

## American Apple by Li Jingwen

1 You have to admit that the moon in foreign countries is bigger than the moon in China. I don't even need to bring up the moon landing, spacecraft, UFO studies, and such. Just this apple, no big deal, really. How can the Americans grow such apples? The red ones are so red, green ones so green, shiny, wax like, as if painted on. They are real, but look so artificially made.

2 Not to brag about it, but as a small local newspaper reporter, the first time I saw an American apple was in an illustrated foreign magazine in our internal reference room. It looked like a supermarket with piles of apples neatly arranged, a pile of red apples, then a pile of green apples, then a pile of red apples again, and then another pile of green apples, and so on, stretched out like a dragon. Especially the red apples, they looked so red, so surprisingly red, that there wasn't even a hint of green on them.

3 In this city of ours where people like to chase whatever is fashionable, many kinds of foreign apples flood in like mad, the most attention-catching of which are American apples. The arrival of American apples added to the sorrow in my heart. I felt like a young lad suffering from unrequited love, who, despite his burning desire, does not dare to do anything bolder than cast furtive glances at his beloved girl from a distance. For a thousand times I had let my reporter's imagination run wild and savored in my mind how sweet and fragrant American apples would taste, but I would not walk close to them. One American apple for 50 yuan, more than the price for a whole case of our native "Red Fushi!" Not that my wallet cannot afford a few such American apples. It's just that in my heart I didn't want to waste my money on such hot foreign things.

4 On a weekend I took my daughter shopping. Of the tens of thousands of merchandise on display in the grand shopping mall her eyes were attracted to American apples alone. And she wouldn't give me peace until I said yes. I tried all the tricks I knew to divert her attention elsewhere and even bought her her favorite Haha fruit milk, Wang Wang crispy egg rolls, and fruit jelly, but failed in the end. She pouted unhappily the whole day and evening and didn't want to say one word to me. When she woke up the next morning, she still had not forgotten. I had never seen such stubbornness for so long in my daughter, even at her young age. I was shocked. These red American apples had such scary appeal to the young children.

5 I figured, no matter how I sliced it, I shouldn't have denied my daughter and dampened her fledgling curiosity about the unknown in the world. That is to say, I should have let my daughter experience what the American apple tasted like. So I burned the midnight oil for a few days, sold a few more stories, made a bit more money, and dashed to the grand mall. There I took out a one-hundred-yuan bill and bought two American apples from a young, all-smiling sales girl. When I got home with the two apples, my daughter jumped for joy, but she didn't want to eat them. Instead, she placed the apples right next to the white rabbit, her favorite toy. Every night before going to bed, she would take one last look and feel the apples in her hand gently. I said:

Why don't you eat them. I'll buy you more if you like them so much. She would shake her head, her eyes still fixed on the mouth-watering apples. She didn't have the heart to bite into the apples that looked so perfect in her mind.

6 Not long afterwards, at the end of an important business press conference, the sponsors gave each of us veteran reporters an exquisitely-packaged gift box, each containing four American apples. I was so thrilled with the gift, which felt so heavy in my hands. At my insistence, my daughter finally gave in and agreed to eat an apple. Watched by my daughter's eager eyes I peeled off the beautiful skin of the apple with a knife carefully, almost religiously, but still felt as though I was committing a crime.

7 I had expected my daughter to jump for joy again, yet at the very first bite, she froze, a puzzled look in her vivid eyes. She licked her mouth a few times as if not sure of her own taste. Then, with apparent disappointment, she placed the apple in my hand: Why does it taste like this?

8 I took a bite and my eyebrows furrowed right away, too. Indeed it tasted far worse than "Red Fushi."

9 So we left the exquisite box of American apples untouched and forgot about them for a long time. When we thought about them again, the apples inside were already rotten beyond recognition.

## *From* **Bend, Not Break: A Life in Two Worlds by Ping Fu**

1 Every night as I lay in bed trying to fall asleep, I would be haunted by images of my grandfather hovering above me. I would see him in my eight-year-old mind's eye as an elegant aging man at the start of the Cultural Revolution. Spring 1966.

2 My grandfather had a collection of traditional Chinese "scholar arts": inkwells from dynasties past, fans hand painted by famous artists, zitan wooden brush holders, chicken-blood stamp stones, and rare books of calligraphy. For two months before I was taken away from our Shanghai home, every night before he went to sleep, my grandfather would pull these objects carefully out of their wrapping papers and examine them. He would touch them delicately, as though they were dear old friends. Then he would select one object to keep on the nightstand next to his bed. The following day, a mask of sorrow covering his usually serene face, he would go out into the streets of Shanghai and sell it for a pittance.

3 Mao's Red Guard had shut down the farmers' markets and taken control of the city's food supply. Each family was given limited rations of rice, cooking oil, sugar, vegetables, and meat. Sometimes it wasn't enough to feed everyone in my household. A few farmers were selling

produce on the black market because they didn't have enough money to support their families. As a merchant-class family, we had always had enough money to eat. But in those days food was increasingly hard to come by. My grandfather knew that if he wasn't willing to part with his precious heirlooms, his family might go hungry. It was a sacrifice he was willing to make.

4 Each night when my grandfather took out the valuable pieces that he planned to sell the next day, he would describe to me why he loved them. One night, he showed me a fan that had been painted by a famous Chinese opera singer, Mei Lanfang. As he told me the story of how he'd gotten the fan—it had been a gift from his beloved wife, who had gone to extraordinary lengths to purchase it for his sixtieth birthday—he touched his fingers to it gently. Then he held it up to the light and fanned it out, revealing a picture of plum flowers that sparkled like fairy dust.

5 Another evening, my grandfather drew a small gold nugget out of his pocket and massaged it between his fingers as he spoke. Although it was a simple, rough chunk of metal, he had rubbed it so often that it had developed a fine, smooth finish.

6 “Once, many years ago,” my grandfather explained, “I was walking down the street when I caught notice of a blind man playing the erhu”—a traditional Chinese musical instrument. “About three hundred children were gathered around to listen, so I stopped as well. The blind man's music was enchanting. After he finished his song, I left him a few coins, expecting to continue on my way. But the man began tugging at my robe.

7 “‘I want to sell you this gold nugget,’ the blind man said. ‘Won't you buy it from me? I need the money to feed my children.’

8 “‘No, I don't collect gold nuggets,’ I replied, refusing to buy this one from the blind man. I said good-bye and walked away.

9 “The next day, I saw the same man playing. Once again, I was enchanted by his music and stopped to listen. Once again, the blind man pulled at my robe and asked me to buy his gold nugget, but I refused.

11 My grandfather sighed heavily. “Tomorrow, I'll sell this nugget to a pawnshop for maybe seventy yuan—about one one-thousandth what I paid for it. What makes me most sorrowful is not the money. It's the fact that I'll be selling my lucky charm. You see, ever since that day when I bought this gold nugget, I've carried it with me in my pocket and rubbed it to bring our family good luck. That's why it has been polished to this glossy sheen.”

12 At that moment, my grandfather's lips turned up into a heart-breaking smile. “Then again, it seems right, somehow. Buying this nugget was how I once helped a man save his children. Now, in selling it, I'll be saving my own children. I guess this gold nugget has done what it was supposed to do.”