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Zhang/Shanghai Express

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If you were ever to work in a train station and had a bit of slack time, then when you saw a train pull into the station, you’d be bound to wonder, “Where are all these people coming from?” And if you saw one packed with passengers leave the station, you’d wonder, “Where are all these people going to?” What’s more, there never seems to be any end to the coming and going of the trains and no end to the stream of passengers crowding in and out of them either.

Now, this is a curious state of affairs because if you think back to the days when there were no trains, weren’t there just as many people who wanted to go on long trips? This isn’t just some off-the-wall idea that I came up with out of the blue either, for even as I speak there are some people out there on the platform discussing this very issue!

It is 3 January 1935, 2:40 p.m.—twenty-five minutes before the scheduled departure of the Shanghai Express. We are in Peiping."¹ This is the East Station. You know, the one

¹. After the Republican Revolution of 1911, the government was established at Nanking (lit. “southern capital”; now Nanjing) and then moved to Peking (lit. “northern capital”; now Beijing) the next year. Peking was China’s capital from 1912 until 1928, when Chiang Kai-shek moved the capital back to Nanking. Thus, when Li Chengfu speaks of the Peking
by the Chengyang City Gate. Passengers are pouring in. From the shish-shish and chish-chish made by every imaginable kind of shoe and boot scraping against the station platform, you can tell what a great swarm of people must be there. Yet even all the din raised by so much hustle and bustle doesn’t lessen the overwhelming feeling of cold that hangs in the air. There isn’t much snow—there is only whatever hasn’t been swept clean from the tracks, plus the little that still nestles in the cracks between the bricks of the city wall just to the north of the station. Be that as it may, in the eyes of those passengers who look at it, it’s more than enough to magnify the general impression of cold. It’s a clear day, too. But once the sun is no longer directly overhead, it hides itself away in the afternoon sky, leaving the world below all the more drab and dreary.

With a great whoosh, a cold wind rises up, grabs the dry snow from the cracks in the city wall, and hurls it like so much sand against the faces of the people on the platform. Even wealthy passengers in bulky overcoats with fur collars turtle their necks in and wrap their collars tight. Even so, their noses turn red as turnips in the frigid air. Hot white vapor spews from the great steam pistons on the locomotive, while moisture condenses on the axles and drips down into thick icicles. In similar fashion, the hot breath of the porters steams from their mouths into the cold air, while clear mucus drips nonstop from their crimson noses. People in short jackets slip their hands underneath them to keep their fingers warm; they protect their ears by pulling the

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government, he refers to the sixteen years between 1912 and 1928. The Nationalist government, under Chiang Kai-shek, had its capital at Nanking from 1928 until the Japanese invasion of 1937. Since we are told on the first page of *Shanghai Express* that our trip takes place in 1935, this places the novel in the Nanking period.

2. Pinyin: Zhengyang.
flaps of their rabbit-fur caps down over them, but their unprotected faces turn blue in the cold.

Yes, it's cold out there on the platform, but on the train itself, in the first-class section, things were far different. Three men who had come to see off one of the passengers were crowded together with him in a small compartment. Although they had all taken off their fur overcoats and fur hats, they were still sweating.

Hu Ziyun, whose compartment this was, was a second- or perhaps third-rate figure in government circles. Clear-completed, round face; small moustache. Add a pair of horn-rim glasses to complete the effect, and you end up with something resembling an official. He wore a camel-hair gown lined with fine blue silk. The sleeves were rolled up, revealing a white silk shirt underneath. Mr. Hu held the bowl of a pipe in one hand and gesticulated with the stem as he spoke. As the three companions who came to see him off spoke, there was not a single serious comment in anything they said. Their coming to see him off was a formality pure and simple. Besides, if you've got anything serious to say, you say it long before getting on a train. Other than smoking, Mr. Hu stopped speaking now and, other than smoking, seemed to do nothing but smile. Since three people had come to see him off, he couldn’t decide which one to speak to first and so simply smiled at them all.

"Porter, don’t you have even one empty berth?" It was a woman’s voice, gentle and feminine.

"No, not a single one," replied the porter. "Now, if you were a man, I might be able to work something out on the way, but I certainly can’t arrange anything for a woman. Go to the dining car, if you please, and take a seat there."

"How can you be so unreasonable? How is it that you can work something out for a man but not for a woman? You’re quite obviously bent on insulting me to my face!"

"Now don’t get upset, Miss," replied the porter. "Listen
while I explain. According to railroad regulations, we are only permitted to put men into compartments with other men and women into compartments with other women. At this moment, all the compartments in this coach are full. Every one of our compartments has two berths. If there was a woman in one of the compartments and the other berth was empty, I could let you have it. But if there’s a man in a compartment with an empty berth, I can’t very well put you in with him.”

These negotiations between the female passenger and the porter had long since disquieted the entire coach. Even Hu Ziyun stuck his head out of his compartment door to see what the commotion was all about. He saw a young woman of about twenty wearing a fur coat with a high collar. In the midst of that collar there appeared a pretty, powdered face. A pair of jade earrings dangling from her lobes swung continuously back and forth with the movements of her head. Those flashing, deep black eyes and fluffy black hair were enough to captivate any man. As she raised her hand to smooth her hair, one could see a diamond ring as large as a good-sized bean on her ring finger. But how could a young woman so à la moderne fail to be familiar with railroad regulations?

Conscious of so many people staring at her, the young woman said, “In that case, for the time being I’ll go sit in the dining car, but if a vacancy does occur, make sure to let me know.” As she said this, she picked up two suitcases and, with a walk well calculated to show her figure to full advantage, made her way to the dining car.

Talking to himself as much as anyone else, the porter said, “If you get on the train without a berth reservation, you ought to take it up with the trainmaster. What good does it do to talk with the likes of us porters? Do you mean to tell me that a young woman as modern as all that has never been on a train before?” Just as Hu Ziyun was on the
verge of asking the porter something or other, an electric bell started to ding-ding-ding: the train was about to get under way. In a great flurry of activity, those who had come to see people off got down from the train, while the passengers remaining aboard went to the windows to wave their good-byes.

In the course of so much activity, all that had previously transpired was quickly forgotten. Hu Ziyun was now alone in his compartment. He had reserved the lower berth; the top one remained empty. After the train got under way, he drew the door closed and quickly found that the compartment was even more unbearably hot than before. At this point, he took off even his robe and sat there wearing only a pair of shorts and a shirt. Looking outside, he enjoyed the passing scenery.

Hu Ziyun hadn’t set foot outside of Peiping since arriving two years ago. Glad to be on the move again after such a long period of physical inertia, he was just in the mood for such sight-seeing. As soon as the train got past the Yungting City Gate and into the countryside, everywhere you looked you could see the accumulation of several days of snowfall. Against all that white, peasant homes with a few bare trees around them seemed to have shrunk in size. No one was to be seen walking in the fields. This, of course, presented a desolate prospect, but at least it was one that you would not be able to enjoy within the confines of the city. How pleasant it was to sit there wearing only shorts and a shirt while enjoying this panorama of white, a panorama he continued to enjoy until the train pulled into the station at Fengt’ai.

Peddlers rushed back and forth on the platform outside the train. Two things were worth noting: the hawkers of

winter plum blossoms who held bouquets on high and the vendors of cucumbers that were thin as your finger and tied with dried reeds into little bundles of four each and arranged in flat baskets. Just as Hu Ziyun opened the window and stuck his head out, ready to ask the price, a man with two bunches of these cucumbers in his hand nodded in his direction. Ziyun said, “Well I’ll be! If it isn’t Mr. Li! So you’re on this train too. Hurry up and come aboard so we can visit. You’re just in the nick of time. I was so lonely in here all by myself that I couldn’t take it much longer.” Mr. Li was also all by himself and felt just as lonely as Mr. Hu and so, on running into this old acquaintance, quite readily hopped up on the train and hurried to Ziyun’s compartment. The latter shook his hand and said, “Chengfu, how did you manage to get away from work at this time of year?”

Chengfu smiled and put the cucumbers down on the tea stand in front of the window. “Have some fresh vegetables. These cucumbers are a specialty along this stretch of track. They raise them in underground hothouses.” Only after he had sat down did he answer Mr. Hu’s question. “The school wants to make a few purchases in Shanghai, and they’re sending me to take care of it.”

“What number is your compartment?” Ziyun asked.

Chengfu laughed and replied, “Pauper professors like me can’t be compared to a man of substance like yourself. I’m in the second-class coach.”

Ziyun objected, “You must be using public funds, so what’s the point in saving such a little bit of money?”

Chengfu said, “Well, that’s the regulation. It’s not permitted for me to make up the difference myself and go first class either. The compartment I’m in has four berths, but since I’m the only one in it, my situation isn’t too different from yours up here in first class.” He frowned and continued, “It certainly is hot enough up here in first class.”
“The equipment that we Chinese use in our daily lives isn’t scientificized yet,” explained Ziyun. “We have steam heat, but once the steam arrives it’s free to get as hot as it wants to, with no limitation whatsoever. If we were abroad, it wouldn’t be that way. There you just set the temperature for whatever you want.” At this juncture the porter came in with a pot of tea. You could tell from the thin uniform he wore that he too found the overheating very annoying. Ziyun queried him, “Since you are obviously aware of the overheating problem, why don’t you make some improvements in the steam pipes?”

The porter smiled and answered in a thick Tientsin accent, “You’re something else! Let me tell you how things are for other people. In a westward-bound uncovered car two people froze to death at T’angku.\(^5\) To be sure, it’s uncomfortably hot in here, but we ought to make the best of it.”

Nodding in agreement, Chengfu smiled cheerfully and said, “He’s got a point there. We really ought to make the best of it.”

“Make the best of it—that reminds me of something that happened when the train started out from Peiping,” said Ziyun. “A young woman got on and couldn’t find a first-class compartment. Had to go sit in the dining car. But according to you the second-class coach is not at all crowded. Why didn’t she go there? She’d have a place to sleep and save a little money in the bargain.”

“But a lot of people getting on in Tientsin have reserved second-class berths,” replied Chengfu. “Probably sold out. My good brother, Ziyun, has always had a strong chivalric streak in him that makes him look out for the welfare of pretty young women,” he continued lightheartedly.

\(^5\) T’angku (pinyin: Tanggu) is a port city about thirty miles east of downtown Tientsin.
“No, that’s not it. It’s just that what you said rang a bell with what happened in Peiping. After all, Chengfu, I already have three wives; why would I keep an eye out for another?”

Chengfu smiled and observed, “But a bigwig in the Tax Bureau like yourself has money to burn. You could easily afford four or even five for that matter.”

“Well, I suppose I could afford it, but I wonder whether my body could?” Ziyun guffawed at his own humor. Chengfu picked up the teapot from the stand in front of the window, poured himself a cup, and was just about to put it to his lips when Ziyun stopped him with a wave of his hand. “Train tea is awful. Let’s go to the dining car and have a cup of coffee.” While saying this he stood up and donned his gown.

Also bothered by the overheating in the compartment, Chengfu stepped out into the corridor to wait for his friend. He hadn’t noticed that the door of the compartment next to the Ziyun’s was half open. Suddenly he felt something soft and cool against his hand. He looked down. Seeing the head of a grey Russian wolfhound protruding from the partially closed door, Ziyun stepped back in alarm. Glancing into the compartment, Chengfu saw two young men dressed in Western suits. One of them was dark complected and fat, and it was he who was holding the leash. “You have to buy a half ticket to take your dog on the train,” Chengfu reflected to himself. Anyone who could afford to take his dog in a first-class sleeper must have a lot of money. Initially, Chengfu had thought of telling the man to keep his dog on a tighter leash, but then he thought that since he wasn’t staying in that particular compartment anyway, it really had nothing to do with him. What’s more, since rich people like to get up on their high horses at the drop of a hat, Chengfu didn’t feel like giving the dark fat man an excuse to jump
down his throat over something that really wasn’t any of his business to begin with. With this thought in mind, he drew back yet another step.

As Ziyun came out, he saw his friend draw back but didn’t ask why he had done so. Seeing that he had gotten away with it the first time, the wolfhound stepped even further into the passageway, thrust his pointed muzzle in the direction of Ziyun, and began sniffing him all over with that strange-looking snout of his. Just as Chengfu had done, Ziyun stepped back with a start. Now, this passageway was no more than two feet wide to begin with, and so as Ziyun and Chengfu maneuvered in it they couldn’t avoid bumping into each other. Not only did that fat, dark-completed young man not leash in his dog, he even squinted his chubby little eyes into an amused smile. Ziyun didn’t say anything, but he did give him a dirty look before turning around and making his way into the dining car, which was right next to the first-class sleeper. Since it was much too early to eat, most of the tables were empty. A foreigner sat at one of the middle tables whiling away the time by dealing himself poker hands; a bottle of beer and a glass were set on the table before him. At the far end of the car, a group of dining-car stewards in white uniforms, some standing and some sitting, were passing their time in idle chatter.

As Ziyun entered the dining car, he put the tin of cigarettes he was carrying down on the first table. It wasn’t until he turned to sit down that he noticed that a young woman was already seated at that table by the window, the same one who had earlier been looking for an empty berth. A foreign book in her hand, she was scrunched up in the corner chair by the window reading. Disturbed by the clang of the cigarette tin on the table, she looked up to find the source of the disturbance and found herself face to face with Ziyun. From his point of view, Ziyun thought he had been some-
what rash and impolite in tossing the can down without first looking, and so he couldn’t help but blush. She, on the other hand, didn’t seem to mind in the least and simply went back to her reading. “Excuse me,” said Ziyun in a low voice as he backed down the car to the next table and sat down facing in her direction. Chengfu took the seat across from him. A steward came over, and as Ziyun ordered two cups of coffee he couldn’t help but glance in the direction of the young woman.

By now she had taken off the dark fur coat with the high collar and sat there wearing a purplish red cheongsam. The sleeve openings and borders were decorated with white trim, the sleeves were cut high, the waist was formfitting, and beneath the front one could make out the clear outlines of full breasts. Although this cheongsam wasn’t in the latest style, its color and the feminine figure it enclosed combined to lend it a provocative air. Holding that foreign book in her pale, smooth hands, the young woman sat there in the most artless of poses and continued to read. Ziyun wondered to himself, “What kind of woman is she exactly? She’s a little too old for a student, and that kind of clothing is a bit extravagant for someone who’s still in school. Could she be a social butterfly of the kind who’s someone’s concubine? No, that doesn’t make any sense either. If you just look at the refined impression she gives sitting there reading—a foreign book at that—you can tell she’s got some education behind her. Can’t be a concubine.” As these thoughts went through his head, he sat there with his eyes fixed steadily on this young woman.

When the steward set the coffee cups down on the table, Ziyun dragged his over to him with his left hand, all the while continuing to stare at the young woman; with his right hand he felt for a spoon, picked it up, and started stirring. “Don’t you take sugar in it?” asked Chengfu. It would
seem that Ziyun didn’t hear him for he simply kept on stir-
ing his coffee and staring. Though she was seated some-
what farther away, the young woman heard Chengfu’s words
very clearly. Slowly she lowered the foreign book and looked
out over top of it in the direction of the two men; even if
you didn’t see her lips, from the expression in those lively
eyes alone you could tell that she was highly amused. It was
only for a second or so that she looked before raising the
book again to eye level to resume her reading.

At this point, Ziyun took a spoonful of the coffee and put
it in his mouth. It was so bitter that it curled his tongue.
As he lowered his head, he discovered that the sugar bowl
was still in the middle of the table. So that was it! It was
bitter because he hadn’t put any sugar in it yet! Noticing
that Chengfu was also observing him with an amused eye,
he couldn’t help but feel embarrassed. He smiled and said,
“I like strong tea too. That’s why the bitterness of coffee
doesn’t bother me in the least. Ordinarily, I never put sugar
into normally brewed coffee, but this stuff is so strong that
I’ll just have to add a little sugar. Coffee isn’t like tea. When
you drink tea, all that you ask is that it be hot and fragrant.
You’re not concerned with flavor. You know, this is really
wicked!” He put two lumps of sugar into his cup. Just then,
Chengfu bent his head down to light a cigarette. As Cheng-
fu struck a match, Ziyun took advantage of the opportunity
afforded to toss a third cube into his cup. Ziyun began to
feel that he wasn’t quite himself today and now no longer
dared stare at the young woman all that much. Had she
noticed his odd behavior? He had no way of telling.

But now it was the young woman who was talking.
“Steward, is the coffee freshly brewed?”
“Yes, it is.”
“All right, I’ll take a cup as well.” As the steward brought
her coffee to her, he picked up the sugar bowl from Ziyun’s
Off in a corner all alone
table on the way and moved it over to her table. She took a small spoon and, stirring the coffee as she spoke, said to the steward, “Coffee has to be piping hot to be good.”

“We’d never serve anything second rate in this dining car,” the steward responded. “Our coffee has aroma.”

“It’s aroma that makes coffee enjoyable.” Overhearing this, Ziyun couldn’t help but be struck by the fact that the tenor of the young woman’s observation was the same as his own. How could such a thing be entirely a matter of chance? And so he raised his head and looked in her direction again. Putting her book down, she held it open with her right hand, placed her left elbow next to it, and cupped her chin in her hand. She seemed to be looking half at the book and half in the direction of Ziyun’s table.

As Ziyun saw it, you could say that she was so modern and uninhibited that she acted this way because she didn’t care about appearances, or you could say that she actually was peeking at him. How Ziyun longed to peek right back at her! She was so modern and sophisticated, however, that he didn’t dare. A woman as modern as all that wouldn’t be intimidated by anyone. Who’s to say she wouldn’t come straight out and ask him what he thought he was looking at? On the other hand, how could a young woman who kept glancing about so boldly be annoyed by his attention? And so it was that as Ziyun conversed with Chengfu, from time to time he also looked in her direction. Furthermore, he made so bold as to talk in a good, loud voice.

“Even though we’re in a recession right now,” he told Chengfu, “you still see crowds of people traveling back and forth from north to south. Why just this morning I saw someone with a first-class ticket who couldn’t find an empty berth in the first-class sleeper. Now wouldn’t you call that strange?” At this point, the young woman was looking straight at their table and seemed on the verge of speaking. Initially, Chengfu had wondered why his friend was behav-
ing so absentmindedly, but hearing Ziyun say this he now began to realize what was going on. How could Ziyun be talking about anyone else save the young woman sitting over there in the corner? This must be the person he was talking about when he had earlier told Chengfu that there was someone in the dining car who couldn’t get a sleeper in first class. Chengfu couldn’t resist turning around in his seat to take a look. She held a teaspoon in her right hand and was stirring her coffee. She held the spoon between her thumb and first two fingers and had her pinky and ring finger cocked up in the air. Her ring finger sported a sparkling diamond. Since she quite obviously came from a wealthy family, why was she traveling alone? Now that really was strange. Chengfu couldn’t very well continue to stare at her indefinitely, and so after a glance or two he turned back and faced Ziyun, who suggested, “Why don’t you move in with me? It only amounts to thirty or forty dollars more anyway.”

Chengfu laughed and replied, “Didn’t you just say we’re in a recession? In that case, we ought to cut back on expenses, right? Besides, as I said before, people like me who make our living on blackboards and chalk can’t be compared to important people like yourself.”

Ziyun gave a cold smile. “You think too much of me. How can I be counted as a bigwig? I’ve got enough to get by on, to be sure, but that’s about it. My monthly expenses alone must run to fourteen or fifteen hundred dollars. Just thinking about it scares even me.”

“You spend that much every month?” asked Chengfu in surprise.

“Sure do. Can’t figure it out myself. How can I possibly manage to run through all that money every month? And that’s just household expenses—doesn’t even include what I spend on social activities outside the home.”

Just as Ziyun was hitting his stride in this exchange with Chengfu, the young woman called loudly for the steward.
When he arrived at her table, she asked, “I’d like some cigarettes. Do you have Garricks?”

“We only have Three Castles.”

The young woman pursed her lips in the direction of Ziyun’s table and said, “Aren’t those Garricks they’re smoking over there?”

The steward gave her a slight bow and replied, “They brought them with them when they boarded in Peiping. We don’t carry Garricks on the train.”

“You people in the dining car are stick-in-the-muds, every one of you! Never want to try anything even slightly different. All right then, go!” The steward had no choice but to smile and walk away. Now, since Ziyun was not deaf, how could he have failed to hear all this, especially since he had his eye on that young woman to begin with? Each and every word she said bored deep into his ears.

As the steward passed his table, Ziyun stopped him and asked in a low voice, “Did that young lady say she wanted Garricks?”

“Sure did, but we don’t carry them on the train. Apparently, she thought you’d bought this tin after boarding.”

Ziyun smiled and quoted an old saw, “Tobacco and tea belong neither to you nor to me—they’re the kind of thing you can offer to share with anyone.” Why not just take this tin of mine and give it to her? All alone on a train ride, she’s got to have something to relieve the boredom, right?” Saying this, he handed the tin of cigarettes to the steward.

The steward felt that Ziyun was making a bit too free in offering his cigarettes to a young woman he didn’t know. Chengfu, too, was anxious about the reception such an offer would meet. After all, according to commonly accepted

6. Tobacco and wine are neither yours nor mine (yanjiu bufenjia) is the more commonly heard expression to the effect that such trifles are really public property.
rules of propriety, when two people meet by chance, they must rigorously respect the division that properly exists between the sexes. How then does it do to offer cigarettes to an absolute stranger of the opposite sex? However, cigarettes in hand, the steward took a distant peek at the young woman and discovered that she was still wearing a pleased expression, even though she must have heard Ziyun’s comments. Since she had heard and didn’t seem to mind, that meant she wouldn’t refuse. And so the steward deliberately raised the tin on high, marched over to her table, and set them down.

He smiled and said, “These belong to the passenger there at the next table. He says that since tobacco and tea belong neither to you nor to me, he’d like you to have these. The young woman first looked at the tin of cigarettes and then, laughing lightly, stood up, nodded politely at Ziyun, and said, “Thank you.”

“Think nothing of it.” Ziyun also stood as he spoke. “Since they don’t carry this brand on the train, take as many as you please.”

“In that case, thank you again.” Smiling, she fished out four or five cigarettes, gave the tin back to the steward, and told him to return it to Ziyun.

Ziyun, who was still standing, saw what was going on and waved his hand vigorously back and forth in her direction. “Doesn’t matter. Keep the whole tin. I’ve got lots more in my traveling bag back in the compartment.”

She smiled at him again. “In that case then, I’ll just hold on to these. Thanks again.” Having said this, she sat down quite naturally, lit a cigarette, and went back to her reading. Ziyun thought to himself, “You could say she’s fairly uninhibited. A slightly more proper woman would never accept a gift from a stranger. Wonder if she could be a dance-hall girl? No, you’d never catch a dance-hall girl sitting there well behaved as all that and reading.”
Just as he had decided that that riddle wasn’t all that easy to solve, the young woman hailed the steward again. “When does this train get to Tientsin?”

“Six o’clock,” answered the steward. “Are you getting off at Tientsin?”

“Well, what do you expect? Do you think I’m going to sit here in the dining car for two days and two nights until we get to Shanghai? I’ll have to get off in Tientsin and work it out with the stationmaster so that I can change to another train.”

“As long as you have a round-trip ticket, there’s no problem,” explained the steward. “There’s no need to take it up with the stationmaster. Peiping-Shanghai round-trip tickets are good for forty days. The only requirement is that you get back to your starting point within forty days. Along the way you can get off anywhere you want to, doesn’t matter a bit.”

“There are a number of stations in Tientsin. If I want to find a good hotel, which one should I get off at?” she asked.

“Get off at the old station.”

“Which is the old station?”

“It’s the main station.”

The young woman put one hand across the cover of her book and, lifting her head, turned her eyes away for a moment in thought. “Oh, you mean Central Station,” she said with a smile, giving the name of the station in English.

In general, people who don’t have all that good a command of English like to say one or two words in it to show off. People who really know the language well consider that sort of thing tacky, but it’s usually enough to fool the average person. And so when Ziyun heard her use two English words, he immediately decided that his latest guess as to her background—dance-hall girl—was also mistaken.

As she spoke, she opened the small purse at her side, took out a five-dollar bill, handed it to the steward, and said, “I’ll pay whatever bill those two gentlemen have incurred. Just
take it out of this.” In his wildest dreams, Ziyun had never expected this young woman to be so generous. He immediately stood up and politely declined her offer; even Li Chengfu got up and said there was no need for her to pay. She smiled at the two men and replied, “Didn’t I just hear this gentleman quote the old saw that *tobacco and tea belong neither to you nor to me*?” It was such an apt comment that Ziyun could find no comeback to it and simply let her pay the bill.