

Contemporary Chinese Women Writers

The Blue House



Cheng Naishan



Foreign Languages Press

Panda Books

Cheng Naishan captivates her readers with stories about the lives of the Shanghai capitalists who have weathered thirty years of political vicissitudes, as well as the lives and thinking of their children. "The Blue House" is one such story describing the turmoils going through Gu Chuanhui's mind when he learns that his grandfather is Gu Fuxiang, the former steel giant in Shanghai who owned the Blue House. "The Poor Street" tells how a young teacher tries hard to overcome her timidity and helps the people living in a former poor street who, although well-off materially now, remain poor culturally. Through the depiction of family life and romance, Cheng Naishan skilfully brings out the life and paradoxes of Shanghai, China's largest metropolis .

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Cheng Naishan was born in Shanghai in 1946. She graduated from the English Department of Shanghai's Education Institute and taught as an English teacher in one of Shanghai's middle schools.

In 1979 her first work, "The Song Mother Taught Me to Sing", was published in *Shanghai Literature* and she has so far published dozens of short stories.

In 1982, a collection of her stories, *The Death of the Swan*, was published by the Jiangsu People's Press. In September 1983 she joined the Shanghai Writers Association. She has been a professional writer since 1985.

In the winter of 1990, she went to Hong Kong and settled down there. She's now a member of the Hong Kong Writers Council.

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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The Blue House

1

“DUE to the war in Europe in 1914, there was virtually no pig iron available for importation. Mr Gu Fuxiang had a large stockpile of pig iron, and by selling off the hoarded material at the suddenly skyrocketing prices, the distinguished Mr Gu Fuxiang became one of the richest industrialists in Shanghai overnight... Mr Gu had three sons. The eldest, Gu Hongzhi, following his father's instructions, went to America to study economics in order to further develop the family business. The second son, Gu Hongfei, became so dissatisfied with his family that he ran a notice in the newspaper publicly disowning his father. Gu Hongji, the third son, is currently pursuing studies at Xuhui College, where he is reportedly majoring in metallurgy... After the war with Japan, the Gu family's Huachang Steel Plant continued to expand and prosper, and today the Gu clan is considered the 'Steel Giant' of southeast Asia... The Gu estate is located in the French Concession, and the Gu mansion was designed by the German architect Burger. The exterior of the building is covered with blue tiling, and the interior is equally impressive, with the washrooms and kitchen fitted out with

American and British imported equipment. It is known in Shanghai as the 'Blue House'."

The library was closing, and Gu Chuanhui had to tear himself reluctantly from the yellowed 1946 edition of *A Narrative History of Shanghai Commerce*. Several lines in particular stayed with him even after he closed the book: "The second son, Gu Hongfei, became so dissatisfied with his family that he ran a notice in the newspaper publicly disowning his father." Intense feelings of anger and self-pity welled up within. By pure chance he had discovered that he himself was a descendent of this famous family. And "The second son, Gu Hongfei," was his very own father! To think that he had never heard a thing about this illustrious and once influential clan to which he belonged. Father had never said a word about it all these years. Incredible! But all the book could offer was those few lines, far from satisfactory.

He walked out of the municipal library and into the never-ceasing noise and ever-pressing crowds of Nanjing Road. "The second son, Gu Hongfei . . . disowning his father." The words trailed behind him like a ghost as he walked out of the building. For the first time in twenty-seven years he was unhappy with his family, with himself.

Chuanhui was born on the ninth day of the first lunar month, a most auspicious day, so it was said—the birthday of the Jade Emperor himself! He was indeed blessed with good luck; there was no denying that. His parents had worked hard all their lives and were the epitome of cautiousness; they had adroitly dodged one political movement after another and had managed to live in

relative peace in spite of the "storm of class struggle" that raged around them. And although his father had been criticized some during the "cultural revolution" (he now realized that it must have been connected to the fame of the Gu clan), his home suffered nothing compared to others; many families had been smashed or exiled. His family had been left intact and mostly at peace, and Chuanhui had to admit his good fortune. Moreover, being an only child he was spared the physical and mental anguish of those sent to the countryside during those nightmarish years; according to the policy an only child was given a menial government job near home. Menial government jobs—selling wheat cakes or sweeping the streets—were hardly the best jobs in the world, but at that time people's expectations were not high, and just the chance to stay in your home town would have made most people happy. But when word came that the boy would be given work at a cooked meat store, his middle school teacher father and nurse mother were far from content. The neighbours good-naturedly reminded the distressed parents that the pay was not all that bad, and besides, such a well-placed son might help them all get hold of some hard to come by food items; but the couple could find nothing to laugh at in the situation. It was not that the parents looked down on such a profession; it was just that they were afraid that after a few months the boy would turn into someone as slippery and ambitionless as those greasy youths in the store. Even in the days of Zhang Tiesheng's blank test paper, * the parents had made their son fill

* Zhang Tiesheng: During the "cultural revolution" this young man turned in an empty sheet of paper for his college entrance exam and later wrote an essay explaining that he was too busy making revolution to learn anything academic.

a page with calligraphy and study at least a few lines of English each night. Until he had been officially assigned his job, there had seemed to be some hope, but once stuck in a cooked meat store what kind of future could he possibly have? But any man who shares his birthday with the Jade Emperor has got a lucky star higher than the sky itself! After he had worked at the cooked meat store only two months, the college entrance examinations were reinstituted. Thanks to the solicitous coaching of his parents during those difficult times, Chuanhui had become an excellent student, and so with little effort he was able to bid farewell to the store and enter university.

After college he was assigned to the instrument and metre factory. The sight of him sitting there in his laboratory looking stylish in his white lab coat brought immense relief to the parents who had worried so much about him.

Life had indeed been good to him, and he was even endowed with each of his parents better physical features. He had the high forehead, tall stature, and strong, handsome features of his father, and from his mother he inherited thick eyebrows that shadowed sharp and lively eyes. A peaceful and cultured family life gave him a quick mind and sensitive soul. Simply put, he was a very likeable young man. If you had to find a fault, you could say his forehead was a little too shiny and a bit delicate looking or maybe that his complexion was a little too fair for that of a man. Perhaps he lacked the strength of character one hoped to find in a man. But that would be nitpicking. No one who knew him was bothered in the least by any minor frailty, and all the girls found him adorable. While he was still in middle school, the neighbours used to joke with his mother, "Boys are

much sought after these days. Good boys are hard to find you know, and a fellow as well-mannered and well-behaved as your son can take his pick when the time comes to find a girl! Girls'll be fighting over him!" The words were true enough. The "Unite the majority!" slogan came around in the early 70s, and intellectuals were denounced. Yet, they were like "stinking bean curd". Stinking, maybe, but good to eat. By then the capitalist families had lost their attraction. High ranking cadres' families were out of reach to most marriageable youths, and besides, the way politics was swinging back and forth, they were not the best investment for a sound future. As for the families of the "Five Reds" *, they were just a bit too crude. So an intellectual family with sound finances suddenly became the ideal for the average citizen looking for a spouse.

All this could not help but give Chuanhui a sense of superiority. He moved with ease and confidence in public, especially with other young people. And he was equally confident—actually coldly calculating—when it came to romance. He held off till his last year of college before making any commitments, then finally made his move on an attractive girl with the latest hairstyle from the foreign language department. Her clothes were always stylish and never old-fashioned. She could swim, play tennis, and play the piano expertly. She was just the kind of girl he was looking for, but she was strangely indifferent to Chuanhui's attention. Finally, she rejected him altogether. Not long after he found out that every weekend the girl was met at the school gate by a short, stumpy fellow built something like a gourd who would whisk her away on his motorbike. This gourd had nothing

* Five Reds: workers, peasants, soldiers, students, and pedlars.

on Chuanhui as far as he could tell. He was more than a little shocked when he found out that this gourd's father was a big shop owner who handed his son 50,000 yuan the moment the policy of refunding businessmen was carried out. This defeat in his first romantic campaign punched a large hole in his ego, but he learned the lesson that circumstances can change rapidly for anyone, and that his time as "The Most Favoured One Under Heaven" had drawn to a close.

Circumstances can change dramatically, and so can people. Take Xiao Zhu, a fellow that did odd jobs around Chuanhui's lab, for example. The boy had spent five difficult years labouring in the countryside before finally returning to the city to take his mother's job when she retired. It was said that Xiao Zhu's father had jumped aboard a ship years ago and had not been heard of since. His mother had worked hard for years to eke out an existence for herself and her only son. Having a poor family and low-level job had left the boy with a deep inferiority complex, and everyone who saw him felt sorry for him. He could hardly whack up the courage to speak to the young men his age, much less girls. But a person's fate can often turn round overnight; the mysterious missing father was found. He had a business in West Germany, and Xiao Zhu was able to contact him. At that point Xiao Zhu's personality changed completely. The change was even more dramatic when the father came to Shanghai last year and bought Xiao Zhu a new apartment out at the Overseas Chinese Development. He suddenly became obnoxious and arrogant and spent the day roaring back and forth on his new Suzuki motorcycle, beeping his infernal horn till the heavens were about to split. He was well equipped electronically: an electronic watch, an electric lighter, an electronic calcu-