

GEMS OF MODERN CHINESE LITERATURE

HAYSTACKS

AND OTHER SELECTED WRITINGS



TIE NING

**TRANSLATED BY
DANIS MAIR**



FOREIGN LANGUAGES PRESS

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Author's Preface

“WHY are you interested in writing fiction?” I have been asked. My answer is that I always have something to say.

To me literature is an understanding and a grasp of the world, an exploration and a comprehension of human destiny. Though everybody has his own ideas, I would like to have my fiction depict, grain by grain, what mankind may feel in common.

Here are ten pieces, written between 1982 and 1987, in which people both young and old, whom I am familiar with, are the protagonists. What I describe is usually to do with the relationship between human beings and nature, between human beings and the world. I am interested in describing young people because I am one; I am concerned with the old because someday I will be. Maybe in the world we live in no ideal life exists to be found, but that is the world we have to live in together. We have, through hope and despair, to understand the meaning of life, to search for tenderness between human hearts.

This book takes its title from “Haystacks”, a reminiscence of the loess plateau where I lived many years ago. Male and female, we moistened the soil with our sweat. As the wheat gave good harvests we cut it with sickles, and haystacks, old and new, male and female, have gone forth and multiplied. They rise up between heaven and earth, sloppily and obstinately. They look to each other in the distance or lean close, breathing the breath of time, longing, brooding, concealing, gazing. Maybe theirs is an old family, existence transcending ordinary life. Many stories are buried beneath haystacks. Hidden there, they have called to me and emerged one by one to charge my writing with their vitality and joy.

People can never, in any age, be clear to themselves. The purpose of literature is not to make them so but to effect understanding through it.

I hope I understand you.

I hope you understand my fiction.

The beginning of the Year of the Dragon, 1988

Ah, Fragrant Snow

IF trains had not been invented, if nobody had laid railway tracks into remote mountains, small villages like Terrace Gully would never have been found. The village and its villagers, in fifteen houses, hid in the deep wrinkles of an old mountain, silently accepting the willful mountain's tender caress and brutal temper.

But now, two slim, glittering railway tracks stretched over the mountain. They bravely spiralled halfway up, then quietly felt their way further, wound and curved before finally arriving at the foot of Terrace Gully. Then they made their way into the gloomy tunnel, dashed ahead to another mountain, and hurried away into the mysterious distance.

The villagers jostled to watch the green dragon whistling past. It carried an unfamiliar, fresh wind from some strange place beyond the mountains, and hastened away from poor Terrace Gully. It went at such a pace that the sound of the wheels rolling on the tracks was like an eager voice: can't stop, can't stop! It had no reason to stop at Terrace Gully. Did anyone in the village need to go on a

long journey? Did someone from beyond the mountains want to visit relatives or friends at Terrace Gully? Were there oil deposits or gold mines? Terrace Gully had no power at all to invite the train's attention.

Nevertheless, a new stop was added to the railway timetable, "Terrace Gully". Perhaps some passengers had made a suggestion, and one of them who had some influence was related to the village. Perhaps the train attendant, a jolly young fellow, had noticed the pretty girls of Terrace Gully. Every time the train passed, they would come in groups, stick out their chins, and stare at the train with greedy eyes. Some pointed at the train, and occasionally you could hear coy screams when they poked each other. Perhaps none of these was the real reason. Perhaps Terrace Gully was just too small—so small it made your heart ache, so small that even the gigantic dragon couldn't bear to stride proudly ahead without stopping. Whatever the reason, Terrace Gully was on the railway's timetable now. Every evening at seven o'clock, the train from Beijing to Shanxi would stop here for one minute.

One minute, so fleeting, yet it threw Terrace Gully's peaceful evenings into disorder. It had been the custom in the village to go to bed right after dinner, as though everyone heard the old mountain's mute order at the same time. The small stretch of stone houses would suddenly become completely noiseless—so quiet that it seemed the village was silently confiding its piety to the old mountains. But now, the girls of Terrace Gully served dinner in a flurry, absent-mindedly grabbed a quick bite and, soon as they put down their bowls, went straight to their dressers. They washed off the dust and stains of the day, revealing their rough and ruddy complexions, combed their hair, and then vied with one another in wearing their best outfits. Some girls put on new shoes which they were supposed to wear only for Spring Festival; others even secretly put a little rouge on their cheeks. Then they ran to the railway, where the train passed. Fragrant Snow was always first; her next-door neighbour, Frail Phoenix, followed right behind.

At seven o'clock, the train slowed down as it approached Terrace Gully, gave a loud crash and a shake, then stopped. The girls rushed toward it, their hearts thumping violently. As if watching a movie, they

looked into the cars through the windows. Fragrant Snow hid behind her friends and covered her ears. She was the first to come out of her house to watch the train, but retreated when it arrived. She was frightened by its gigantic head. The monster spurted out magnificent white smoke, as though it could suck Terrace Gully into its stomach in one breath.

“Fragrant Snow, come here!” Frail Phoenix dragged Fragrant Snow to her side. “Look at those golden rings in that lady’s hair. What do you call them? It’s the lady in the back seat with that big round face. Look at her watch, it’s smaller than my nail!”

Fragrant Snow nodded. At last she saw the golden rings in the woman’s hair and the tiny watch on her wrist. But soon she found something else. “A leather schoolbag!” She pointed to a brown leather satchel on the luggage rack.

Fragrant Snow’s discoveries usually did not excite the other girls, but they still rushed up around her.

“You stepped on my toes!” Frail Phoenix cried out and complained to another girl who was pushing to the front.

“What a loud voice! You want to show off so that white-faced man will talk to you, don’t you?”

“I’ll tear your mouth off if you repeat that!” Frail Phoenix cried, but couldn’t help looking over to the gate of the third car.

The fair-skinned young attendant stepped down from the train. He was tall and had jet-black hair, and spoke with a beautiful Beijing accent. Perhaps this was why the girls called him “The Beijjngese” behind his back. The Beijjngese crossed his arms on his chest, kept a distance neither too close to nor too far from the girls: “Say, young ladies, don’t hold onto the windows, it’s dangerous!”

“Oh, so we’re young; are you so old?” the bold Frail Phoenix retorted.

The girls broke into laughter. Somebody gave Frail Phoenix a shove, and it made her almost bump into him. Instead of embarrassing her, this boosted her courage.

“Hey, don’t you feel dizzy staying in that train all day long?” she asked.

“What do you do with that thing hanging on the ceiling? It looks like a broadsword,” another girl asked. She was referring to the electric fan in the railway car.

“Where do you heat the water?”

“What if you run into some places and they haven’t got any roads?”

“How many meals do you city people eat every day?” Fragrant Snow asked in a small voice, hiding behind other girls.

“Bah, I’m at the end of my rope,” grumbled “The Beijngese”.

They wouldn’t let him go till the train was about to start. He glanced at his watch as he ran toward the train, and shouted back: “Next time! Next time I’ll answer all your questions.” He had long, nimble legs and stepped on the train agilely. Then, the green door shut with a bang. The train dashed into the darkness, leaving the girls beside the ice-cold tracks. For a long time they could still feel the slight quiver in the tracks.

Everything became quiet again. On the way back home, the girls quarrelled about trifles.

“She’s got to bind the nine golden rings together first, then stick them in her hair.”

“No. She didn’t do it that way.”

“Sure she did.”

“Frail Phoenix, why don’t you speak up? Still thinking about that Beijngese?”

“Get lost. You talk because it’s you who’s thinking about him.”

Fragrant Snow didn’t say a word. She just flushed with embarrassment for her friend. She was only seventeen and had not yet learned how to rescue someone from this sort of talk.

The same girl kept teasing Frail Phoenix, “I know, you like him but haven’t got the nerve to admit it. He’s got such nice skin!”

“Nice skin? That’s from staying in that big green house all year long. Let him try Terrace Gully for a few days,” someone in the shadows said.

“There you go. Those city folks all hide in rooms from the sun.

They should see our Fragrant Snow. Our Fragrant Snow was born with this pretty skin. If only she did her hair into a bunch of curls like those girls on the train.”

Frail Phoenix had no response except to let go of Fragrant Snow’s hand. Frail Phoenix couldn’t help feeling defensive about the fellow, as if the girls had belittled someone related to her. She firmly believed that his fair skin was not from hiding in rooms. It was natural.

Fragrant Snow put her hand back into Frail Phoenix’s. It seemed to her that she had somehow wronged her friend, and she was asking forgiveness.

“Frail Phoenix, have you lost your tongue?” the same girl attacked again.

“Who’s lost whose tongue! You girls look at nothing but whether a fellow’s got nice or ugly skin. You like him, why don’t you go with him?”

“We aren’t the right match.”

“Don’t you think he’s got his own girl?”

No matter how heated these quarrels were, the girls would always part amicably because an exciting idea would arise in everyone’s mind: tomorrow, the train would pass again and they would have another wonderful minute. Compared to this, a little quarrel was nothing.

Ah, that colourful minute was filled with the joy, anger, grief and happiness of the girls from Terrace Gully.

As the days went by, the girls added a new dimension to this precious minute. They began to carry rectangular wicker baskets full of walnuts, eggs and dates, and stood under the train’s windows to quickly strike up bargains with the passengers. They stood on tiptoe and stretched their arms all the way up to raise basketsful of eggs and dates to the windows, taking in exchange things that were rare in Terrace Gully; fine dried noodles, matches, or the girls’ favourite: bobby pins, gauze kerchieves, sometimes even richly coloured nylon socks. Of course it was risky to take the latter items back home, for they might get scolded for making decisions based purely on their own fancy.

The girls seemed to have a tacit agreement to assign Frail Phoenix

to “The Beijinese” . Nobody else but Frail Phoenix, basket in hand, would ever go to him. It was amusing to see how she made a deal with him. She always dawdled on purpose, then put a full basket into his hands just when the train was about to start. The train began to move before he had time to pay for her eggs. He put the basket in the train, and made gestures to explain something to her, while she stood by the train feeling happy; she was glad that he took the eggs without paying. Of course the fellow would bring money to her next time, along with a bundle of noodles, gauze kerchieves, or something else. If the noodles weighed ten *jin*, Frail Phoenix would insist on taking out one *jin* to give back to him. She felt this was only fair. She wanted their contact to be a little different from a regular business sale. Sometimes she would remember the girls’ remark: “Don’t you think he’s got his own girl?” As a matter of fact, whether or not he had his own girl was not Frail Phoenix’ s concern, because she never thought of going away with him. But she wanted to be nice to him. Did she have to be his girl to treat him nicely?

Fragrant Snow was taciturn and timid, but her sales were the most successful of all the girls. Passengers loved to buy from her because she looked at them so trustingly with her pure, innocent eyes. She had not learned how to haggle over the price; she simply said: “You offer as you think fit.” They looked at her face that was as pure as a new-born baby’s, her lips as soft as red satin, and a beautiful feeling would come over them. They couldn’ t bear to trick this little girl.

Sometimes she would seize an opportunity to ask passengers about things from the outside. She asked if the universities in Beijing would want students from Terrace Gully, and what “musical poetry” was (she happened to see this term in a book a classmate brought to school). One time she asked a middle-aged woman with glasses about a pencil box that could close automatically, and how much it would cost. But the train started moving before the woman could answer. She ran quite a while after the train. The autumn wind and the whistling wheels rang in her ears; then she stopped and realized how ridiculous she was being.

The train was soon out of sight. The girls surrounded Fragrant

Snow. When they found out the reason for this train chasing, everybody laughed.

“Silly girl!”

“It’s not worth it.”

They tapped her mockingly on the shoulder like the venerable elders would do.

“It was my fault. I should have asked her earlier.” Fragrant Snow would never think that this was not worthwhile; she only blamed herself for acting too slowly.

“Bah, you might as well ask about something better, “ said Frail Phoenix carrying the basket for Fragrant Snow.

“No wonder she asked that; our Fragrant Snow is a student,” said someone else.

Perhaps this explained everything. Fragrant Snow was the only one in Terrace Gully who had passed the entrance examination for middle school.

Terrace Gully had no school. Fragrant Snow had to walk five miles every day to the commune school. Although she had a quiet disposition, with the Terrace Gully girls she always had things to talk about. However, at the commune middle school she did not have many friends. There were a lot of girls, but the way they acted, the expression in their eyes and their soft laughter made it seem they wanted Fragrant Snow to realize she was from a small village, a poor place. They asked her over and over: “How many meals do you eat every day at home?” She was ignorant of their intention, so she always answered innocently: “Two meals.” Then she would ask, “What about in your village?”

“Three meals,” they would always answer proudly. Afterwards, they felt pity and anger that Fragrant Snow was so slow.

“Why don’t you bring your pencil box to school?” they asked again.

“There it is.” Fragrant Snow pointed to the corner of her desk.

Actually, everybody knew that the little wooden box was Fragrant Snow’s pencil box, but they all looked shocked. The girl sitting next to Fragrant Snow started fiddling with her big plastic pencil box, closing

it up with a click. This was an “automatic” pencil box, and only long afterward did Fragrant Snow learn the secret of how it shut automatically. It was because there was a small magnet hidden inside. The little wooden box was a special present made by Fragrant Snow’s father, who was a carpenter, to celebrate her success in the entrance examination. It was unmatched in Terrace Gully, but here in the school, it looked awkward and outmoded. The little box shrank back timidly in the corner of the desk.

Fragrant Snow’s mind was no longer at peace. The meaning of her classmates’ repeated questions suddenly dawned on her. She realized how poor Terrace Gully was. Her eyes were fixed on her classmate’s pencil box now. She guessed that it must be from a big city, and the price must be quite outrageous. Would thirty eggs buy it? Or forty? Fifty? Her heart sank.

What am I thinking about? Did Mother collect eggs so I could go off on wild flights of fancy? Why is that inviting click always ringing in my ears?

Late autumn came to the mountains. The wind grew colder and the days short, but Fragrant Snow and the other girls never missed the seven o’clock train. Now they could wear their colourful cotton-padded jackets. Frail Phoenix wore two pink barrettes, and some girls tied their plaits with braided elastics. They had traded eggs and walnuts for these things from the train. They carefully dressed up from head to toe, imitating the city girls in the train. Then they lined up by the railway tracks, as if they were waiting to be reviewed.

The train stopped and heaved a deep sigh, as if it were complaining about the cold weather in Terrace Gully. Today the train showed an unusual indifference towards Terrace Gully; all of the windows were tightly closed, and passengers were sipping tea and reading newspapers in the dim light. Nobody glanced out of the windows. Even those familiar passengers seemed to have forgotten the Terrace Gully girls.

As usual, Frail Phoenix ran to the third car to look for her “Beijingese”. Fragrant Snow tightened her red scarf, switched her basket from her right hand to her left, and walked by the train. She stood on

tiptoe so that passengers might see her face. Nobody noticed her, but on a table, something among the food caught her eyes. She put down her basket, held onto the window sill with a violently pounding heart, and assured herself that it was a pencil box with a magnet. It was so close she could have touched it if the window had been open.

A middle-aged woman attendant dragged Fragrant Snow away, but Fragrant Snow kept watching the pencil box from a distance. When she had assured herself that it belonged to the girl by the window who looked like a student, she ran over and knocked on the window. The girl turned about and faced her. Seeing the basket on Fragrant Snow's arm, she waved her hand apologetically and showed no intention of opening the window. Fragrant Snow ran toward the door and when she reached it, grabbed the hand rail. If she had still been a little hesitant when she was running toward the door, the warm air from the car would have strengthened her resolve. She leaped onto the footboard. She intended to run into the carriage as fast as she could and in the shortest time trade the eggs for the pencil box. She had so many eggs—forty today.

At last Fragrant Snow stood in the train. She held her basket tightly, and stepped cautiously into the car. Just then, the train gave a lurch, and the door closed. The train began to move. She threw herself at the door only to see Frail Phoenix's face flashing past the window. It did not seem like a dream; everything was real. She had left her friends, and was standing in this familiar yet strange train. The train gained speed, carrying Fragrant Snow with it, leaving Terrace Gully behind. The next stop was West Pass, ten miles away from Terrace Gully.

Ten miles in a train or a car is nothing. Passengers chatted for a while and then came the West Pass stop. Many got on, but only one got off. Someone in the train seemed to try to bar her way, but she jumped down resolutely, just as she had confidently leaped onto the train a little while ago.

She had no basket in her arms, for she had quietly put it under the girl's seat. On the train, she had told the girl that she wanted to trade the eggs for the pencil box. The girl had insisted that she would give

the pencil box to Fragrant Snow. She had also said that she didn't want the eggs because she lived in a dormitory and ate in a dining hall. She had pointed to the "Mining College" school badge on her coat to convince Fragrant Snow. Fragrant Snow had taken the pencil box but had left her eggs on the train after all. No matter how poor Terrace Gully was, Fragrant Snow never took anything without paying for it.

Earlier, when the passengers had learned that Fragrant Snow was getting off at West Pass, what could they say to her? They had tried to persuade her to stay overnight at West Pass, and the warm-hearted "Beijingers" had even told her that his wife had a relative living at this train station. Fragrant Snow did not want to find his wife's relative. His suggestion made her a little sad, for Frail Phoenix, for Terrace Gully. Thinking of this sorrow, how could she stay on the train? Hurry away, hurry home, and hurry to school tomorrow. Then she could open her schoolbag proudly and put the pencil box on the desk. So she told those on the train who were still trying to talk her out of returning home: "Don't worry, I'm used to walking." Perhaps they believed her. They had no idea what mountain girls were like. They believed that mountain people were not afraid of walking at night.

Now Fragrant Snow stood alone in West Pass gazing after the departing train. Finally, it was completely out of sight and a wild emptiness surrounded her. A chilly gust of wind blew on her and drained the warmth from her body. Her shawl had slipped down to her shoulders. She wrapped it closer about her head, then sat on the railway tracks curled up with cold. Fragrant Snow had experienced all kinds of fear. When she was a little girl she used to fear hair: if a hair stuck to her shoulder and she couldn't remove it, she would cry in terror. When she grew older she was afraid to go to the front yard alone at night; she feared caterpillars and being tickled. Now she feared this strange West Pass, feared the gloomy mountains, and the dead silence all around. When the wind blew in the nearby grove, she was afraid of the rustling sound. In ten miles, there were so many groves and thickets she would have to walk through.

A full moon was rising. It bathed the silent valley and the pale-