

# [Balzac and the little chinese seamstress](https://assignbuster.com/balzac-and-the-little-chinese-seamstress/)

Balzac and the little Chinese Seamstress is partly biographical, partly fictional novel that takes the reader to the remote village in Phoenix Mountain to show the life of simple peasants during the Cultural Revolution in China. Uneducated, simpleminded people became “ revolutionary peasants” and were honored for it, while educated and intellectuals were looked down upon, disgraced and exiled. To keep the revolution alive, to regain his power and to appeal to simple people the Chairman of the Communist Party in China, Mao Zedong was forcing socialism onto his country and as the result of purges a great number of intellectual people were sent to the so-called reeducation camps thus “ ignorance was in fashion”. As in the story by Dai Sijie, two young sons of doctors were sent to a remote village to such a camp. Having a very slim chance of ever being allowed back to the city, the boys had to adjust to the life in the village; they had to endure humiliation and hard labor. The only books they were allowed to read were books approved by communists. Even playing the music could be dangerous if it was not a music approved by Chairman Mao.
Most members of village the Narrator and Luo were sent to were illiterate and had low aspirations. They were uneducated: a clock was a novelty for them and, more so, the violin, which they considered a toy. The only person who ever saw such musical instrument was the tailor. However, he never heard the music it played. The “ revolutionary peasants” were very ignorant. When Luo contracted malaria, the choice of cure was weeping and a “ shock treatment” in the ice-cold water.
When the narrator and Luo met a very beautiful little seamstress and her father, both of the young man became attracted to her. Luo confessed, though, that she was “ too uncivilized” for him to fall in love. When, through the series of events, the Narrator and Luo obtained the “ forbidden books”, they also started reading it to the Little Seamstress. Everyone felt the transformative power of the books. The Narrator told about the effect the book had on him: “ To me it was the ultimate book: once you read it, neither your own life nor the world you lived in would ever look the same.¨ (Sijie 107). The effect the book had on the little Seamstress was even greater. Her uneducated mind became a fertile soil for the new ideas that were coming from books. The life in the city fascinated her. In fact, the book reading or story telling became a favorite entertainment in Phoenix Mountain villages. The tailor himself was so taken by story-telling that he decided to stay with the young men for a while. Even his style of making dresses became different: “ Dumas would have been most surprised to see the mountain men sporting sailor tops with square collars that flapped in the breeze.¨ (125). The stories, either proficiently re-told films or taken from the books, were transforming people’s lives. And Little Seamstress’ life was changing as well. However, the changes that were taking place in her heart were not what Luo was hoping for. She was becoming not simply more educated; books by Balzac had captivated her and were transforming her way of thinking and outlook on life. Hearing the stories from “ Madame Bovary” and other books had made her think more about her aspiration, individuality, change, freedom, beauty and the power a woman can have. She was “ carried away in the dream”, enchanted by stories. Luo succeeded in the task of educating Little Seamstress so much so that she left Phoenix Mountain to go to the city. She did so without any notice, despite of tailor’s plea to stay. The Narrator and Luo had to run after her to possibly stop her. When Luo saw her he realized the transformation that took place. “ In combination with her new hairstyle and her immaculate tennis shoes, the nifty jacket with its mannish details made her look unfamiliarly stylish and sensual. The lovely, unsophisticated mountain girl had vanished without a trace.¨ (184)
This is a great irony of the story. The narrator and Luo are sent to be re-educated, and they bitterly resent it. However, Luo attempts to re-educate a “ simple mountain girl” so that she will become more like him. He succeeded, albeit not to his satisfaction. The new ideas that had never entered her mind prior to reading western books expanded her horizons and she embarked on the journey to the unknown. She became independent, and the simple life in the mountains was not enough for her any more.
Just like Luo’s re-education failed to make him what Chairman’s regime wanted him to become, Luo’s attempt to educate a simple girl brought other results that what he had anticipated. People have a free will and the choices they make might not be convenient or satisfactory to their educators or, even, frustrating. That is the reason the Narrator and Luo burned books after the Little Seamstress’ departure.
Works Cited:
Sijie, Dai. " Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress". Trans. Ina Rilke. New York: Anchor Books, 2002. Print.