

**GEMS OF MODERN
CHINESE LITERATURE**

THE BUTTERFLY

AND OTHER SELECTED WRITINGS



WANG MENG

**TRANSLATED BY
DANIS MAIR**



FOREIGN LANGUAGES PRESS



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Contents

An Acquaintance with Wang Meng for Readers Overseas	001
The Butterfly	014
The Strain of Meeting	091
The Lovesick Crow and Other Fables	248
Not as Good as Hot and Sour Soup and Others	259
Winter Rain	268
Happy Stories	272
A Dream of the Sea	286
Ah, Mohammed Ahmed	300
Unique Features of Literary Writing	335
The Jacket in the Bottom of the Trunk	355
Autobiographical Note	363

An Acquaintance with Wang Meng for Readers Overseas

The pleasant opportunity of introducing Wang Meng to readers overseas has fallen to me. I like to think of Wang Meng as an old friend, not because of the length of time I've known him, but because I have been an enthusiastic reader of his work for quite some time.

I first saw Wang Meng's writing in 1956, when I read a story that people practically knew verbatim at the time, but that was soon marked as a "poisonous weed"—"The Young Newcomer in the Organization Department." The year of 1956 was noteworthy in the history of China's new literature. In that year a large group of home-grown young Chinese writers emerged, bringing a morning freshness to the literary scene, and splashing it with bright colors. The power to touch readers' hearts remains undiminished even now in some of the writings published then, such as "At the Bridge Construction Site" by Liu Binyan, "The Election" by Liu Guowen, and "The Ormosia Bean of Love" by

Zong Pu. Of course "The Young Newcomer in the Organization Department" belongs on the list. Stories in this vein drew on a wide range of materials and touched on facets of life rarely seen in earlier writings. Such stories reflected newly growing rifts in the social fabric of our young nation, and they did so in remarkably mature form, as the fruition of a compelling new aesthetic. They should be numbered among the literary master-pieces produced in our country since its founding. What a sad misfortune that in 1957, with the escalation of the Anti-Rightist Campaign, many writers were mistakenly branded as Rightists! These stories and the men who wrote them became targets of abuse; Wang Meng and his writings did not get off easily. The literature of an era was lost in obscurity for twenty years, right up until 1979, when some stories were "revived to bloom anew" before the eyes of other readers.

Among this crop of stories, the one that stirred me most was "The Young Newcomer in the Organization Department." This story left me with intense feelings. The feelings got through to me, probably because the author and the main characters in the story, Lin Zhen and Zhao Huiwen, were my contemporaries, and all of us lived through comparable experiences. Wang Meng and the protagonists of his stories represent the progressive youth of that generation, a generation that grew up in a time of terrific turmoil. They threw themselves with all the zeal of their political precocity into the cause they thought was right. They were ready at any moment to lay their lives on the line for their beliefs. In short, they boldly sounded a funeral knell for the old China and beat the drums that hastened the birth of the new China. "The Young Newcomer in the Organization Department" moves us most of all because it unabashedly reveals the ideas and states of mind particular to that generation. It expresses their selfless daring, so worthy of our admiration, but it does not conceal their immaturity and impetuosity. They were too young, after all. They were only fourteen or fifteen when politics sucked them into its whirlpool. Their strengths and weaknesses interwove to make them sensitive, upright, and passionate in their hatred of wrongdoing. Having no tolerance

for unsound or unreasonable things, they made stringent demands on others to be rid of such things, and they made the same demands on themselves. When the time came that their ideals collided with reality, a tragedy had to happen. This is the tragedy of the fictional characters Lin Zhen and Zhao Huiwen, and it is also the tragedy of Wang Meng's own life.

After incurring criminal penalties, Wang Meng sank to the lowest level of society. For more than twenty years he lived together with dirt-poor farmers and herdsmen in Hebei and Xinjiang. The rude lessons of life were profound for an idealist like Wang Meng. He gradually realized that ideals are transitional aims that people pursue and hope for, but they cannot be reached by simply waving our arms and raising a rallying cry. Ideals are not just yearnings for a beautiful life: they are beliefs to be made real by grounding oneself in labor and struggling through a hundred adversities. He touched on this in a letter he wrote me in 1980, containing these lines:

"Even if millions and millions of Lin Zhens and Zhong Yichengs (protagonists in his stories) appeared, could they really provide enough impetus for the socialist modernization of China? When childishness and naivete are carried beyond the age proper to such attributes, they lose their charm. And when childishness and naivete are used to cope with uncompromising real-life problems, they can turn into crimes... What is maturity? It usually has to do with complexity: the adult outlook has a greater complexity than that of children. Reminiscences of childhood may lull us with their grace, but if we confront the convoluted reality, we see a world that has grown extremely complex and is getting more so every day." I think these lines will be of help in understanding the writer that Wang Meng later became.

Since picking up his pen again in 1978, Wang Meng has been writing pieces of greatly different characters. The change in depth of his understanding is apparent. Of course change is also apparent in his way of handling a story, due to his constant experiments with technique. But no matter how many changes his writing goes through, no matter what it develops into, it always shows flashes of the youthful

ideals of "The Young Newcomer in the Organization Department." Often as if in spite of himself he betrays fond memories of his younger years—a time he looks back on with pride. Even now, despite the broadened scope of scene and character gleaned from, as he puts it, "travelling up and down this land, through thirty years of wind and rain," he is most at home when writing about the hopeful people who made their entry into society at the time he did, and are now getting gray about the temples.

For me, the elusive melody of a generation's hopes is a theme that, once grasped, serves as a key to Wang Meng's writings, though he himself would not admit it and would probably deny it. When talking of his own writing, he goes as far as to relegate any fixation on ideals to a past that will never return. His fiction, to be sure, has taken on greater ambiguity. The passionate pursuit of ideals that filled "The Young Newcomer" and "Long Live Youth" seems to have grown fainter, or has at least been removed from a central position. There is more bringing of darker elements out in the open, things that are an apparently absurd jumble of the old and the new, laughable yet deplorable. On the surface this new tendency bears no relation to the tone of his earlier work, and even seems antagonistic to it, yet giving it some thought one discovers a certain connection between the two. The latter tendency expresses an attitude of ridicule and disapproval of the grotesque, the absurd and the freakish. Is it not likely that such an attitude grows out of the earlier pursuit of truth and beauty? I am not manufacturing this opinion for the sake of argument. An overview of materials he has published in recent years, with their radical departures in tone from earlier works, will show what connections exist.

In some of his recent works, the blood relation to his earlier writing is apparent without analysis. Examples are "The Most Precious Thing" and two pieces selected for this anthology—"Dream of the Sea" and "The Jacket at the Bottom of the Trunk." He wrote "The Most Precious Thing" when he was just re-emerging as a writer, and putting matters frankly, it is a rather hidebound short story. Nevertheless, in terms of Wang Meng's development as a writer, it is

a transitional piece, drawing on earlier work and opening the way for something more. The title encapsulates the central theme of the story, which condemns in sharp words and righteous tones the inhuman acts committed during the ten-year course of the Cultural Revolution by certain people who betrayed their friends and sacrificed others to save themselves. These were the very people who called on others to stand up for the truth whatever the cost, and to lay their lives on the line without fear. They called for an unyielding spirit of truth and justice, which was what marked the thought of Lin Zhen and Zhong Yicheng.

“Dream of the Sea” and “The Jacket at the Bottom of the Trunk” were written after new avenues of thought had opened for the author; they broke through the shell of form that he had handled proficiently in the past. The demands of content made a breakthrough necessary: he needed a torrent in which to pour forth the experience and feeling of a once aspiring generation. The form he settled on was subjective and lyrical. He poised his main characters—Miu Keyan in “Dream of the Sea” and Li Shan in “The Jacket at the Bottom of the Trunk”—at the very moment when “bitterness is gone and sweetness comes” and allowed them to vent the sentiments that had lain dormant in their minds for twenty years: the concern for the future that knew no bounds, the anguish, the awakening to certain truths about life, and the hopes they still treasured deep in their hearts. The sea and the violet brocade jacket are emblematic. With the best years of his life already past, Miu Keyan finally gets his first long-awaited glimpse of the ocean, at which he cannot help but sigh, “After what I’ve been through, my head has grown white like you, whitecaps! Too late, too late.” But still, at the end, he cannot hold back the cry: “Sea, I—love—you!” This heart-rending cry is not just directed at the sea: it is the voice of a resolute generation whose aspirations remain as yet unfulfilled. A still more complex mixture of feelings wells up in Li Shan at the sight of the violet brocade jacket, a reminder of what was to have been the joy and blessedness of her youth. She regrets that it never got the attention it should have, never contributed to its owner’s appearance. Its chance was missed; it was put away to grow uselessly old. She cherishes it with

a special fondness, and even wants to help make up for what it missed. She makes a formal gesture of giving it to her future daughter-in-law. This is Wang Meng's way of bringing out the question of how aims and ideas can be passed from generation to generation, though they must change ceaselessly. He feels that a "pretty piece of clothing" cannot "serve as a reminder of youth and love for two different generations." Though the jacket has grown old for nothing, Li Shan feels that she has passed through the trials of the years as best she could, and so sees "no need for resentment and regret, not to speak of envying the lot of others." The best thing is to let the jacket "change with the elements, fleetingly, in the depths of the heart." For me these lines are a capsule statement of what experience has taught Wang Meng. They are a recognition, gained by weathering the storms of history, of our aims and fervor, our completed and never-to-be-completed tasks, and the change of aims from one generation to the next. From the tumult that brought his personal fortunes first to ruin and then to prosperity, Wang Meng has learned equanimity. Gone is the drive that knew no caution. Even the tension in "The Most Precious Thing" is gone. Wang Meng had to pass through a raging tempest and then bask in a gentle breeze before he could arrive at this quiet maturity. Still, quiet as he appears on the surface, something speaks to us of a true heart that has not changed within. Stories like these are the windows of Wang Meng's spirit. In recent years, Wang Meng has done his utmost to conceal his feelings in his writing, avoiding the confessional urge. These few stories came about because he could not hold himself back, and it is precisely in this that they convey the author's emotions so faithfully.

Wang Meng has another vein of stories which we can identify by the pains he has taken to seek out something new, both in form and content. These are stories that could only be crafted by hard thought. They are his personal favorites, and they have stirred enthusiastic response among his readers. Typical of such works are the novellas "Butterfly" and "The Strain of Meeting", included in this anthology. The short stories "Sounds of Spring" and "Kite Streamers" not included in this book are also of this type. These stories do not adopt

the confessional manner of earlier stories, nor are they confined by a protagonist's nostalgia for youth gone by. They put other techniques to work and touch other areas of experience. New kinds of characters are brought forth to embody a fuller range of ideas. But no matter what gaily colored forms they take, a common purpose informs these stories. They tell us that just as Antaeus could not leave Mother Earth, individuals cannot separate themselves from the people, and ultimately they cannot turn away from their original beliefs. Once you distance yourself from the people, no advancement at home or success abroad will keep an irremediable emptiness from overtaking your spirit. Is there not a common thread joining this message with the one expressed in "The Young Newcomer in the Organization Department" and "Dream of the Sea"?

"Butterfly" has already gotten quite a response overseas. This is partly due to bold departures from narrative convention—such as reworking the temporal order, darting back and forth in space and shifting the central characters—but it is also because of the strongly Oriental quality of its revolutionary idealism. Perhaps readers overseas are especially attracted to the spirit of self-examination that persists in the midst of cataclysm. At the beginning of the Cultural Revolution the main character Zhang Siyuan is sent down to a rural village. In one day he is transformed from a deputy department head to just another peasant. Ten years later, with the conclusion of the Cultural Revolution, he goes from being "Old Zhang" to "Assistant Chief Zhang". Wang Meng puts him through several such wrenching reversals, until disillusionment comes like an awakening from a dream, leaving him unsure if he was Assistant Chief Zhang dreaming he was Old Zhang or Old Zhang dreaming he was Assistant Chief Zhang. No one can understand this state of mind who has not passed through sudden, dislocating changes—the kind of changes that turn your head around and addle your sense of direction.

This moment of confusion on awakening alludes to Zhuang Zi's dream of the butterfly. Some reviewers think Wang Meng's recent work shows clear signs of influence from the thought of Lao Zi and Zhuang

Zi, but I do not see sufficient evidence for this assertion. To me, his thought is formed by two major influences, the more important being the glowing revolutionary romanticism from early literature of the Soviet Union, and the other being an attitude toward life traditionally held by China's intellectuals—an attitude that stresses the search for a meaning to human existence, giving strict attention to self-discipline and always ready for self-examination. It is a broad-minded outlook born of a dialectical understanding of the fortunate and disastrous sides of human life. Of course during thirty long years there has been an ebb and flow in the two major currents that make up Wang Meng's thinking. The accumulation of years and experience, with all the individual and collective disasters along the way, has added to Wang Meng's depth of understanding. The latter element has gained some ground in Wang Meng's thinking. "Butterfly" is the most concentrated expression of his thought at this stage. By tracing the relationships of Zhang Siyuan with his first wife Hai Yun and with Qiu Wen—the woman doctor he eventually meets in the village—Wang Meng reflects Zhang Siyuan's and his own gradual recognition: romantic dreams conceived without regard to practical concerns will be smashed to pieces in the confrontation with cruel reality. Zhang was forced to plant his feet on the ground and think of how he might fit in with the pattern of unfolding events. Zhang's first love Hai Yun, a girl fresh out of middle school, is the epitome of the revolutionary romantic, naive and filled with the spirit of self-sacrifice. This is a character type which Wang Meng is partial to: he has portrayed a number of female characters in this vein, such as Zhao Huiwen of "The Newcomer," Zheng Bo in "Long Live Youth" and—a character born at almost the same time as Hai Yun—Xiao Ling of "Andante Cantabile." It is worth pointing out that in early stories he forgot all restraint in singing the praises of such characters, but in these later stories, he finally shows what a heartbreaking life they led, reeling under blows of adversity from all sides. The view of life that Wang Meng endorses now is the one held by Qiu Wen, the female country doctor who Zhang Siyuan meets and falls in love with after going to live in the village. She is

a woman who grows gradually stronger by meeting hardship head-on. She has lived through disaster without resigning herself to fate; in times of suffering she helps others without thought of return. To preserve her independence she turns down a chance for a station in life that many would envy—being a Department Chief's wife. She answers Zhang Si-yuan, who made a special trip into the mountains to propose marriage, in these words: "Why should I give up my work, my position, my neighbors and relatives, just so I can go off with you and be a Department Chief's wife?... Life as an official's wife would suffocate me. I wouldn't be able to find my true place in such surroundings.... I'll go on being a country doctor, doing something to ease the pain of these mountain folks. Don't forget us, that's all I ask. I appreciate your asking me. I just hope you'll do all you can to help the people, not hurt them. If you do right by them, the people will be grateful." She too is a woman of ideals, but a mature one, aware of people and events, clear-headed and realistic.

"The Strain of Meeting" is a far cry from the stories mentioned above, both in material and theme. Still, there are connections if one looks for them. This is a novella on a subject that was popular in China a few years back—overseas Chinese coming back to search for their roots. In this novella Wang Meng stayed clear of the conventional tragic separations and long-delayed but joyful reunions with parents, siblings and lovers. Instead he described a meeting after 30 years of two childhood playmates who once travelled the road of revolution together as young intellectuals. The forces that separated them and brought them together again had to do with ideals and beliefs. The American professor Lan Peiyu did not come back to China just to seek out old places and friends, but to find a lost dream. She was not looking for ancestral roots or emotional roots, but for roots to anchor her beliefs and ideals. She was eager to see Weng Shihan, who in her eyes, represented that dream. Had Wang ended the story with the main characters reveling in the joy of togetherness or bemoaning their time apart, he would have forced it into an artificial mold, for both characters had already travelled for 30 years down separate roads.

Wang Meng knew what he was doing: given subject matter that lent itself easily to mediocre treatment, he mastered his material by fixing on the theme of "The strain of meeting matches parting." He dealt not just with the objective limitations that keep people apart, but more importantly with subjective obstacles. On Weng Shihan's side, the obstacle was his unwillingness to settle his feelings and make up his mind about her one way or the other, since he had never clearly understood her backing down from their vow to stand at the forefront of the revolutionary line. A complex person like Lan Peiyu can be understood in different ways, depending on who is looking at her. Here, once again, Wang Meng makes plain the breadth of perspective from which he views people. He gently unrolls this delicate woman, like a scroll, pointing out her lingering memories of an old dream. After all their hardships, she and Weng still feel what can best be described by the line "The silkworm winds till death its heart's own thread." Wang Meng allows these two cramped spirits to find a sort of communion, but then, with a clever change of key, the theme of divisive beliefs emerges once more.

Aside from the above types of fiction, Wang Meng takes pride in originating a type of story with farcical overtones. In such stories he employs a tongue-in-cheek manner and outrageously concocted diatribes to inveigh against certain absurdities and satirize narrow, unmotivated people who have the laughable tendency to think too highly of themselves. Given these stories, there need be no doubt what a well-informed man Wang Meng is, and how rich is his fund of words. These stories give all the proof that is needed of Wang Meng's acuity and humor, and of his keen powers of observation that cut through the facade of things. After making a beginning with "Eyes of the Night" and "A Courtful of Advisors", he has enjoyed himself tirelessly at this for several years. Each year he published something that has the ring of vaudeville patter, and each year the pieces get more reckless and free-flowing. A recently published collection named after the title story "The Jacket at the Bottom of the Trunk" includes a few of these pieces: "The Salad Explodes", "The Break-up of the

Wrangling Office” and “A Trumped-Up Affair”. No such pieces have been selected for the present anthology, perhaps due to considerations of space. All of them seem absurd on the surface, yet they are true to life nevertheless. They are loaded with laughs, yet marked by streaks of tears. In the preface to his first farcical short story, “Anecdotes in the Life of Director Maimaiti,” Wang Meng wrote, “When you’ve cried out all your tears, it’s time to laugh.... Humor is a superiority complex for the intelligent.” China’s greatest novelist, Cao Xueqin, once wrote of his masterpiece *A Dream of Red Mansions*. “Pages full of fantastic words, penned with bitter tears.” Great writers seemingly share an attitude that counterposes “fantastic” to “bitter”.

Wang Meng often displays Wang-Mengian humor in handling his material, but he displays Wang-Mengian shiftiness as well. He seemingly wants to cover for his playfully mocking, irreverent attitude, and tries to smooth over contradictions. Sometimes this technique can be anticlimactic.

Wang Meng also writes another kind of farcical story reflecting his life in exile in the rural district of Yili. These stories are nothing like his absurdist diatribes, but they have a humor all their own. He has written a series of eight stories about this stage of his life, with the title *In Yili*. One of these stories, “Ah, Mohammed Ahmed”, is included in this anthology. It describes life among the Uygur people, and since the Uygur have their own irrepressible sense of humor, such description easily takes on a comic tone. On the other side of the coin, though years of shared hardship bound him to them, their weaknesses did not escape his keen eyes. He had nothing but praise for their humble kindness, honesty and patience, but he did not spare their backwardness, their lack of motivation and their habit of celebrating when there was nothing to celebrate. *In Yili* is his stirring portrait of this lovable and sometimes laughable group, with just the right touch of commentary on their ethnic character to serve as a framework for high comedy.

Wang Meng’s comic stories, whether of the absurdist type or those portraying the strengths and foibles of folkish characters, are

far removed from the theme that is closest to his heart. We should not force them to fit the pattern set by his other works, for they contain no direct tribute to high ideals. Nevertheless, they express the author's dissatisfaction with certain failings and deformities, and as such, they make an implicit plea for something better.

Wang Meng does not overvalue the function of literature: he feels that literature does not amount to a direct involvement in life. It cannot direct the advance of history, and it cannot make history move backwards. What it can do is make people aware. By conveying the author's ideals, a literary work can make people mindful of higher obligations. Perhaps the purpose of Wang Meng's comic stories is to prod people into awareness of his ideals. By showing ugliness for what it is, he rouses our longing for what is beautiful.

Wang Meng has travelled a broad road as a writer, "ranging widely over this great land, through thirty years of wind and rain." He has tried hard to nurture his writing as a unique outgrowth of his own thinking. Though his seven collections of stories are not of uniform quality, their range of experimentation makes him a worthy representative, both politically and creatively, of the middle-aged generation of writers. He represents a literary generation that commenced its search for truth and began creative work at an early age, then came to maturity in a labyrinth of hardship. His works are a faithful and moving reflection of the rude awakening of that generation, their aimless stumblings and their reawakening to ideals. Of course that reawakening happened differently for each author. Some kept more of a hold on utopian ideas, and some adopted a more pragmatic stance. Wang Meng did not give up his pursuit of ideals, but the lessons of watching men's affairs shift like clouds in the wind were not lost on him. Sometimes dissatisfaction moves him to ridicule the pigheadedness and unreasonableness he sees, but just as often he shows understanding and tolerance. Such tolerance is viewed by some readers as giving in to the ugly reality. But perhaps Wang Meng has taken the right approach. In the face of a twisted reality, one man's anger does little good. This being the case, the duty of a writer—and herein is the