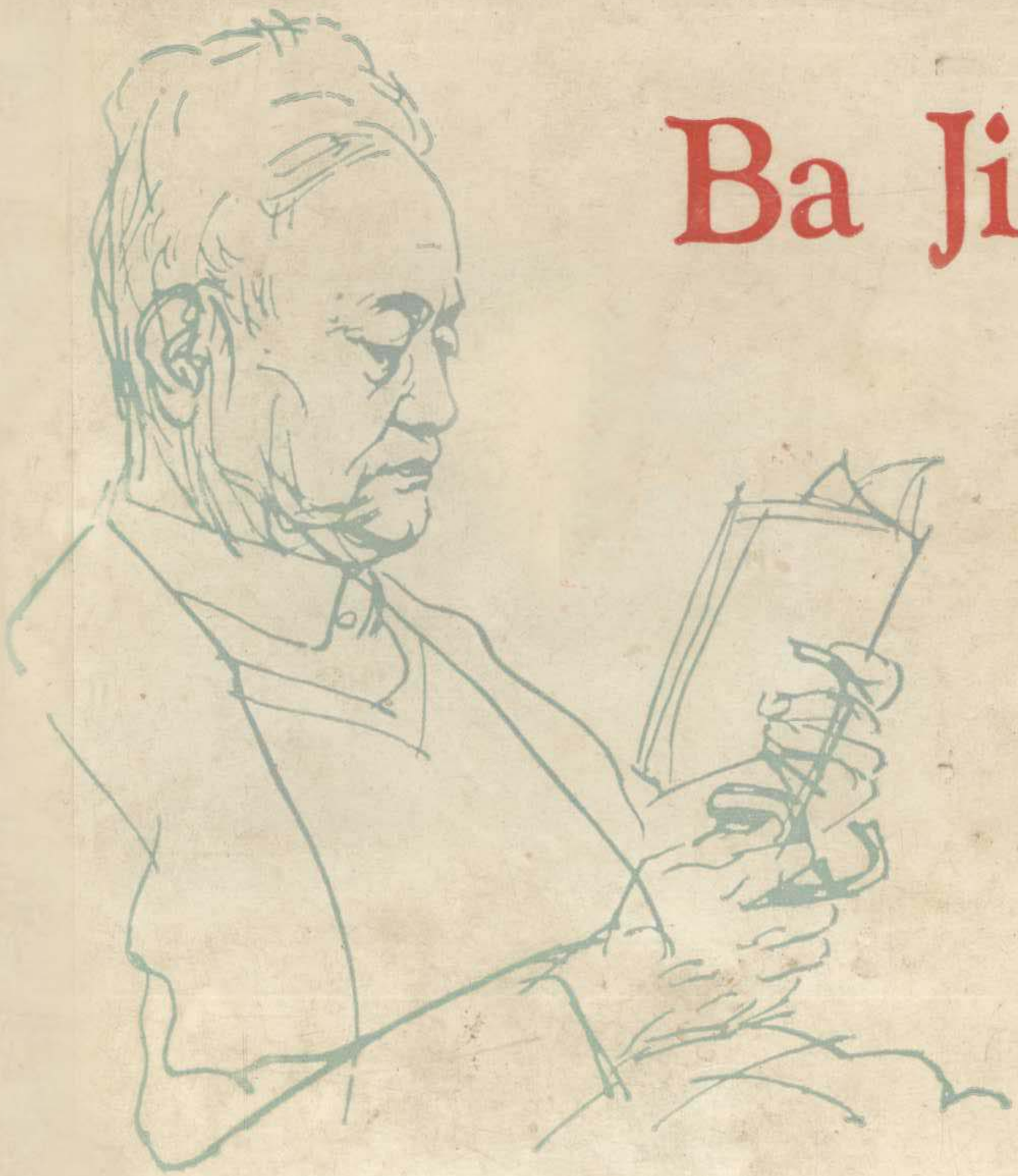


Ba Jin



AUTUMN
IN SPRING
AND OTHER STORIES

Panda Books



春天里的秋天及其它

巴 金
熊猫丛书

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Ba Jin

**Autumn in Spring
and Other Stories**



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Autumn in Spring and Other Stories

Ba Jin, one of China's outstanding contemporary novelists, was born into a big feudal family in 1904 in Chengdu, Sichuan. He was familiar from childhood with the wrangling and conflicts between its members and the misery inflicted on the young by the feudal moral code. This gave him an urge to revolt and made him ready to accept the progressive ideas of the anti-imperialist and anti-feudal May 4th Movement launched in 1919.

He went to study in France in 1926 and while there completed his first novel *Destruction*. After his return to Shanghai in 1928, in addition to a number of short stories, he wrote the short novel *A Dream of the Sea*; the trilogy *Fog, Rain and Lightning* which depicts the disillusionment of intellectuals and their desire for revolution; and the trilogy *The Family, Spring and Autumn* dealing with the evils and decline of the big feudal family. *The Family* was later adapted into a stage play by Cao Yu and made into a film in the fifties.

He has also translated into Chinese a number of foreign classics such as Turgenev's *Father and Son*. He is now a member of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress and chairman of the Chinese Writers' Association.

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The Heart of a Slave

“MY people were slaves!” Peng told me one day proudly.

Many of my friends had told me their family background, all announcing equally complacently, “My ancestors had hosts of slaves!” Most of their families still owned many slaves, though a minority had fewer than before or none at all, and their behaviour and talk made it clear that they looked back nostalgically to that golden age.

As for myself, I remember that my great-grandfather had four slaves, my grandfather eight, and my father sixteen. I inherited those sixteen slaves from him, very pleased to be a slave-owner. And it was my ambition to increase the number from sixteen to thirty-two.

But then Peng came into my life and did not scruple to tell me, even proudly, that his forbears had been slaves. I thought he must be crazy.

I didn't know Peng's background, but we were friends. This had come about in a unique way: he burst into my life by chance. It happened like this:

One afternoon, leaving college with something on my mind, I didn't watch where I was going. A car drove up behind me, its horn blaring, but apparently I didn't hear it. I would have been run over had not a strong hand grasped my arm and tugged me aside. I nearly fell, but I was out of danger. When I recover-

ed my balance and looked round, a tall lean young fellow behind me was glaring at me. He made no response to my thanks, didn't even smile, just fixed me with a gimlet stare. Finally he said as if to himself, "Better be more careful in future." With that he left. But we had become acquainted.

In college we belonged to different departments. I studied literature, he social sciences. We didn't attend the same lectures, yet often ran into each other. Each time we only passed a few remarks or said nothing at all, simply exchanging cool glances. Still, we had become friends.

Very rarely did we converse at any length, and we never made small talk about the weather.

When we did talk it was always to the point.

You might say we were good friends, yet I didn't love him. It was largely out of gratitude and curiosity that I remained friends with him. I may have respected but certainly didn't like him. There was nothing amiable about his appearance, speech or behaviour. Wherever he was, he looked dour.

I didn't know his background, as he never spoke of it. But judging by what I saw of him at college he wasn't from a wealthy family. He was very parsimonious, quite unlike the usual run of undergraduates, and didn't wear western-style suits or go to films or dances. Apart from attending lectures, he spent his whole time reading in his room or strolling in the playing-field or the town. He never smiled, merely brooded in silence.

Yes, I often wondered what he had on his mind. For three years we were classmates, and as far as I could see he spent the whole time brooding.

One day I couldn't resist asking, "What are you thinking about all the time, Peng?"

"You wouldn't understand," he answered coldly, then made straight off.

He was right — I didn't understand why a young man should be so gloomy, so eccentric. My baffled surprise made me eager to solve this riddle. And so I paid more attention to his behaviour, to the books he read and the company he kept.

I discovered that I seemed to be the only friend he had. Of course he knew some other people, but no one liked to have much to do with him, especially as he showed no inclination to make friends. He glowered at everyone, not even smiling when girl students addressed him. And although we were on close terms he treated me coldly too. I decided that must be the reason why I disliked him.

I observed his reading habits. He was too indiscriminate, reading many weird books by authors whose names I had never even heard of. Some of them had remained for years in the library stacks with no one asking for them. He read books of every kind: one day a novel maybe, the next a treatise on philosophy, the day after that a history. So it was virtually impossible to decipher him from his reading, as I knew nothing of what was in those books — unless I took the trouble to read them myself.

One evening he came without warning to my room. That term I'd moved outside to comfortable lodgings. My upstairs room had a view of the road to the college and a newly opened miniature golf-course.

Peng came in and plumped down unceremoniously on my white sofa, dusting off his old lined gown in

silence. I was reading at my desk, and after glancing up at him lowered my head again. My eyes were on my book, my mind on my new sofa under his old lined gown.

"Do you know, Zheng, how many slaves there are in China today?" his gruff voice asked suddenly.

"Several million most likely," I answered off-hand, having no idea whether this figure quoted by a friend a few days before was correct or not. It wasn't a question which had ever exercised my mind.

"Several million? No, more than several tens of millions!" Peng sounded distraught. "And, in a wider sense, at least three quarters of China's population are slaves."

"Well, at any rate I'm not one," I thought complacently. But I raised my head again to look at Peng, puzzled by his agitation.

"Do you have slaves too?" he asked abruptly and rudely.

I thought he must despise me for having none, in which case he was wrong as we had in fact sixteen. Smiling smugly I bragged, "Of course someone like myself has slaves. We have sixteen at home."

He gave a caustic laugh, and I observed even greater contempt — instead of respect or envy — in the glance he shot at me. He actually seemed to despise the owner of sixteen slaves. That astonished me. I could hardly believe my eyes. As I tried to work out the reason, it suddenly occurred to me that it was jealousy, for judging by the frugal way he lived he couldn't have slaves himself. So I asked sympathetically, "I suppose you have slaves in your family too?"

To my surprise he shot me another glance, this time

filled with pride. "My people were slaves!" he announced, as if boasting of some great achievement.

"Surely not," I said, even more staggered. "There's no call for such modesty between good friends."

"Modesty? Why should I be modest?" He sounded astonished, as if I had said something strange.

"But you stated clearly that your people were slaves."

"So they were."

"And you're a college student..." I remained sceptical.

"Why shouldn't the son of slaves be a college student?" he retorted scornfully. "I dare say some of your ancestors were slaves too."

I leapt up as if lashed on the head, thinking this a fearful insult, and stepped over to confront him. "You think my ancestors the same as yours?" I glared at him furiously. "Not on your life! Let me tell you, my father had sixteen slaves, my grandfather eight, my great-grandfather four; and before that they had still more!" In fact I was uncertain about those earlier times. My great-great-grandfather may have been a small tradesman with no slaves; or the son of a slave, for all I knew. But I always liked to imagine him a high official with a fine mansion and a flock of concubines, as well as hundreds of slaves.

I may not have harped on it but I had certainly told people several times, "My ancestors were high officials." And now he had the nerve to call me — to my face — the descendant of slaves. I had never been so insulted in all my life. This was too much to take, I must get my own back. I glared at him balefully. But when our eyes met, his steely stare gradually calmed me down. I felt I owed him more deference in view of

the good turn he'd done me. I went back to my seat.

"Yes, I believe you there, because someone like you obviously comes from a slave-owning family. But someone like myself could never have been born in such a family. That's what I'm proud of." His manner was overbearing. He was obviously sneering at me.

Sure that envy had unhinged his mind, I couldn't help laughing.

His face blackened and he raised his hand as if to block out the sight of me. "What are you laughing at? Yes, I'm proud to be descended from slaves. Because our hearts are so closely linked together. . . . What do *you* know? Dreaming sweet dreams inside your warm quilt in this elegant room, what do *you* know about such things? . . . I wish I could open the eyes of people like you! . . . Yes, I'm the son of slaves, I don't deny it. I can proclaim it with pride. My father and mother were slaves, and my grandfather and great-grandfather before them. Going further back, there may never have been anyone in my family who wasn't a slave."

I thought he had surely gone mad and I had better trick him into leaving, before he made any trouble. But he went straight on:

"Yes, you have sixteen slaves. You're satisfied, happy and proud. But do you know how your slaves live? Can you tell me the story of just one of them? No, of course you can't.

"All right, let me tell you some stories. . . . My grandfather was a very loyal slave, I've never seen anyone more loyal. He worked hard in his master's house for nearly fifty years. As the son of a slave, he was put to work very young. His hair was grey as early as I can remember. We lived in a tumble-down shed

behind the house, my father, mother, grandfather and I. Not that mother often slept there, she was too busy waiting on the mistress and young ladies. I often saw grandfather cursed by the master and his sons. He flushed and accepted it with lowered head. In winter the wind shook the roof of our shed, icy air came through the crannies, and we were too cold to sleep with just a thin quilt on the hard plank bed. The three of us — I was just a child with my old grandfather and my father in his prime — used to go out to collect sticks, fallen leaves and straw to make a fire on the ground. As we squatted down to warm ourselves, grandfather's tongue would be loosened. He reminisced, then launched into a homily, urging me to be good and honest, to work faithfully for the master the way he did. Goodness would meet with its reward, he said. My father wasn't much of a talker. By the time grandfather ended his lecture the fire would have died down and it would be late, time for the three of us to go to bed, huddling closely together through the cold night.

“Grandfather's reward came at last. One summer morning we woke to find him gone, and later he was discovered hanging dead from a branch of the locust tree in the garden. Mother wouldn't let me have a last look at his face, and his corpse was quickly disposed of, laid out on a wooden board, the top half covered with a mat. All I saw was his big, dirty feet. So that was my last sight of my grandfather.

“Why had he hung himself? The reason was said to be simple: the day before, the master had discovered the loss of some valuables and accused him of stealing them. Grandfather had protested his loyalty — he would never dream of robbing his master. But for this he

had his ears boxed and was roundly abused, ordered to make good the loss. Grandfather was very ashamed and felt he'd let his master down by failing to win his trust and repay him for his kindness. This made him wretched. Besides, after slaving away all those years he hadn't a cent put by to pay for the loss. So after nearly fifty years of faithful service he hung himself with his own belt on the locust tree. That was his 'reward'.

"Though the whole household pitied him, they took it for granted that he was the thief. So I was not only the son of a slave but the grandson of a thief. However, I didn't believe my grandfather had stolen anything. That wouldn't have been in character. He was a good man. Most evenings my father cradled me in his arms and very soon dozed off, tired out after a day's hard work. But I couldn't sleep that night for thinking of my grandfather. At the thought of his kindly face, tears blurred my eyes. I suddenly felt I was in his arms and hugged him, sobbing, 'Grandad, I don't believe you ever stole anything. The thief must have been someone else.'

" 'What's that you're saying, Little Ox?' I recognized my father's voice. Born in the Year of the Ox, my pet-name was Little Ox. I wiped my eyes but my father — it was he who was sleeping beside me — had seen the tears. I burst out crying so that he couldn't sleep. In tears himself, he tried to comfort me, saying, 'You're right, Little Ox. Your grandad never stole anything. I know who the real thief was.' Clutching his arm, I begged him to tell me, and after some hesitation he said with a sigh, 'All right, if you promise not to tell anyone else.' I promised, not that a child's word counts

for much, and so he finally told me bitterly, 'It was the elder young master. Your grandad knew that. You mustn't let on to a soul. Your grandad was willing to give his life to cover up for him, so I can't tell the truth. He's dead and gone now, and if I were to speak out no one would believe me. It would land us in trouble too. . . .'

Peng paused before adding with a wry smile, "I'm telling you the gist of what my father said, not the actual words. But I'm sure I've not left out anything important. You mustn't think I'm making this up."

I nodded in silence and let him continue, "I didn't understand my father's reason, but I was afraid to ask any further questions. Still I missed my grandfather and cried for him.

"I still had my parents and we loved each other. After my grandfather's death my father always looked anxious and very seldom smiled.

"One evening — by then it was winter — my father and I were trying to warm up beside a fire indoors when there was a sudden commotion outside, and someone shouted, 'Help, help!' In fright I flung myself into my father's arms, my hands tightly round his neck. He whispered, 'Don't be afraid. Dad's here.' Then there was silence outside. But before very long someone came to tell my father that the master wanted him. He was away so long that I felt scared all alone there. Then he came back with my mother, both of them weeping. He held me in his arms, shaking with sobs, and spoke despairingly to my mother. That night the three of us slept clinging to each other. I didn't fully understand what my parents said. All I remember is this, 'Better let me die. What's the use of my living on?'