

CONTEMPORARY CHINESE WOMEN WRITERS

Apart
from
Love



Chi Li



Foreign Languages Press

Panda Books

This collection introduces five short stories by the popular woman writer Chi Li. Set in the large industrial city of Wuhan in Hubei Province, the stories focus on the lives of young people as they deal with questions of love and marriage, and everyday problems such as job-hunting, housing, family planning and bringing up children. The detailed and earthy descriptions conjure up a vivid picture of life in China today.

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作者 池莉

译者 王明杰等

责任编辑 陈海燕 李芳

封面设计 唐少文

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Chi Li, born in Hubei Province in 1957, is the founder of the “Neo-realistic Group” and is one of the most popular writers in China today. She has worked as a nurse and an editor of a literary magazine before taking up writing as a fulltime occupation. A national award winner, she has written a great number of stories, many of which have a growing foreign readership.

Editors' Note

WHEN the Cultural Revolution came to an end in 1976, especially after 1978 when China adopted the policy of reform and opening to the outside world, one tidal wave of creative writing after another has washed over the face of Chinese literature. Chinese women writers have added their indelible inscriptions to this New Age Literature. Their works present a good cross-section of life in China. Among these writers are Shen Rong, Wang Anyi, Zhang Jie, Cheng Naishan, Tie Ning, Lu Xing'er, Chi Li, Zhang Xin, Fang Fang, Chi Zijian, and Bi Shumin, to name only a few.

The late 1970s and the early 1980s was a period of literary renaissance, thanks to the relaxed political climate and growing democracy in China. Many women writers emerged, dealing with all kinds of subject matters and attracting widespread attention. The school of "wound literature" took shape, which mainly focuses on people's lives during and after the Cultural Revolution. Shen Rong's "At Middle Age" raises the problems of middle-aged professionals, who enter the new age with marks left on them by the Cultural Revolution and who have to divide their time between career and family and more often than not neglect

one or the other. Cheng Naishan, perceptive, objective, penetrating, and compassionate, captivates her readers with stories about the lives and loves, the destinies and the emotional entanglements of the industrial and business families of China's metropolis, a class which has weathered political vicissitudes before and during the Cultural Revolution. "The Blue House," her representative work, is one such story describing the turmoil going through the Gu family, the former steel giant in Shanghai who owned the Blue House.

Women writers were truthful spokesmen for the youth who suffered during the Cultural Revolution. Problems of the young people of the time were frankly dealt with, such as their disrupted education; lack of interesting employment; the difficulties met with by boys and girls sent from town to the countryside; the low incomes and overcrowding which threaten to break up young couples' marriages; their mental confusion after the turbulent years in which traditions were thrown overboard and bureaucracy, nepotism and corruption were rampant. Zhang Jie's "Love Must Not Be Forgotten" had aroused considerable interest as well as much controversy. Boldly unconventional, idealistic and intensely romantic, the story sheds interesting light on the changes in the attitude to love in socialist China, still strongly influenced by feudal ideas about marriage at the time.

While reform was still dawning on the Chinese horizon, Zhang Jie captured the historic social changes of this mood of reform in her important novel, "Leaden Wings." First published in 1981 and an instant bestseller, the story has as its central theme the modernization of industry. The publication of this book aroused further controversy. Exposing various abuses and man-made obstacles to modernization, it came under fire for

"attacking socialism." But many readers welcomed it as painting a truthful picture of modern Chinese society of the time.

In the mid-1980s, seeking out and examining the roots of Chinese culture became the dominant trend, hence the term "root literature." Leading this trend was Wang Anyi's novella "Xiaobao Village," which dissects the rights and wrongs of traditional moral values by portraying what happens behind closed doors in a tiny village that is generally extolled as a paragon of humanity and justice. The author's rich choice of language and her profound grasp of the cultural life and nature of people in a small village, places "Xiaobao Village" on a par with Ah Cheng's "The Chess Master" and Han Shaogong's "Father."

Wang Anyi, who represents the writers whose formal education was disrupted by the Cultural Revolution knows from first-hand experience the problems of young people who have returned from communes to the cities. In her stories, a sense of humanism appears. She is not one simply to condemn or write off the 10 years of her generation lost because of the Cultural Revolution. In her creative world, authentic human feelings live through the traumatic days of the Cultural Revolution. They are perpetuated along with—perhaps in tandem with—the old class relations, with all their old prejudices, suspicions, and tolerances, too. Wang Anyi analyzes China with an imagination that seems nourished by both pre-revolutionary and post-revolutionary culture. Her stories are alive with such tensions and contrasts. Her stories "Lapse of Time" and "The Destination" have won literary prizes in China.

In the late 1980s, Neo-realism came in vogue in Chinese fiction, of which Chi Li, author of "Trials and Tribulations," and Fang Fang, who wrote "Landscape," are both hailed as found-

ing members.

Chi Li is an active writer on the Chinese literary scene. Her stories, like the above-mentioned "Trials and Tribulations" and "Apart from Love," mostly focus on the female world, their love and marriage, though her attitude has nothing to do with feminism. The detailed and earthy descriptions conjure up a vivid picture of life in the late 1980s.

Fang Fang began by writing humorous stories, which are 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 she later changed her style again. She is sort of unpredictable, constantly surprising readers and critics because she does not confine herself to a certain style. One of the most popular female writers in present-day China, she is best known for her stories about urban life, with characters ranging from intellectuals to laborers. Her "Landscape" depicts the relationships between an illiterate docker and his nine children, and the hardships they endure in a raw struggle to survive.

During the transitional 1990s, New Age Literature came to an end. The transformation of social and economic patterns in China has given rise to multiple literary patterns with writers of various pursuits locked in a keenly contested competition. The principle of literature has changed from serving life to serving man's existence, and from presenting people's aspirations for life and the historical destiny of collectives to depicting ordinary people's existence in this world. Works by women writers started to describe the petty vexations of people working to earn and survive in the mundane world. Neo-realism, first appearing in the late 1980s and represented by Chi Li and Fang Fang, has developed to a new height. Chi Li's relatively recent stories, "To and Fro"

and "Life Show," have presented a vivid, realistic picture of the life of women in the fast-changing Chinese society. Bi Shumin, a doctor-turned woman writer, focuses on specific social and economic phenomena, revealing the contradictions in modern society and the true nature of man in the face of the social and economic reforms in China. But her works don't just stop there. Her novella "An Appointment with Death" and full-length novel *The Red Prescription* aim for a broader philosophical meaning beyond the superficial implications of subjects like hospice care, life and death, drug use and rehabilitation.

Today, China's relaxed political climate and growing democracy have resulted in more truthful writing and a wider range of themes. Love, social injustice, the value of the individual, humanism and other subjects formerly taboo are being fearlessly tackled by women writers—often with an unabashed display of emotion.

As editors, we hope that this series of women writers' works, compiled and published by Foreign Languages Press, will open a door to the world of Chinese women writers and to the everyday life of ordinary Chinese, for our readers who are interested in Chinese literature and China as well.

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Apart from Love

SCALPELS apart, it was sport that fascinated Zhuang Jianfei most. Although he was always a loser no matter what ball games he might play, he was great at being a spectator, and such an expert that he corrected the misjudgment of a first-rate international referee or point out the inexperience of a coach.

He had been watching sporting events ever since he was in his mother's womb. Back then it was merely his mother's courtesy towards his father, but he seemed to have benefited from this antenatal education. The past thirty years had convinced him that he and sport had some kind of special relationship. A sports field was invariably the scene of bustling activity, full of vigour and vitality, free from polished deception or affectation; full of strength and beauty and fierce competition. Here the wisdom of fighting was pooled without the commonplaces of life. It was the distillation of life itself. Could a man really be called a man if he was not crazy about sport?

So before today, it was beyond Zhuang Jianfei's wildest thoughts that he would miss the Uber Cup women's badminton final and the Thomas Cup men's. He simply had to watch an international-level final if a Chinese team was involved. The

whole surgical department and then the entire hospital had learned about this passion of his over the six years he had worked here. The department head avoided putting him on night duty if there was an important sports event that evening. Just like this time.

Mr Zeng was a doctor-in-charge, known as the second scalpel in the surgical department. He was in his early fifties with clear fair skin and good taste in clothes. In recent years his heart had been playing up so he had given up watching games despite his habitual craving. He was now forced to place all his hopes on explanations and outcome. He thought China's sport announcer Song Shixiong's voice was too sharp, he was too passionate and the words he used were often inappropriate. Zhuang Jianfei, then, had become his ideal guide. It so happened that afterwards Zhuang loved to ponder over a match with somebody. And so young and old had formed a perfect team. Before leaving work today, Dr Zeng waited for Zhuang Jianfei at the bottom of the stairs. "See you tomorrow, Dr Zhuang," he said. Zhuang Jianfei replied with their mutual understanding, "Yes, tomorrow."

If it hadn't been for the Uber Cup final that evening, they would not have bothered to say anything. As colleagues who saw each other every day, they might at most have said "Hi".

As usual, Zhuang Jianfei's wife Ji Ling had their dinner ready. What was different was that Zhuang Jianfei did not pace around the dinner table rolling up his sleeves and commenting: "Hey, great food!" He kept looking at the clock.

Before they finished the meal, the game began. Putting down his bowl, Zhuang Jianfei seated himself in front of the TV set in

the lounge.

The final was between China and Korea. As everyone knew, this small country Korea, in just a few years, had sprung into the sports world like a hungry tiger down from a mountain, as if wishing to swallow the whole world. This game would be a bloody battle.

The first women's singles player for the Chinese team was Li Lingwei. She looked somewhat sluggish. The announcer explained that this queen of the world badminton circles had just suffered from several days of high fever. Patting the back of his chair, Zhuang Jianfei all of a sudden broke into a sweat. Sure enough, Li Lingwei lost the first set. "Too bad!" Zhuang Jianfei shouted at the screen. The team doctor must have sneaked into his position through a back door, a fellow who was interested only in going abroad and gaining some foreign currency. How come he could not even cure a high fever? He should have given her an infusion of sylvite. How could she get the strength otherwise?

Fortunately Li Lingwei kept up appearances after all. She won the second and the third sets and gained one precious point for China.

Zhuang Jianfei wiped his sweat with his hand and welcomed the second women's singles player Han Aiping with warm applause. He sensed a redoubled feeling of empathy towards all players from Hubei Province as if he was related by blood. Great! Han Aiping was tough and well seasoned. She beat a small young Korean girl with a sure hand in almost no time. Since she had won the first and the second sets, there was no need to play the third.

China's third women's singles player was the new talent Gu

Jiaming, A little girl from Hubei again. Zhuang Jianfei could not help feeling inspired with enthusiasm.

Before Gu Jiaming entered the court, Zhuang Jianfei's wife Ji Ling without any warning stepped squarely in front of the screen.

"I bet you Gu Jiaming will win!"

She did not move aside.

"What's the matter with you?"

Zhuang Jianfei did not realize until this moment that his wife looked extremely serious. He hoped that nothing would go wrong, particularly at a time like this. With a hopeful smile to head off a disaster, he said,

"Come on! Sit here and watch the game with me. My mother always does with my father."

"I am not your mother," said Ji Ling.

Zhuang Jianfei found it impossible to go on smiling.

"Well. The third round of singles has started."

Turning her head away, Ji Ling stood there firm and erect.

Zhuang Jianfei demanded, "Please step aside."

Ji Ling just turned her head in another direction.

"Ji Ling, I request you step aside!"

"Great!" the announcer exclaimed in high excitement behind Ji Ling.

Ji Ling gave a smile and swayed a bit. The TV went off with a crackle.

"What are you doing!" Zhuang Jianfei jumped up.

"Turning off the TV."

"Who asked you to?"

"No need for me to ask anybody for approval."

"You really are being unreasonable!"

"Who's unreasonable? If you just try to remember, you'll realize that you have looked at nothing but the clock ever since you entered this house. I haven't said anything. I've been working in the kitchen all the time. I've been waiting for you to ask me."

"Ask you what?"

Zhuang Jianfei quickly searched his memory. There seemed nothing to ask. All was normal. He continued: "I don't remember needing to ask anything. If so, please remind me. Now quickly turn the TV on."

Shaking her head sadly, Ji Ling closed her eyes. When she opened them again they were brimming with tears. "No! I won't!" she shouted at him, her voice full of grievance.

Zhuang Jianfei seized her arm and tried to drag her aside while Ji Ling, struggling to hold her ground, kicked him.

The TV was now turned on. Gu Jiaming smashed a beautiful killing smash. The announcer exclaimed again, "Wonderful!"

Ji Ling rushed at the TV and pressed the button with all her strength. Zhuang Jianfei followed and clasped her around her chest. Ji Ling scratched her husband with her sharp varnished nails. In an instant, she had won. She had occupied the TV set, her hair dishevelled like a lion. She was crying: "Well! You've come to blows! You've hit me, Zhuang Jianfei, you son of a whore!"

Staggering back a few steps in astonishment, Zhuang Jianfei stared at his wife as if she were some apparition. This was certainly not the Ji Ling he had been in love with for two years and married to for half a year. His Ji Ling was the studious pure sweetheart from whose mouth no dirty words had been ever heard. At this awkward moment, he even felt like laughing. The magical change made him feel cheated. But who had cheat-

ed him? Who had ever cheated him?

Beating her chest with fists, Ji Ling continued to yell tearfully: "Hit me. Hit me here if you have the guts! Go on, beat me to death. You are a damned cowardly bastard if you don't dare!"

Zhuang Jianfei had gripped a cup in his hand.

This cup was part of a high-quality imported coffee set, jade green in colour with an exotic design. The past came clearly into view. It had been the day just before their wedding. Braving heavy rain, the two of them ran around all over the three towns of Wuhan in search of a coffee set to their liking. They were disappointed and tired as they dragged their way into a shop to take a breather. It happened to be a newly opened wholesale store and up there on the shelf this translucent jade green coffee set sparkled with lustre. Both of them spontaneously uttered "Oh" and pointing, said, "Let's get it!"

They bought it. Each cup cost 8.99 yuan. Neither of them hesitated or minded about the high price.

Ever since then the coffee set had been cherished.

Zhuang Jianfei raised the cup and smashed it against the floor. Amidst the sound of breaking, to his great satisfaction, he heard Ji Ling's voice shrieking sharper than broken glass:

"Ah! You son of a bitch!"

The Bank of China was a lofty Western-style building made of huge blocks of rock. Zhuang Jianfei climbed to the top of its stairs this June evening. He sat down heavily and finished five ice lollies at one go. After having re-evaluated his marriage, he cool-headedly discovered the basic reason why he had wanted to get married. That was: sex.