



# Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress : A Novel

By Dai Sijie

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## Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress : A Novel By Dai Sijie

An enchanting literary debut—already an international best-seller.

At the height of Mao’s infamous Cultural Revolution, two boys are among hundreds of thousands exiled to the countryside for “re-education.” The narrator and his best friend, Luo, guilty of being the sons of doctors, find themselves in a remote village where, among the peasants of Phoenix mountain, they are made to cart buckets of excrement up and down precipitous winding paths. Their meager distractions include a violin—as well as, before long, the beautiful daughter of the local tailor.

But it is when the two discover a hidden stash of Western classics in Chinese translation that their re-education takes its most surprising turn. While ingeniously concealing their forbidden treasure, the boys find transit to worlds they had thought lost forever. And after listening to their dangerously seductive retellings of Balzac, even the Little Seamstress will be forever transformed.

From within the hopelessness and terror of one of the darkest passages in human history, Dai Sijie has fashioned a beguiling and unexpected story about the resilience of the human spirit, the wonder of romantic awakening and the magical power of storytelling.

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### Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

The Cultural Revolution of Chairman Mao Zedong altered Chinese history in the 1960s and '70s, forcibly sending hundreds of thousands of Chinese intellectuals to peasant villages for "re-education." This moving, often wrenching short novel by a writer who was himself re-educated in the '70s tells how two young men weather years of banishment, emphasizing the power of literature to free the mind. Sijie's unnamed 17-year-old protagonist and his best friend, Luo, are bourgeois doctors' sons, and so condemned to serve four years in a remote mountain village, carrying pails of excrement daily up a hill. Only their ingenuity helps them to survive. The two friends are good at storytelling, and the village headman commands them to put on "oral cinema shows" for the villagers, reciting the plots and dialogue of movies. When another city boy leaves the mountains, the friends steal a suitcase full of forbidden books he has been hiding, knowing he will be afraid to call the authorities. Enchanted by the prose of a host of European writers, they dare to tell the story of *The Count of Monte Cristo* to the village tailor and to read *Balzac* to his shy and beautiful young daughter. Luo, who adores the Little Seamstress, dreams of transforming her from a simple country girl into a sophisticated lover with his foreign tales. He succeeds beyond his expectations, but the result is not what he might have hoped for, and leads to an unexpected, droll and poignant conclusion. The warmth and humor of Sijie's prose and the clarity of Rilke's translation distinguish this slim first novel, a wonderfully human tale. (Sept. 17) Forecast: Sijie's debut was a best-seller and prize winner in France in 2000, and rights have been sold in 19 countries; it is also scheduled to be made into a film. Its charm translates admirably strong sales can be expected on this side of the Atlantic.

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From School Library Journal

Adult/High School-This beautifully presented novella tracks the lives of two teens, childhood friends who have been sent to a small Chinese village for "re-education" during Mao's Cultural Revolution. Sons of doctors and dentists, their days are now spent muscling buckets of excrement up the mountainside and mining coal. But the boys-Luo and the unnamed narrator-receive a bit of a reprieve when the villagers discover their talents as storytellers; they are sent on monthly treks to town, tasked with watching a movie and relating it in detail on their return. It is here that they encounter the little seamstress of the title, whom Luo falls for instantly. When, through a series of comic and clever tricks and favors, the boys acquire a suitcase full of forbidden Western literature, Luo decides to "re-educate" the ignorant girl whom he hopes will become his intellectual match. That a bit of *Balzac* can have an aphrodisiac effect is a happy bonus. Ultimately, the book is a simple, lovely telling of a classic boy-meets-girl scenario with a folktale's smart, surprising bite at the finish. The story movingly captures Maoism's attempts to imprison one's mind and heart (with the threat of the same for one's body), the shock of the sudden cultural shift for "bourgeois" Chinese, and the sheer delight that books can offer a downtrodden spirit. Though these moments are fewer after the love story is introduced, teens will enjoy them at least as much as the comic and romantic strands.

*Emily Lloyd, Fairfax County Public Library, VA*

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From Library Journal

This deceptively small novel has the power to bring down governments. In Mao's China, the Cultural

Revolution rages, and two friends caught in the flames find themselves shuttled off to the remote countryside for reeducation. The stolid narrator occasionally comforts himself by playing the violin, and both he and more outgoing friend Luo find that they have a talent for entertaining others with their re-creations of films they have seen. A little light comes their way when they meet the stunning daughter of the tailor in the town nearby, with whom Luo launches an affair. But the real coup is discovering a cache of forbidden Western literature including, of course, Balzac that forces open their world like a thousand flowers blooming. The literature proves their undoing, however, finally losing them the one thing that has sustained them. Dai Sijie, who was himself reeducated in early 1970s China before fleeing to France, wonderfully communicates the awesome power of literature of which his novel is proof. Highly recommended. Barbara Hoffert, "Library Journal"

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