

TWO
STORIES
FROM
MAINLAND
CHINA

Helen Leung / TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION

Since Mao Zedong's death in 1976, a rapid succession of trends have come and gone in Chinese fiction: the "scar literature" of the late 70s documents the political upheavals of the Cultural Revolution with confessional passion; the "roots-searching fiction" of the mid-80s probes the margins of documented history to excavate the origins of China's cultural tradition; the "avant-garde" or "experimental fiction" of the late 80s and early 90s stage lurid spectacles of violence to critique all dominant ideologies from humanist ideals to Confucian ethics. Despite their difference in themes and styles, these fictional works all reflect a deeply philosophical vision and a commitment to social critique. Meanwhile, two decades of economic reforms have spurred China's incorporation into the global capitalist system and created a new species of young, urban, middle-class readers who care more about the giddy delights of consumer culture than the revolutionary heritage. They are also the first generation who has to confront both the oppressive political culture of an authoritarian centralized state and the stultifying conformity of unbridled capitalist consumerism. The wild popularity of Wang Shuo's notorious "hooligan fiction" in the mid-90s signals the changing tastes, demands, and frustration of this new readership. A playful — also often irreverent, anti-intellectual, dysfunctional, and anti-social — space begins to emerge in Chinese fiction. Published in 1998, "Between Papaya and Nakedness" and "The Face of a Thousand Personalities" convey a flavour of this most recent sea change in contemporary Chinese fiction.

Best exemplified by the series of semi-autobiographical novels (*At War With Myself*, *Keeping a Vigil For the Empty Years*, and *Speak, Room!*) published during 1993-96, Lin Bai's works transform the tragic political history of the Cultural Revolution into an erotic, libidinous event. Adhering to neither the realism nor the modernism of her predecessors, Lin Bai refuses to anchor her fiction in any structure of certainty. In "Between Papaya and

Nakedness," for example, the boundary between historical memory and personal imagination is constantly shifting. The significance of the events in the story is no longer historical but creative and erotic. In Lin Bai's hands, an entire generation of writers' painful obsession with the "truth" of the Cultural Revolution is, with the ease of a brush stroke, displaced by an imaginary evocation of erotic truth. Lin Bai is also one of the very few authors in the People's Republic who dares to express female homoeroticism. The submerged lesbian sensibility in "Between Papaya and Nakedness" gives a brief glimpse of the erotics Bai has developed more fully in her novels and other stories such as "Water In A Bottle."

Wang Anyi also first became famous for her description of female sexuality, most notably in the *Love Trilogy* published during the late 80s. She has been an extremely prolific writer since, recently publishing several important novels such as *Documentation and Fabrication* and *Song of Everlasting Regret*. Anyi has a penchant for building intensely internalized emotional worlds within a structure of minute, densely packed, and excessively externalized details. In "The Face of a Thousand Personalities," such details unravel a mundane but central experience of urban middle-class society: television spectatorship. In this ironic tale of self-obsession, the male gaze is comically displaced from its position of voyeuristic power by a relentless acoustic femininity. The story also performs an irreverent reversal of literary convention. Instead of investing a seemingly quotidian event with allegorical significance, the story turns a serious and much-debated concern amongst Chinese intellectuals — the grand theme of China's encounter with the West — into a trivial and empty symbol: Gu Lianhua's Chinese voice dubbing over television shows from the West.

In an introduction to a recent collection of Chinese fiction, Howard Goldblatt imagines that "Chairman Mao would not be amused" by the playfulness and lack of political utility in most contemporary fiction. Certainly, stories such as Lin Bai's and Wang Anyi's have departed dramatically from the socialist realist tradition prescribed by Mao. I would like to think that Mao, the consummate theorist of contradictions, would perhaps appreciate the subtle but insistent playing out of contradictions in most contemporary Chinese

fiction. To be sure, these contradictions — between history and fabrication, freedom and repression, revolutionary seriousness and playful irreverence — are not what concerned Mao during his long and eventful political career, but they embody some of the most pressing challenges to the legacies of his revolution.

GLOSSARY OF CHINESE TERMS AND TITLES

Zhiqing: youths from intellectual families who either volunteered or were forced to relocate to rural areas to serve as “apprentices” to peasants during 1966-76. In “Between Papaya and Nakedness,” the narrator and Anrong were both *zhiqing* at the time Anrong’s portrait was painted. The house they shared then is called *Zhiqing Corner*.

Journey to the West: One of the most popular traditional Chinese novels which is attributed to the late Ming writer Wu Cheng’en (c.1500-1583). It is based loosely on the journey of the Tang priest Xuan-Zang (596-664) who travelled to India for Buddhist Scriptures. In “Between Papaya and Nakedness,” the narrator likens *Zhiqing Corner* to the mountain abode of Monkey, the monk’s guardian and companion, who has fantastic powers and comes from an area filled with exotic plants and luscious fruits.

Dream of the Red Chamber: Also known as *The Story of the Stone*, the novel by Qing author Cao Xueqin (1715-1763) is generally regarded to be the greatest masterpiece of traditional Chinese fiction. Lin Bai’s story refers to an expression often used by the novel’s protagonist Jia Baoyu.

RECENT ANTHOLOGIES OF CHINESE FICTION IN TRANSLATION

Jing Wang, ed. *China's Avant-Garde Fiction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998).

Howard Goldblatt, ed. *Chairman Mao Would Not Be Amused: Fiction From Today's China* (New York: Grove Press, 1995).

David Der-wei Wang & Jeanne Tai, ed. *Running Wild: New Chinese Writers* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

Henry Y. H. Zhao, ed. *The Lost Boat: Avant-Garde Fiction From China* (London: Wellswepp, 1993).

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