

Chenxi and the Foreigner

Sally Rippin

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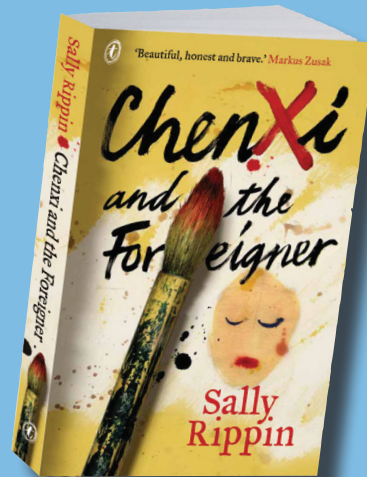
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Synopsis

Chenxi and the Foreigner is set in 1989, just four weeks before the horrific Tiananmen Square massacre which shocked the world. Thousands of protesters, mainly students, were killed, although the full extent of the killings may never be established. Troops stormed through universities, looking for ringleaders then beating and shooting them.

In the novel, an eighteen year-old Australian student, Anna White, is visiting her domineering, businessman father in Shanghai who seems obsessed with making money. She is ostensibly there to study Chinese art but she seems unsure about her future and this holiday is also an escape from her needy mother. She becomes infatuated with Chenxi, the art student employed to help her settle into the course and also to translate for her. He is a talented and streetwise artist who seems indifferent to her and who is something of an enigma. Anna finds the humidity, pollution and crowds of Shanghai oppressive and does not enjoy being stared at and ridiculed as a foreigner.

However, she becomes more and more obsessed with Chenxi despite her growing awareness that she does not understand him or the world he lives in and despite his often arrogant attitude towards her. It is obvious that he is an independent and rebellious thinker who does not want to paint that which the government deems is suitable. He is frequently in trouble with the police. With no real encouragement and a certain amount of arrogance she believes she can save him from himself and from the oppressive regime.

Towards the end of the novel, the headstrong Anna is thrown out of the apartment by her father. Even then she believes she can still save Chenxi. She is learning to make decisions for herself and believes she can make them for Chenxi, too. It is only when she returns to Australia that she begins to understand his real situation. She sees the Tiananmen Square massacre on

the news. Thousands have been killed and she decides to write his story.

Chenxi and the Foreigner has been published twice. First published in 2002, it was self-censored by Sally Rippin. She feared that if the book contained sex, swearing and too much about Chinese politics it might be black-listed. In this edition she leaves these ingredients in the novel, albeit in a non-confronting way.

About the Author

Sally Rippin was born in Darwin, grew up in South-East Asia, has lived in China and France and now lives in Melbourne. In addition to her novel *Chenxi and the Foreigner*, she has written and illustrated several prize-winning children's books.

Themes

Cross cultural questions, Chinese culture, art, freedom of speech, cultural change, sexual awakening, teenage pregnancy.

This novel is not simply a love story. It contains many complex issues and ideas that are closely woven into the narrative.

The first theme is obvious in the title. The main character is not Anna, but Chenxi, the handsome, highly talented and rebellious art student. He is at the heart of the book. The Australian student, Anna, is indeed the foreigner. She is not only a non Mandarin speaker but she is in a dusty, humid, pollution-ridden city, where she is ogled and laughed at. She knows nothing really of Chinese culture and she certainly does not understand the political situation in which Chinese students particularly are placed in 1989. Nor does she understand the way art is seen in China at this time.

It is set just four weeks before the infamous Tiananmen Square massacre, after the time of the Cultural Revolution and the Gang of Four. The book looks closely

at what it is like to be a free-thinker in an oppressive society. You should read the afterword and chapter 15 to gain some understanding of the political situation in China at this time.

Sally Rippin says that this is a novel about artistic freedom. Rippin is herself an artist and book illustrator and she too studied art in Shanghai from 1989–1992.

It is also about the right to express yourself freely in general terms. Take note of the relationship between Anna and her parents and the ways that she, too, feels a need to break free, to make decisions for herself and to take responsibility for these decisions.

Because she is an artist, the novel is very visual. It paints a very vivid picture of Shanghai in the late 1980s. Look at the way she describes Shanghai and Zuan. A very strong sense of place is created in the book. The city has changed since the eighties and would be almost unrecognisable now. Read the afterword to see how the city has changed.

Another theme of the novel is how difficult it is to live as a foreigner in an alien city and culture. Anna is isolated and sometimes frightened. She does not speak the language, nor does she understand the Chinese culture. She is both stubborn and courageous in her determination to survive the cultural shock.

It is important to think about the ways Anna learns and changes as the book develops. Even after all she has learned at the end of the book she still believes she can change the world into a more comfortable place just by willing it to happen. It is probably not until she returns to Australia that she really understands the situation which Chenxi has chosen and why he has chosen it.

We see in the book how some foreigners were taking advantage of China. Only peripherally interested in its politics and apparently not interested at all in its culture, they hide away in expatriate enclaves like the Shanghai Hilton and the Australian Consulate and use China as a source of money-making through astute business deals.

There is also the development of her infatuation with Chenxi, which becomes almost an obsession. There are many questions that need to be asked about this relationship as you read through the novel. Consider whether it ever had a chance to blossom.

Chapter 1

We are plunged immediately into the noise and traffic chaos of Shanghai. A bus 'lurches' and 'groans'. The difference in living between the Chinese and the foreigners is made clear right from the start.

What differences are pointed out to us?

Write about 300 words describing the street where you live.

We also see Chenxi for the first time. Anna was not able to 'read' him.

What do we learn about his physical appearance?

What are your first impressions of his personality?

Mr White is introduced here too and it is easier to sum him up.

What do we learn about him?

Chapter 2

Anna and Chenxi go to buy 'the four treasures' for Chinese painting.

What are they?

Why do you think Chenxi does not use the new bank notes given to him by Anna's father?

Chenxi's attitude to Anna appears to be arrogant and eventually he deserts her when he sees a friend.

How does Rippin's depiction of the streets and the climate add to our sense of Anna's misery and isolation?

How is she made to feel by the actions of the taxi driver?

Chapter 3

Why does the noodle seller pack up?

Why do you think it is so important for Chenxi to try to con his way into the bar?

Chapter 4

Anna wakes to the sound of waltzes in the park and is enchanted by the different world that she is seeing. She feels she must write about it in her journal.

But the 'foreign' world outside is not replicated in the apartment. Here her father and she eat muesli and toast. We learn more about Anna's relationship with her parents. She views her mother as weak and ineffectual and far too dependent on Anna. On the other hand her father is anxious that she keeps isolated from the Chinese community. He would much rather she kept to the Hilton and the consulate where she might meet some nice western friends.

How does Anna react to her father's protectiveness?

Although smothered by her parents, Anna is in a foreign place and she depends on Chenxi, who once again lets her down.

Anna finds Chenxi intensely attractive, but why is she having doubts about him?

Chapter 5

What do we learn in this chapter about the life that Chenxi and his mother lead?

How do we know that there is a secret in his life?

Anna learns again what it is like to be a foreigner.

What is the reaction of the other students to her?

How does it make her feel?

How is Chenxi forcing her to be independent? Why is he doing this?

Chapter 6

There is a very lively picture of the rather uninviting noodle shop and the market.

How does Rippin create these pictures?

Try to create a sense of place by describing somewhere in a world you are familiar with. (Perhaps a shop, a market, a sports ground.) How can you make it come alive?

What is meant by saying that Anna's mother is 'a hard person to leave'?

What is her father's 'unfinished business'?

Why does Anna get the sense that she is wasting time in Shanghai?

Chapter 7

Chenxi asks Anna about his painting and is really surprised that she should know a lot about art. Anna finally 'reaches' him. Then they are asked to paint a model but the results turn out blank, formulaic. For the first time Anna realises that this was 'a forced style', a 'compromise.'

Why is this a 'sinister' glimpse into the attitude towards art in China at this time?

Chapter 8

Anna's father says life is about 'compromise'.

What do you feel he means by compromise?

What do we learn about the attitude of members of her family towards each other?

How is it shown here?

Anna's father has isolated himself from the world he is living in. He sees himself as superior and can't even pronounce the simplest Chinese name. He is portrayed as a patronising money-grubber who is milking China for all he can get. He has no Chinese friends, no interest in China as a country.

What is symbolic about the double-glazed windows?

Why does Rippin describe Chenxi's room in the last paragraph?

Is her father right when he says Anna has not been there long enough to understand? (p59)

Chapter 9

Here is a lovely description of the calming, meditative mixing of ink and the traditional painting of bamboo. Anna learns that she must use her energy, her 'chi' to paint. She also bravely tries the noodles in what was really an act of defiance towards her father and finds

them delicious. She invites Chenxi to the consulate but is frustrated when he waits outside.

Do you think Chenxi is teasing Anna or wooing her?

Why do you think he stays outside?

Chapter 10

Why is living as an expatriate a 'constant ego trip'? (p 73)

Why do you think Anna smoked the hashish when she is not a drug-user?

Laurent says that Chenxi 'should watch out.' Why? (p76)

Why does Chenxi think that 'in your own country the worst racists are your fellow men'? (p80)

Chapter 11

Anna is still ill from the hashish and realises that Chenxi has deserted her again. An uneasy note enters the book when we realise that the aiyi has taken a shower and is about to come into her room uninvited. In her room, as the aiyi leaves, we are reminded of the gulf between the cocooned existence of the foreigner and the world outside. The thoughts in her head are like 'shifting storm clouds'. (p85)

There is a very unpleasant scene in the antique market where Mr White beats down a peasant girl for a precious snuffbox which Anna does not even want. It is a scene which reminds us of Chenxi's perusal of the Ming vases which Anna's father is proud of having bought for a song. Anna's father is proud of the fact that he can beat down the girl. He has no conception of her need for the money nor of how precious the box is for the girl. He is totally insensitive. Anna realises she is the wealthy foreigner taking advantage of a peasant. She realises too that Chenxi must feel contemptuous of what she stands for.

What do you think Anna did stand for at this point in the book?

Chapter 12

The art class is visiting minority groups but Anna cannot go because she is a foreigner.

Why do you imagine these groups are forbidden to foreigners?

Instead they will visit his sister and her family in Shendong, near Xian.

Still feeling estranged from Chenxi, Anna invites him to her apartment where they talk about art and the fact that what he wants to paint is not accepted in China. She is astonished and tells him his paintings would be worth a lot in Australia. At the same time she is disappointed when he shows interest in this.

It seems she cannot understand that money must be important to an impoverished student. She has some idealistic and unrealistic view that art is beyond money

because she has never had to struggle for money herself.

He tells her he has no father and she realises that she asks too many questions.

Chapter 13

The airport at Xian is very confronting and the episode with the very persistent thief is alarming and increases Anna's sense of isolation. The scenes from the bus are very vividly described.

How has Rippin created the picture on p103?

Chapter 14.

Anna says on p114 that 'an artist's responsibility is to show a different world to the viewer.' She believes that to change one person's life because of her painting is worth much more than making money.

Does Anna understand how art is seen in China at that time?

Why does Chenxi say that she can only think like that because she is free?

When Anna becomes ill she is horrified to realise that if anything happened to her her hosts would be severely punished. She is beginning to see that there are differences between her and her friend that she can never truly comprehend. She has never felt so alone. (p116)

Her blood runs cold when she realises Chenxi's father has been killed in the Cultural Revolution because he loved a foreign woman. 'That why Chenxi not polite with you...' (p119)

Chapter 15

This is a very important chapter because, along with the afterword it gives us some of the background of the political situation at this time, especially for students. It is important to read this carefully if we are to understand the background of the book, and through this to understand Chenxi.

After this new and horrific information, do you feel, on reading the extract from her journal on p123, that Anna is naïve in thinking that there is a future with Chenxi? Give your reasons.

There is a lovely description of Chinese silk painting on p125.

How does it differ from Western painting?

How do the other students react to Anna's quick learning?

Chapter 16

Anna realises Laurent is in China for the same reason as her father. He tells her Chenxi is using her, probably to find a way to Australia.

How does this make Anna feel?

How are her feelings reflected in the weather?

Chapter 17

The weather continues to reflect Anna's desolation. It is apparent her mail is being read and a morbid letter from her self-pitying mother only strengthens her resolve not to give up her art for a man 'and become an empty shell of regret like her mother.'

When she arrives at school her lovely painting is gone and Chenxi is not there. Later Lao Li tells her through Laurent that Chenxi is a stirrer and needs her for a visa to Australia.

When Chenxi arrives at the class after lunch she cannot imagine why he has hidden his wonderful landscape. He can only reply, 'You do not understand.'

Chapter 18

Chenxi takes her to Old Wolf in an effort to show her what his art is about. She understands even less and hates the experience.

Read pp152–3. How do we know that her position as a foreigner in Shanghai has become too much for her?

Chapter 19

Chenxi has been injured.

How has it happened?

What do you think is the real reason he was thrown off the bus?

Why can't he go to the police?

On p158 Chenxi admits that Anna has already helped him.

How has she helped him?

Chapter 20

Here we see how her father is determined to run her life for her.

Anna has been shown as indecisive from the start of the book. Give three reasons for this.

In a rather crass move her father tries to arrange her relationship with Laurent. The White family dynamics are very complicated. Her mother is self-pitying, her father is a bully, nobody speaks frankly to anyone else in the family and they are all adept at dodging issues.

Why does Anna find it so hard to stand up to her father?

She writes in her journal to 'empty herself.'

What does she need to empty herself of?

Why is writing sometimes more therapeutic than talking to someone?

Her cultural identity is further shaken by the ten year-old boys who tease her and then by the kindness of the shop-keeper who insists on peeling her grape. A further sinister incident reveals that the aiyi has been snooping in her father's papers.

Chapter 21

What is meant on p168 by 'the interior force' of a painting?

Chenxi brings a painting as a farewell present for Anna. This leads inevitably to a moment of intimacy between them which somehow disappoints Anna.

Why do you think he does not stay for a little while after. Is it because he does not love her or for some other reason?

Later they visit a fortune teller.

What did the fortune teller foresee for each of them?

Anna offers to take Chenxi back to Melbourne with her.

Why does he refuse?

The last paragraph describes a very beautiful Fuxing Park.

Do you think this shows a new response to China in Anna? What is it and how has it happened?

Chapter 22

Lao Li takes Anna to the gallery.

Describe in your own words the art installation in which Chenxi is a part. Why would the exhibition be described as 'extremely controversial'?

What other confronting exhibits does Anna see?

What is her reaction to the exhibition?

Why has she resolved to stay on in China for a year to study Mandarin? (p185)

Chapter 23

Anna enrolls in the university and meets African students. She has forgotten during her stay in China that foreigners come in other colours.

Is this a reflection on her self-centredness and self-consciousness?

Why won't she live at the university?

At the noodle shop she learns that Chenxi is in trouble with the police and has gone into hiding.

Chapters 24 and 25

Anna is pregnant. Again she is dependent on the despised Laurent to take her to the hospital.

Why does he insist on speaking Mandarin, even to those who speak English?

In what other ways is this experience different from what you might expect in an Australian hospital?

Anna realises she has no idea whether Chenxi might want her to keep the baby. He is still a stranger.

Chapter 26

How do we see here that Anna has grown a little and no longer wants other people to make her decisions?

What two decisions has she made?

Chapter 27

What are Anna's father and mother's reactions to her pregnancy?

Anna discovers that the aiyi was indeed a spy and that her journal has been stolen. As a result Laurent is about to be deported. The readers realise the ramifications this might have for Chenxi. At the end of the chapter she is still maintaining that she can bring Chenxi back to peaceful Australia and it seems she still has no idea of the predicament of the rebellious thinker in China. She almost seems like her father, believing as he does that she can manipulate the lives of those around her.

Is it true, as Laurent maintains, that Anna is just an 'ignorant little bitch'?

Chapter 28

Anna returns to Australia and just a few days later learns of the Tiananmen Square massacre. Art colleges had been singled out as troops searched universities for ringleaders. She decides to write a book and still hopes Chenxi might read it.

She pulls out a cryptic note she had received from Lao Li before she left.

OuR FRieND is FRee now.

What do you think is meant by this message?

Read again the first paragraph of the book and then the last paragraph.

What effect does this last paragraph have on our mood as the book ends?

What is its significance to the themes of the book as a whole?

Essay questions

- 1 'The more you know, the more you realise you don't know.' How is this saying borne out in Anna's understanding of China and Chenxi?
- 2 'In Australia it means nothing to be free.' Does the fact that most Australians take freedom for granted explain Anna's naivete about Chenxi and his political situation?
- 3 Why was it so difficult for expatriates in China, like Anna's father, to become involved in the country in which they were living?