty-three or thirty-four. "But why didn't you marry after your return?"

"Well, how shall I put it? One has to wait for an opportunity."

Chen Xin said nothing.