

YU DAFU

NIGHTS  
OF SPRING  
FEVER

*and Other Selected Writings*

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# NIGHTS OF SPRING FEVER

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YU DA HUI

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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## Foreword

YU Dafu's highly distinctive works first appeared in the Chinese literary world in early 1920s. Apart from his short stories, which first brought him fame, he was also a first-rate essayist and poet. In addition, he wrote many articles on literature and politics and translated a great deal of foreign literature. A contemporary of Lu Xun, Guo Moruo and Mao Dun, he is often mentioned together with them as a founder of modern Chinese literature.

Yu Dafu came to fame with his short story *Sinking*. His first collection of short stories, containing this as the title story plus *Moving South* and *A Light Grey Death*, was published in October 1921. It is the first collection of short stories in the history of modern Chinese literature. His "startling subject matter and bold descriptions", as the critic Cheng Fangwu put it, created a sensation among contemporary writers, critics and readers and set him on a career as a writer. Between 1921 and 1935 he wrote about fifty works, most of which are short stories. Among his longer works are the unfinished novels *Spring Tide* (1922), *Mirage* (1926), and the short novels *The Lost Sheep* (1927), *She Was a Weak Woman* (1932) and *Flight* (1935).

Most of his early stories depict the morbidity and psychic traumas of students and young intellectuals,

*Sinking* being a good example. It is the story of a Chinese student in Japan and the bullying and humiliation he is subject to as the national of a weak country in a foreign land; it describes his melancholy and grief, his quest for love and the contradictions and struggles between the demands of the soul and the body. Finally with a bitter cry, "Oh, my country, my country, may you soon grow rich and strong!" he jumps into the sea and drowns. The story boldly reveals the aspirations of Chinese youth in the May 4th period, especially young intellectuals with their demands for democracy, freedom and the emancipation of the self. Grasping with keen perception the anti-imperialist and anti-feudalist trends of its time, it evoked an immediate and powerful response upon publication. "His fresh new tone is like a spring breeze blowing through China's decaying society," wrote Guo Moruo, "awaking at once countless youthful hearts at that time. His audacious self-exposure is like a flash of lightning in a storm to the hypocrisy of the old literati deeply hidden under thousand-year-old carapaces, and sends these canting moralists and pseudo-scholars into a frenzy of shock. Why? It is because his undisguised frankness makes them feel their pretences difficult to sustain."

When he returned from Japan after graduation in 1922, Yu Dafu took an active part in the Creation Society, the famous literary society which also numbered Guo Moruo as one of its founding members. His work included editing periodicals, producing comments and articles, writing fiction and strengthening its contacts with social life. At that time the Chinese working class had already engaged as a political force and the

broad masses of workers, peasants and intellectuals had reached a new level of political consciousness; Yu Dafu's fiction similarly entered a new stage, advancing both ideologically and artistically. *Caishiji* (1923), *Nights of Spring Fever* (1923) and *A Humble Sacrifice* (1924) are his masterpieces of this period. On the surface, *Caishiji* has a historical theme, on the Qing poet Huang Zhongze (1749-1783), but in fact it is about the author's own circumstances. It expresses the emotional suffering of intellectuals in the old society who fail to achieve their ambitions, and the indignation and protest they direct at society. *Nights of Spring Fever* and *A Humble Sacrifice* are famous as the first stories in the history of modern Chinese literature on the life of workers. These two stories, he said himself, "have a more or less socialist tinge". The former is about a woman who works in a cigarette factory, the latter about a rickshaw puller. Through the association of the first-person hero with these people, the story praises the simplicity, honesty and nobility of the working class, exposes their cruel enslavement and oppression in the old society, expresses deep sympathy for their miserable destiny and performs a frank and incisive self-dissection. These three stories are a great improvement over his earlier fiction in composition and technique. Not only is the structure better integrated and the language more beautiful, but his ability to portray character through detailed psychological description has also greatly increased.

However, ups and downs are only to be expected in a writer's ideological and creative development. In the latter half of 1923, the society's periodicals gradually ceased publication, some of its members were forced to

disperse and Yu Dafu found problems arising in his worried life. As a result, he lapsed for a time into a state of "apathy and dejection, wherein neither the spiritual nor the physical held any value". In this state of mind, he strayed from his true creative path, writing such perverse stories as *Autumn Stream* (1923), *Autumn Willows* (1924), *A Chilly Night* and *Street Lights* (1925). Artistically they have something to say, but their negative and decadent ideology has nothing to recommend it.

From 1924 to 1927 a great force was taking shape in the south, resulting in the Northern Expedition which moved like wildfire against the warlords in central and north China. The heart of this movement was in Guangzhou, and in March 1926 Yu Dafu, Guo Moruo and other members of the Creation Society felt impelled to leave Shanghai for Guangzhou. "I intended to change my old habits," Yu said, "and plunge myself into the revolution with all my ardour and sincerity, grief and indignation." But owing to his inadequate understanding of the complex nature of the revolutionary struggle, his revolutionary illusions as a petty bourgeois intellectual were "shattered by the evil wind of actuality", like "soap bubbles blown by children", as he himself said. After six months in Guangzhou he returned to Shanghai. For a time he alternated between high points and low in his thinking and writing. He fell madly in love with Wang Yingxia; he became estranged from his old friends in the Creation Society over differences in opinion and broke off his connection with the society; and he even considered going abroad "live in a foreign country for ever". In the end he chose to retire to the countryside, living in a house named "Wind and Rain Cottage"

in Hangzhou. Fortunately that he was in frequent contact with Lu Xun during this time, obtaining from him considerable encouragement and benefit. Thus he still took part in major struggles such as the activities of the Freedom Movement League and League for the Protection of Democratic Rights. Throughout he refused to co-operate or compromise with the reactionary authorities, taking his stand with the revolutionaries and supporting their line.

Under such circumstances it was inevitable that his works would be influenced by this extremely complicated situation. *The Past* and *The Desolate Afternoon* (both written in January 1927), *Wishes* (August 1927), *The Lost Sheep* (December 1927), *Dongziguang* (September 1932), *Late-flowering Cassia*, *An Autumn Night at Jade Wave Lake* and *The Gourd Monk* (all October 1932) express unhealthy emotions or are permeated by a gloomy atmosphere, reflecting depression and frustration; some even praise life as hermit. But at times when his spirits were better and his thinking more positive, he was able to produce stories like *Snowy Morning* (July 1927), *Arbutus Cocktails* (August 1930), *She Was a Weak Woman* (March 1932), *A Fatalist* (February 1935) and *Flight* (October 1935), incisive portrayals of real life and the current struggle.

*The Past* marks a new stage in Yu Dafu's creative writing. Previously he had mostly written autobiographical romantic and lyrical fiction. But in this story not only is the main character for the first time a woman, but the subjective lyrical tone of his early works is much reduced, and the element of realism is increased. His creative style underwent a distinct change, as realism began to penetrate his romanticism. The main reason

for this is the political turmoil in China at that time, which forced the writer to face up to grim reality. On the surface the story deals with thwarted love, but in fact it portrays the author's distress at the setbacks to the revolutionary movement. Great attention is paid in the story to the depiction of character.

*Late-flowering Cassia* represents a further advance to maturity, the writer attaining new heights in plot development, description of natural scenery, character portrayal and prose style. Very little actually takes place in the story: the emphasis is on the moods and temperaments of the four main characters, the first-person narrator, his friend Weng Zesheng, Weng's sister and his mother. The narrator, now a middle-aged man, suffers from melancholy at the approach of old age, and his response to the political oppression of the time is to retreat from life and its struggles. In the presence of natural beauty and the purity of his friend's sister, however, he is purged of his morbid emotions and leaves their mountain home with a new sense of responsibility to society. The theme of this deeply philosophical story is that misfortune in one's earlier life can result in a deeper wisdom in maturity, just as the cassia that flowers late smells sweeter and lasts longer than the earlier blooms. The description of the famous scenery around Hangzhou and West Lake is extremely poetic, as is also the depiction of the sister's lovely innocence and the simple, traditional life of a mountain village.

*Snowy Morning*, *Arbutus Cocktails* and *A Fatalist* are all about intellectuals. Through the tragic love story of an indigent student, Zhu Ruya, *Snowy Morning* exposes warlord oppression of youth. *Arbutus Cocktails*

tells how a scientist in applied chemistry who has returned from studies abroad is unable to use his skills in a period when the development of the national economy is held in check by imperialist economic aggression, and as a result he suffers from spiritual paralysis. A *Fatalist* describes a poor but law-abiding primary schoolteacher who is under the illusion that he has freed himself from poverty by winning a prize in a lottery; as it turns out, he has been deceived by exploiting reactionaries and commits suicide. All three stories have a positive significance, showing how intellectuals in the old society had no way out and ability was crushed.

The theme of *She Was a Weak Woman* and *Flight* is the revolution of 1927. The former features three women with different levels of political consciousness and tastes, allowing the readers to draw a message from their experiences as to which road they themselves should take. The author praises the revolution and castigates the new warlords who make use of the revolution to feather their own nests. It is a pity that the positive significance of the main theme is marred, damaging the ideological purity of the story. *Flight*, Yu Dafu's last story, also has a significant new theme, that revolutionaries must at all times be on guard against enemy attack with "sugar-coated bullets". In grasping as early as the 30s this major problem bearing on the success or failure of revolution, the author shows considerable insight. Dong Yulin, a rapacious and cunning landlord, and Qian Shiyong, a revolutionary cadre who has been corrupted by the enemy but who finally comes to his senses, have great significance as important social types.

Apart from fiction Yu Dafu also wrote many essays

and poems in the old classical style. His essays, of which about two hundred have survived, reveal his loyal and passionate devotion to the Chinese people, his contempt and hatred for the new warlords and high officials who oppressed the people, and his sorrows and grief. Whether reflections on current affairs or laments on his failure to achieve his ambitions, they convey throughout the sense of responsibility of a progressive intellectual at a time when his country was beset by internal and external troubles and the fate of the nation hung in the balance. Even more than his fiction and poetry, the essays are perhaps the most characteristic expression of his style.

Some of his travel essays are only slight sketches written in a relaxed, carefree mood. Most, however, convey his "grief in idleness" against a contrasting background description of the magnificent scenery of his beloved country. Events and people are also introduced in many of these essays, but the overwhelming emphasis is on the author's emotions and on the scenic beauty around him. These are described in a highly refined, poetic language, using detailed description and concrete imagery to achieve a vivid and moving effect.

Yu Dafu's poems in classical style are known for their thoughtfulness; according to Guo Moruo, "They are better than his modern fiction." As a child, Yu Dafu was fond of writing poetry, and in later years, in moments of intense but unsustainable emotion, or when he had an impulse to write but circumstances did not permit a lengthy exposition, he usually resorted to poetry. His poetic output, including poems in both *shi* and *ci* styles, was quite large, and five hundred of them have survived. Much influenced by Huang Zhongze, he also studied

traditional masters such as Qu Yuan, Li Bai, Li Shang-yin, Du Mu and Gong Zizhen, shaping his own style in the process. Whether rousing or sentimental, solemn or bitter, grief-stricken or carefree, his poems show a high degree of proficiency.

Yu Dafu's works, regardless of genre, are remarkably consistent in style, even including his literary and political articles. Someone once said that even if they appeared anonymously, Yu Dafu's writings would still be identifiable by style alone. Three main features may be said to characterize this highly distinctive style.

The first and most outstanding characteristic feature of his work is its frank self-exposure, and he remained consistent in this respect from the first publication of *Sinking* to his period in Singapore. He once said, "If I want to forswear the crime of hypocrisy, I have to lay bare my heart." Following this principle, he first laid bare his frustrated sexual desires and abnormal psychology in *Sinking* and *The Dark Night*. He again made public his love for Wang Yingxia and the tribulations of his family and social life in his diaries published in 1927, and in March 1939 described in full detail, in a set of poems published in a special enlarged issue of the Hong Kong periodical *The Gale*, the whole story of his break-up with Wang Yingxia. It is a common saying that one doesn't wash one's dirty linen in public, but Yu Dafu, a great writer, made this his speciality. As he himself said, one's grief "is not one's private property". His frank self-exposure was not only undertaken to draw a clear distinction between his work and the deceitful feudal literature of the past but also to attack traditional customs and issue a challenge to society.

The second characteristic is a subjective lyricism,