
Reviews of Books

Carolyn Choa and David Su Li-Qun (Eds.), *The Picador Book of Contemporary Chinese Fiction*. London: Pan Macmillan (Picador), 1998. 308p. ISBN 0-330-36976-8. £ 15.99 (hdb); ISBN 0-330-35264-4. £ 8.99 (pbk); also available as *The Vintage Book of Contemporary Chinese Fiction*. New York: Vintage Books, 2001. 320p. ISBN 0-375-70093-5. US\$14.00 (pbk)

Howard Goldblatt (Ed.), *Chairman Mao Would Not Be Amused: Fiction from Today's China*. New York: Grove Press, 1995. 321p. ISBN 0-802-11573-X. US\$na; £ 17.37 (hdb); 1996. 321p. ISBN 0-802-13449-1. US\$14.00 (pbk)

While the classics of Chinese literature, such as Cao Xueqin's eighteenth-century novel *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, have long been known to scholarly readers in the West, a more general international readership has been gradually growing for the fiction of the last fifty years, which coincides with the foundation of the People's Republic of China in 1949. This work has been published by authors within the Chinese diaspora, in what Howard Goldblatt calls "other Chinese communities", or by arrangement with translators in the West. Its reception has not always been without controversy, most notably when Gao Xingjian was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2000 and the translation into English of his novel *Soul Mountain*, by the Australian scholar Mabel Lee, was widely promoted throughout the Western world. Very little of his work was known in English, and his detractors were quick to dismiss him: the fact that he had taken French citizenship led to the charge made in China that he was not Chinese but French. The controversy surrounding the awarding of the Nobel Prize led to the argument that he had friends in high places, and others, perhaps those who were more widely read in contemporary Chinese fiction, simply said that there were far more significant writers in China who had not received their due.

These two anthologies, which were both available before the Nobel controversy, challenge the reader who is curious to discover the field and to come to a personal assessment of the last remark. Both offer a wide selection of contemporary Chinese fiction, mainly from writers working within China. Both have been published under the auspices of major centres of Chinese scholarship in the West: *The Picador Book*, first published in London in 1998 and now republished under a different title in New York, comes from two scholars associated with the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London; and *Chairman Mao*, which appeared three years earlier than *The Picador Book*, comes from the distinguished scholar and translator Howard Goldblatt. Goldblatt is a professor of Chinese at the University of Colorado and the founding editor of the journal *Modern Chinese Literature*. His translations of contemporary Chinese fiction have introduced various acclaimed authors to English readers worldwide.

The *Picador Book* announces its subject in a neutral fashion and presents a minimal introduction to it. Prose fiction is a comparatively new phenomenon in China, and characterization with psychological complexity did not develop until the 1920s and 1930s. After the foundation of the

People's Republic, fiction moved from the personal to the political and it was not until after Mao's death in 1976 that writers felt sufficiently confident to return to psychological themes. *Chairman Mao*, however, announces its thesis both in its title and in its satirical portrayal of Mao wearing pigtailed with red binding on the cover. Goldblatt's introductory essay develops the argument that "Mao would not be amused" by the fiction which has been published since his death. He would have "approved" of "scar literature", the cathartic work which expressed the sufferings of the people during the Cultural Revolution, because it played a role "in pacifying [them] at a difficult historical moment". As authors turned to "introspective writing" and "root-seeking literature" in the decade after his death he would have accepted that the questions they asked were the ones he wanted to be raised. As dissent developed, however, particularly after the events of Tiananmen Square in 1989, art began to serve its own purposes instead of political ones. A generation of authors has emerged which has probed beneath the surface constructed by the political order and exposed the psychological complexities of everyday life. Goldblatt suggests that these writers, like Yukio Mishima, Alexander Solzhenitsyn and Nadine Gordimer, may become more appreciated internationally than in their own country. Developing a comparison with contemporary Japanese fiction, he suggests that their pessimism has swept away "a benign Chinese exoticism" in the same way as Kenzaburō Ōe, Murakami Ryu and Banana Yoshimoto have destroyed the "visions of a genteel, kimono-clad Japan". His comparisons with Japanese fiction, however, give rise to a possibility which he does not advance, that as China develops, its writers may adopt opposing political positions as Mishima and Ōe did.

Both anthologies present a wide selection of fiction but despite some similarities they cast their nets in a different fashion. *The Picador Book* contains fifteen men and four women, and *Chairman Mao* has fifteen men and five women, a bias which Goldblatt is well aware of and which may be demographic and cultural. One of the authors in *The Picador Book* lives overseas, compared with three in *Chairman Mao*. Three writers are included in both anthologies: Shi Tie-sheng, Su Tong and Wang Meng. *The Picador Book*, however, has a greater representation of writers who were born before 1949, twelve out of nineteen. The oldest, Zhou Libo, was born in 1908. *Chairman Mao* contains only one such author, Wang Meng, who was born in 1934. The biographical note on Zhou Libo observes that he "offers the insight of someone who had lived and worked almost continuously both before and after the revolution", and the biographical notes on the other authors demonstrate the depths of their careers. The acknowledgements in *The Picador Book*, however, do not provide as much specific detail as those in *Chairman Mao*.

The biographical entries in *The Picador Book* contain most useful details for those wishing to follow up other writing; those in *Chairman Mao* are disappointingly minimal. Here are the lives, however, of those who have struggled for their art as they have lived through historical change, social disorder and political turmoil: most have experienced the disruptions of the Cultural Revolution, some in an acute way; some have worked in menial positions, others have worked for the bureaucracy; some are university-educated; only a very small number have left China; most are now professional writers, and many have written in other genres, a fact which may have given rise to the range of forms and styles in these stories.

Although there is a variety of contexts in the collections, a recurrent theme is the psychological complexity of the individual person, often in the face of social and cultural norms. In *The Picador Book*, Jane, the young woman in the extract from David Su Li-qun's *Beijing Opera*, is determined to find a teacher who will accept her as a student in the art of Beijing opera. Mr. Zhou, the central character in Liu Xin-wu's "Black Walls", insists on his right to paint his walls in a colour which is unacceptable to his neighbours. Wang Ceng-qi examines how power corrupts in a dramatic narrative set in a primary school in "Big Chan". Feng Ji-cai writes about the force of malicious gossip directed towards a woman and her husband in "The Tall Woman and Her Short Husband". Bi Shu-min

examines the complexity of a mother's relationship with her son in "One Centimetre". In *Chairman Mao*, Hong Ying creates a picture of love in the face of imminent death in warfare in "The Field". Su Tong deals with the theme of lust in a decaying urban environment named Fragrant Cedar Street in "The Brothers Shu". Li Rui confronts the psychological pain of an arranged marriage in "Sham Marriage". Mo Yan examines the primitive beliefs of villagers who attend an execution in order to obtain body parts for folk medicine in "The Cure". Wang Xiangfu explores a similar world in his description of villagers and folk practices in "Fritter Hollow Chronicles". These examples will suffice to offer a brief introduction to a body of literature which breaks new ground.

As Goldblatt notes, the anthologist's dilemma is where to stop. There is always another author, always the same questions about balance and criteria. For the time being these anthologies serve admirably to introduce a new field of fiction to a wider readership, a field in which the authors have broken free of constraints and begun to explore the dimensions of the self which open when art does not have to serve another master.

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