

YOU JIN

Winner of the
**CULTURAL
MEDALLION**

IN TIME, OUT OF PLACE

Translated by Shelly Bryant



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Translator's Note

IN THE YEARS depicted in the early essays of this collection, Singapore was still a relatively young nation, though a nation that was already seeing a high level of stability and the early signs of creature comforts that we enjoy here today. Whilst many Singaporeans at the time were able to venture to countries farther afield than just our immediate neighbours, few were blessed enough to travel as extensively as You Jin. It is no wonder, then, that she has become Singapore's best known and best loved travel writer, both at home and in the Chinese-speaking world outside of our own borders.

This volume offers a small glimpse of the range of locales You Jin has visited and captured in her writing. Taken from the two volumes *Cun Cun Tu Di Jie Gu Shi* (寸寸土地皆故事) and *Deng Dai Guo Qi De Ren* (等待国旗的人), this collection includes a little under half the work contained therein—a testament to just how well-travelled this beloved writer is.

You Jin's travelogues offer a glimpse into a specific place by telling of her encounters with an individual, or sometimes a few individuals, during her travels. The essays are highly personal, not only in that they express her own perspective of the places visited, but also because she tends to single out specific people, relating their unique, personal circumstances and the insights they have chosen to

share with her in the time she spent with them. She is attentive and curious, with a bit of a naughty streak underlying her observations of the world around her. Thanks to her adept, expressive writing, these traits are recorded on the page in a light-hearted, good-spirited, wryly-humorous series of essays about some very intriguing locales.

But it is not only the places that come alive in You Jin's writings. The times in which she visited these places are likewise captured. The stories she tells of her time in Eastern Europe in the late 1980s and early 1990s, for instance, are set in a time of dramatic change in the region, a trait also foregrounded in her narratives of her expeditions around Asia. Travellers to the same countries today will not see quite the same things You Jin saw in her sojourns. The Eastern Europe of that era is gone, never to be seen again—except in the works of the astute observers and gifted writers who visited those lands in those times. We who read You Jin's essays today are fortunate, for they allow us to enter those bygone times, just as they take us to places we might not have the opportunity to visit in person.

You Jin is one of Singapore's most prolific writers, and her work is widely read both at home and overseas. She is a deserving recipient of Singapore's Cultural Medallion award, which was conferred on her in 2009. Epigram Books is bringing out this volume and another of You Jin's books, *Death by Perfume* (translated by Jeremy Tiang), in translation this year, making three collections of her work released in English by this publisher to date (including *Teaching Cats to Jump Hoops* in 2012, translated by Sylvia Li-Chun Lin). These efforts at making You Jin's work available to a wider audience through translation are commendable. Even more exciting is the fact that, if things go as planned, much more of You Jin's writings will be made available in English in the upcoming years, thanks to the tireless

work of publisher Edmund Wee, editor Jason Erik Lundberg, and the rest of the energetic, dedicated staff at Epigram Books. For readers who are not able to access the work in Chinese, these efforts are a great boon. It would be a pity for this insightful, witty writer to be overlooked as times change and Singaporeans become increasingly distanced from writings in Chinese. It is my great pleasure to see You Jin's stories brought to another generation of Singaporeans, and my hope that the essays included here will prove entertaining and engaging to an even broader audience than the already considerable readership familiar with the writings of the inimitable You Jin.

SHELLY BRYANT

Europe

Czech Music, a Silent Composition

A Czech Encounter—Like Old Friends

AT EXACTLY FIVE in the evening, just as we had planned, the doorbell rang.

Outside the door was a Czech man wearing grey trousers and a T-shirt printed with the words “The Great Wall of China”, making his sturdy physique all the more remarkable. His eyes were crystal clear and bright as he reached out to shake my hand, his grip firm.

In a very clearly enunciated Beijing dialect, he introduced himself: “I am Ruzicka, Tang Yun Ling’s husband. I’m happy to meet you.” He paused, then said, “Yun Ling is waiting for you downstairs.”

I looked down and saw a small red car with a Chinese woman standing beside it. At that moment, she turned her round face upward, her delicately curved eyes blending perfectly with her smiling expression. The mild warmth of the spring sunlight sat luxuriously on her face, making her features bright and adding depth and brilliance to her smile.

Yun Ling. I knew a lot about her, but this was the first time I had seen “Ms Tang, the teacher” in person.

My husband Risheng and I sat in the back seat of the car whilst Yun Ling drove, speeding us along to her residence in the suburbs.

Outside the car window, the setting sun bravely burned itself out,

lighting the sky with fiery colours and turning the Vitava River into a dazzling strip flowing through the centre of the city. Buildings of many different styles towered along both banks of the river—Roman, Gothic, Baroque, Renaissance—each with its extraordinary workmanship and unique charm, revealing the soul of the people with a silent vitality. Everywhere we looked, there were countless ancient structures, their spires stretching gracefully toward the brilliant sky.

So here we were, in Prague. The capital of the Czech Republic had been untouched by the blazing flames of battle during the Second World War, so most of the buildings in the city retained their original styles. At first glance, one feels its subtle grace; a second look reveals its layers of dignity.

Sitting in the front seat, Ruzicka faced the window and pointed out the sights, a fitting sense of pride in his tone, enumerating the historical value of each location. “Oh, that building took a very long time to build, going through several different eras and designed by different architects. So the evidence of both the Roman and Gothic styles it bears is quite singular.”

It was as if we had entered an architecture museum. Risheng and I clicked our tongues in admiration.

The car raced along for another half-hour, and we saw fewer people and cars as we travelled. When we finally stopped and parked the car, we were surrounded only by tall buildings.

“Here we are.” Yun Ling turned off the engine and bustled out of the car. Pointing to a building dozens of storeys high, she said, “My apartment. We’re on the sixth floor.”

Curious, I asked, “Do you rent, or did you buy it?”

“When the flat was first planned, we paid half of the money to

the government, then when it was completed and we moved in, we continued to pay the other half in monthly instalments. When it is paid off, we will be the owners, but we still cannot buy or sell freely. We can only leave it to our children when we die.” Yun Ling offered this general explanation in a regretful tone as we walked. “In Prague, housing is a big issue. My youngest daughter has been married for six years and has two children, but she still cannot manage to buy an apartment. Recently, she was finally allotted a flat, but the location was not ideal.”

The lift was cramped, not large enough to take more than three passengers at a time. Ruzicka climbed the stairs whilst the three of us squeezed into the lift. Yun Ling and I were practically cheek-to-cheek. There was a faint odour of perspiration. We had come from opposite ends of the earth and had only the vaguest ideas about each other’s lives, but though we were just meeting for the first time, it was as if we had known each other forever.

The tale of how we came to know the Ruzicka couple is perhaps even more dramatic than a fabricated story.

Several days earlier, I had been touring in Hungary. Whilst travelling in the southern city of Szeged, I came across a restaurant opened by Mainland Chinese owners. (Even though Hungary is a large country, there are just a few Chinese restaurants.) After we finished our dinner, we asked the headwaiter if we could meet the only Chinese assistant chef in the kitchen, and we talked with him about the situation of Hungary’s working Chinese population. His words ran in a rapid, uninterrupted flow. After we had chatted at length about the difficulties of the local situation, he suddenly added, “When I first came to Eastern Europe, the Czech Republic was the first place I set foot in, and things were really tough. But one time,

when I came across many problems that weren't easy to settle, I was fortunate enough to meet a warm-hearted, compassionate couple who helped me sort through the mess and get a handle on things. They really put a lot of effort into helping me get a job in Hungary. This couple lives in Prague—the wife is originally from Beijing and the husband is Czech. Both of them love to make new friends, and they love culture. They do translation in the Czech Republic, and they also teach Chinese to Czech students.”

As soon as I heard this, I felt my heart quicken in my chest and I asked, “We'll be going to the Czech Republic in a few days. Do you think we could meet them?”

When I said this, his enthusiasm matched ours, and he wasted no time in giving us the address and phone numbers of Ruzicka and his wife. At the same time, in a very respectful tone, he continued to ply us with stories about this wonderfully helpful couple.

But that was not all. Later, we were on the train when we met a Chinese man from Munich who also knew this couple. He told us that their hospitality and generosity were of the rarest kind.

Once we had travelled from Germany to Prague and got settled into our room, I called Yun Ling. I did not expect that, without even giving it a second thought, the pair would come and meet us and take us to their house.

It was a two-bedroom apartment with a living area. The decor was all East Asian, with Chinese paintings covering the walls—the bird, landscape, and flower-and-plant genres were all well represented. Inside a glass cabinet, neatly arranged, were all sorts of exquisite handcrafted art pieces. The living room was small, and nearly every inch was well utilised. It was a little cramped, but very clean, and very cosy.

As soon as we sat down, Yun Ling began preparing tea.

She took a bottle of transparent spirits from the cupboard and said, “Plum wine. It's homemade.”

It was very fragrant, but when I took the first sip, it burned from the tip of my tongue all the way down to my belly.

After three glasses, the conversation grew even more animated and congenial.

Interracial Marriage —The Love of a Devoted Couple

When Yun Ling and Ruzicka met by chance in Beijing, he was nineteen and she was seventeen.

Ruzicka had flown thousands of kilometres from the Czech Republic to China to pursue advanced studies. When he first arrived in Beijing, he did not understand any Chinese at all.

“I spent two years immersed in learning Chinese. My teacher required us to learn fifty vocabulary words a day. In class, she would reinforce each word by a variety of means—reading, listening, writing, and using it. Every morning at eight, we would begin our lessons, and end each afternoon at four. After going home, I continued revising until all of the words were firmly rooted in my mind.”

After two years of such gruelling studies, he finally had a good grasp of the nuances and beauty of the language. From there, he entered the university and majored in Studies for Foreign Trade, with Chinese as the language of instruction.

It was during this time that he happened to meet a piano player with a culture and music ensemble: Yun Ling. It took just one dance for the two of them to fall in love. They were married the year Ruzicka graduated.

“The wedding was paid for and planned by the other exchange students, who all chipped in. It was very lively. They brought a lot of wine and got my father so drunk he couldn’t stop telling stories about my childhood. Everyone had a grand time. Ah, it really was a happy occasion. Even after so many years, I can still picture it all so clearly.”

After they were married, Ruzicka brought his new wife back to Kralove, his hometown in the northern part of the Czech Republic, and that was when Yun Ling’s “nightmare” began.

She explained her trying experience quickly, in a clear, pure Beijing dialect. “My mother-in-law was very conservative, and she couldn’t accept a daughter-in-law of a different race. She couldn’t stand it, so she often took her frustrations and anger out on me. I clearly remember the day we returned home. That night, Ruzicka quarrelled with his mother. His whole face was scarlet, as if he was really angry. At the time, I didn’t understand a word of Czech, so I didn’t know what they were arguing about. Later, when we were back in our room, I asked Ruzicka quietly and he told me that his mother kept insisting I get up as soon as it was light the next morning and cook a traditional Czech soup for the whole family.”

“Did you do it?”

“Of course not. It wasn’t that I didn’t want to, but that I didn’t know how to cook it. As you can imagine, the days that followed were explosive and tearful. The worst part was that Ruzicka had to leave his hometown and stay hundreds of kilometres away for work, only occasionally coming home for short periods. My clashes with my mother-in-law grew sharper by the day until finally the time came when I couldn’t stand it anymore, so I packed my suitcase, ready to leave home. Unfortunately, she found out, and she snatched

my wallet from me and locked me in the room. I was still full of youthful vigour at the time, and could not bear to stay a minute more in the house. I took a thick rope I found in the room, tied it to a nail on the windowsill, climbed down from the second floor window to the ground, and went to Ruzicka’s aunt’s house. My Czech was still not very good, nor was my mood, so all I could say, over and over, was “Auntie, please give me a few hundred *koruna*.” After she gave me the money, I went straight to the train station and bought a ticket to Prague and went in search of Ruzicka.”

After this “domestic revolution”, the abominable relations between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law took a favourable turn.

“Two years after I left home, I went back with Ruzicka for Christmas. I bought a gift she would like, kissed her cheek, and put all unpleasantness behind me. Gradually, she too had come to realise that she would only be a happy mother if she accepted her daughter-in-law. After that, the two of us got along very well. She often comes to stay with us in Prague. I know she likes to eat sweet and sour pork, so I cook it for her when she is here. And she knows I like fresh mushrooms, so she frequently goes to the forest and plucks some to bring to me.”

Although she spoke of these long past events with an easy air, the fear and pain they had caused her was still evident. I felt compelled to let her know that her story had moved me. “You really are very strong.”

“I am optimistic,” she said, smiling. “I always believe that when you come to a roadblock, there will be a way through. Everything will be all right in the end. Even if the sky collapses, the ground will support it.”

It was true. After a storm, there is always sunshine. Yun Ling’s experiences were proof of that.

“Although the early days of our marriage were not easy, I always felt that I was a very lucky woman because I married a deeply loyal husband.”

The couple looked at each other in tacit understanding, a sweet smile passing between them.

Yun Ling continued, “Our relationship has always been good. We will face all our turbulent times together. When misfortune comes, we will both bear it. When we are blessed, we will both enjoy that. On the other hand, we have some friends who are happy as a pair of lovebirds in good times, but as soon as troubles come along, they bolt. Less than half of married couples grow old together.”

By the time we had talked about all of this, it had grown dark outside. Yun Ling stood up and turned on the television, saying, “You all watch TV. I’ll cook some Chinese food for you to try.”

Before long, she was done. She carried the food out and put it on the dining table.

There were two hot dishes and one soup: black fungus mushrooms and cucumbers fried with sliced pork, a tomato omelette, and meatball and glass noodles soup.

I was quite surprised because the black fungus mushrooms and glass noodles were both “limited” products in the Czech Republic. Where had she bought those?

“I have a friend in Prague who works in a Chinese restaurant that opened recently, and I practically begged him to help me buy some. I could only get a bit, and I saved it. We eat it very occasionally.”

Hearing this, I felt the black fungus mushroom between my chopsticks grew heavy.

Ruzicka had a good appetite, gobbling up the rice in his blue and white porcelain bowl, but he hardly touched the meat and

vegetables on the plates. Risheng and I, acting like hosts rather than guests, repeatedly urged the couple to eat from the cooked dishes.

Ruzicka finished and put his chopsticks down, then looked at his wife warmly and said, “I have many friends who love my wife’s cooking. Every time they eat it, they ask for recipes, so my wife has written three cookbooks...”

“Hey, hey, hey! Ruzicka, stop. Quit publicising it!” Yun Ling said, laughing.

Ruzicka went to the study and came back carrying three colourful, beautifully printed cookbooks. He handed them to me.

Each volume, written in Czech, introduced thirty-three Chinese dishes, and a colour photo accompanied each recipe. There were meat dishes, vegetables, fish, soups, noodles, dessert—it had everything.

“It all started when I innocently wanted to help a few Czech friends learn to cook Chinese food, and it ended with me writing these three cookbooks,” Yun Ling said, her expression earnest. “I started by selecting dishes with ingredients readily available in Czech markets. For example, there is a lot of garlic here, but Czech people don’t know that garlic can be used to cook different dishes, so I taught them to cut the garlic finely and wrap it into dumplings. They really love it.”

This series of cookbooks had sold over six hundred thousand copies in the Czech Republic.

“I am currently researching something interesting,” Yun Ling said. “There are many plants with medicinal properties. If these plants are used in cooking, you can enjoy a good meal whilst you take care of your health.”

Teaching Chinese—A Deeper Meaning

After our meal, we all went into the study to chat over tea.

The study was quite aptly named, for there were books everywhere. And most were Chinese volumes. On the desk were many documents translated from Chinese and Czech.

“We currently make our living from translation. Many foreign companies based in the Czech Republic need us to help them translate their material into Czech. The things we translate can be quite varied, coming from many different fields. Whether professional, technical, or literary, we do it all. The scope of work Ruzicka translates is much broader than mine because, besides Czech and Chinese, he also speaks Russian, Polish and English.”

Aside from doing translation, Yun Ling also spent a lot of time compiling dictionaries and teaching the Chinese language. She had found that there were only a few Czech Sinologists in the Czech Republic ploughing quietly away in the field of language.

Yun Ling had been part of a “dictionary editing team” led by a famous Czech Sinologist, and after many years of hard work, they had completed the only Czech-Chinese dictionary, which was already in its ninth edition.

Compiling the dictionary was apparently a very tedious process. Yun Ling took a document from the table and, pointing at the text there, said to me, “Chinese and Czech might as well be languages from two completely different planets. In both grammar and syntax, they are totally different. The editorial team often had to spend an hour or two just debating the appropriateness of a single word. The most difficult part was that we felt like we were fighting a battle alone here in our little corner of the world, and so we had to painstakingly find solutions ourselves when we met with problems.”

In the final version of the Czech-Chinese dictionary, besides definitions of words, its most special feature was that there were a lot of illustrative sentences that could be used as a model for teaching Chinese.

Besides this work, Yun Ling had also worked with the Czech Republic’s only phonetics professor, Dr Cerny, creating a series of Chinese-language textbooks focused on pronunciation. There were already two volumes in the series, with a third due out soon.

“The main reason this series focuses on spoken Chinese is that many Czech students who learn Mandarin graduate with good proficiency in reading, but very poor spoken Chinese. We took commonly used phrases from daily life and put them in the book, hoping to help students strengthen their oral skills.”

As I flipped through the edited material on the desk, I noticed a page with the Chinese character “Êää,” which had notes on twenty-one usages. It was much more thorough than I had imagined.

When we asked Yun Ling about teaching Chinese, her eyes lit up. “Now, I work as a volunteer at the Prague Language School. I teach four classes, two by correspondence and two in the evening. The evening classes meet once a week, four hours each session.”

Yun Ling’s students were all Czech. Though they were together in one class, they were of different ages, from different backgrounds, and in different professions. They included doctors, architects, lawyers, translators, editors, biologists, university students, and secondary school students. What puzzled me was their motivation for learning Chinese.

“Motivation is an individual thing,” Yun Ling said. “Most of my students are interested in Chinese culture and hope that Mandarin will be the key that opens up this beautiful world for them. Some

students hope that after they learn Chinese, when they get the chance to go to China for business or leisure, they will be able to use the language. There is also a small portion of students who treat studying Chinese as a lofty hobby to pass the time.”

Someone pointed out that it is too difficult for foreigners to learn the more complex aspects of Chinese language. Yun Ling vehemently disagreed with this idea. She said stridently, “Learning is a mutual process. If the student has confidence and interest, and if the teacher uses lively teaching methods and suitable materials, there is no reason one cannot succeed in learning. Over the past several years, Prague’s Charles University has produced many successful Chinese scholars from its four-year programme.”

I said her spirit of volunteerism was quite admirable, but she just laughed and said, “There are two things about teaching Chinese in Prague that I find really meaningful. One is that I can spread the love of Chinese culture, and the other is that I can help foster greater understanding between Czech and Chinese people. If students work hard, and good results follow, that becomes my tuition fees.” She paused, then continued, “I always feel that I can’t just waste my time on this earth. I may not be a great person, but I also don’t want to sell myself short. I just want to do my own small part earnestly in the time I have.”

As she said this, the clock began to chime, *dong dong dong*, twelve times.

Oh! It was already midnight!

We got up and said goodbye.

We knew there was a metro station near her home, so we planned to take the train back to where we were staying.

But the hospitable Yun Ling insisted that she and Ruzicka would

give us a lift. Though we repeatedly rejected the offer, the couple insisted on driving us home. At midnight, there was hardly anyone on the road, and the journey was swift as they brought us right to the door of our hostel.

When we said goodbye, we arranged to meet again so they could spend a day showing us around Prague.

A Gentle Devotion—Shaking the World

Early the next morning, they came by to take us out for a tour.

We went to the Prince’s Hunting Grounds, about forty kilometres from downtown Prague. A former Czech prince was an avid hunter, and in his short fifty-year lifespan, he had killed over three hundred thousand types of animals, including lions, tigers, panthers and huge bears. These sorts of big game were mostly made into stuffed specimens. When we went into the Specimen Exhibition, it was like entering a huge primal forest.

Inside were animals that are harmless to people, and those that lie in wait to prey on humans; there were tame, cute creatures and also wild, grisly ones. It was as if every animal one could think of was to be found there. Most impressive was a specimen of a black bear that stood taller than a human, standing erect with paws extended, as if ready to attack any time.

This prince really had subdued all of the wild beasts of the forest.

Along with the specimens of various animals, this lofty, imposing palace that the prince had formerly lived in was also open to guests. The royal family lived extravagantly, its luxurious wealth laid out before our eyes.

Yun Ling walked with us, patiently translating everything the

guide said in Czech into Chinese for us.

She was quite popular. As she walked with us, all of the staff in the Prince's Hunting Grounds greeted her. When she came across someone with whom her relationship was especially good, she took a small jar of Tiger Balm out from her purse and gave it to them.

After we finished a three-hour tour of the Prince's Hunting Grounds, we went to a nearby restaurant for a sumptuous lunch. Afterward, Yun Ling took us around the city to see the tombs of some famous personalities, then we rode a cable car to view a rose garden at the mountain's peak. With a twinkle in her eyes, she said, "There is one place you cannot miss."

It was the National Theatre, which had been funded by donations from the people. It was imposing and dignified. What most impressed us were the numerous venerable bronze statues that stood inside the theatre, all of famous Czech artists.

Yun Ling told me, "These statues are an open recognition of the achievements of local artists."

The National Theatre highlighted opera and ballet with a strong national consciousness. The signs were only written in the Czech language.

Yun Ling explained to me, "Ruzicka and I were always very frugal with our living expenses. But, from the time our children were old enough to understand, with what we saved, we brought them here to watch the performances, hoping to cultivate some national pride in them. But the theatre is often very crowded, and tickets can be hard to get. Many times, I had to be very determined, coming out here at four in the morning, huddling in a blanket whilst I waited miserably to buy tickets. The ticket office opens at nine, so I was usually the first in the queue. It always pays to be early."

As she said this, Yun Ling's charming face lit up gently with maternal love.

When we came out from the National Theatre, walking toward the city centre through a passageway, I saw something surprising: there was a completely black sign hung on a wall. The sign had a date in Arabic numerals printed on it: 17-11-1989. On the bottom of the sign, wax dripped from many small candles. On the ground, glass bottles and jars were scattered around, all filled with flowers.

I stopped to look. As I gazed at the sign, it suddenly dawned on me that November 1989 was a pivotal month in the political fortunes of the Czech Republic. At the time, many Czech people had gathered in the nearby square to demonstrate, creating ripples with their Democracy Movement and initiating a revolutionary fervour that spread across the whole world.

"Thinking back on it now, I still feel I am in the midst of a sweet dream." Yun Ling spoke without reservation. "The people called that revolution a velvet revolution, because it was all accomplished in a very gentle way. There were tens of thousands of people gathered in the square, all holding bunches of keys, continually shaking them. The sound of metal on metal set up a noise that filled the whole land, ringing a death knell for the old government. That scene was so moving. Many who participated in or supported the movement could not help but weep openly. It was winter then, and it was freezing, but the hearts of the people were aflame. I have a friend who carried her beloved Pekingese to join the parade, but after she had spent the whole day walking and gone home, she found that the dog had almost frozen to death at her bosom!"

At that moment, standing in the passageway by the streets of Prague, in front of this sign so full of historical significance, and

hearing Yun Ling narrating the richness of its recent history in such an emotional tone, I could almost hear the sound of jangling keys coming from the square, ringing out the “voice of the people”.

One Czech person had told me, “For the past forty years, it seemed we were living in a sealed, stifling tin. Only now that we can suddenly breathe in large amounts of fresh air coming from the outside do we understand what the air in the tin was really like, how fetid and filthy.”

Now, the Czech people can apply for a passport and travel as they please, the media reports events freely, and newspapers have sprouted up everywhere, like bamboo shoots after the rain. All sorts of information flourishes, like hundreds of birds competing with each other in song.

In terms of economic development, it has been a long, arduous process for the Czech people, but after many years of seclusion, with renewed democracy and freedom, the whole Czech nation has emerged with great jubilation.

A Silent Composition—Moving the Spirit

That night, we went to a Chinese restaurant in Prague for dinner. We ordered appetisers, spicy chicken, ginger beef, sweet and sour pork, sautéed fish slices, spicy sliced pork, and a bottle of red wine.

We poured the wine into crystal glasses and drank a toast to our joyous meeting. However, we all knew quite clearly that we would part once this meal was over, and would not know if we would ever meet again. The smile on my face slowly melted away.

Yun Ling urged us to eat, and Ruzicka poured more wine. Our little table was warm and lively.

The chef was Czech, but the taste of the food was much better than I had expected. When accompanied by the mellow Czech wine, it was especially satisfying.

In the Czech Republic, Chinese restaurants probably number no more than five in all. Thinking of Yun Ling’s exquisite culinary skills, Risheng and I both came up with the suggestion: “If you have the capital, you should open a Chinese restaurant in Prague. Your prospects would be unlimited!”

“Opening a restaurant is too tiring,” Yun Ling said, shaking her head. “If I had the opportunity, I would like to open a teahouse. I would offer a wide range of tea leaves and all sorts of homemade snacks. I would create a pleasant environment for all of my friends in cultural circles to meet and chat.”

This was a dream Yun Ling had harboured for a long time.

In the past, this was just a “glass dream”, not to be touched. The moment it was touched, it would break. But today, in the free, democratic Czech Republic, there was a real hope that such a dream could come about.

The next time I return to the Czech Republic, I hope to be a customer in her teahouse. With all my heart, I wish her luck.

When we had finished our meal, we went to the old street market in the city centre for a walk. By the time we were all tired and ready to go home, it was quite late.

As they took us back to our hotel, we passed a big clock tower. Yun Ling suddenly stopped the car.

“This clock tower chimes every day at twelve, its music marking the time.”

We got out of the car and stood in the empty square in front of the clock tower, leaning our heads back to gaze up at it. Lit up

against the night sky, it stood over us like a dark giant.

The nights in early summer are a little cold in Prague. I put my hands into my jacket pockets and, shrinking back, waited quietly.

The moment slowly drew near. Then midnight passed, but the clock remained silent.

Ruzicka laughed awkwardly and said, "The clock is resting tonight. There will be no music."

The four of us got back into the car. In an instant, I distinctly heard a "soundless music". It was the melody of friendship, the sound of a perfectly tuned quartet who got together by chance, four hearts playing in harmony.

Poland, the Lute with a Broken String

I REMEMBER CLEARLY the afternoon that she stood at the corner beside the door of the tourist centre in Gdansk.

She had silvery-white curls. Her hair was ingeniously held in a bun with black chiffon, with delicate flowers adorning it. Her shimmering white silk blouse shimmered. Her tight red skirt was perfectly tailored. The black stockings and low heels were the final proof of her painstaking pursuit of the latest trends.

Even though her style of dress was young, her face was not. The very fine, but unmistakable, wrinkles on her face and the look in her eyes of having been through life's hardships were evidence of her age. Youth was past for her but she refused to let go of the illusion of youth.

When Risheng and I walked past her toward the doors of the tourist centre, this woman suddenly reached out toward me and in stiff English said, "Sleep?"

Startled, I quickly brushed her hand away.

Undiscouraged, the woman continued to use her halting, limited English to make her meaning clear. "You, sleeping place? My house has."

Oh, at last I understood what she meant. She was an ordinary Polish person wanting to rent a room to tourists to make a little

You Jin brings to her travel writing the same wit evident in her fiction. Whether she is trekking through the Amazon rainforest, exploring the caves of Granada with gypsy pickpockets, visiting a farm stay in Tasmania, or negotiating for a horsehair-lacquer cup in Myanmar, she is adept at weaving a whimsical incident into a compelling and amusing narrative. Her trademark spirited humour brings to life the vastness of the globe we inhabit, as well as more intimate encounters with the people she meets along the way.

You Jin has published more than 150 books in Chinese in Singapore, Taiwan, China, Hong Kong and Malaysia. These include novels, short story collections, travelogues and essays. She is the first recipient of both the Singapore Chinese Literary Award and the Montblanc-NUS Centre for the Arts Literary Award. She received the Zhong Shan Literary Award in 2010 and Singapore's Cultural Medallion in 2009.

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