

Red Guards in Mid-life Crisis

Revolutionary enthused and spiritually nourished by novels like *The Gadfly* and *How the Steel was Tempered*, the men of the Red Guard traveled to the countryside, sacrificing their youth to learn from the masses. Only years later, when they returned to the cities, did they realize that they actually were the victims of the Maoist policies they defended. Trying to catch up with their more fortunate contemporaries, they attended universities, married, and took up mid-level positions in various research institutes. The victimization continued, however, since modernization had begun to show its ugly face. Not only did their classic Red Guard belief system become the laughing stock of a newly emerging consumer society, but even worse: they found themselves excluded from the recently en vogue monopoly.

Review >
China



By *Irmy Schweiger*

In his two stories *Panic* and *Deaf* the Chinese author and ex-Red Guard Liang Xiaosheng slightly varies this well-known 'lost generation' meta-narrative in two respects: he chooses the narrative mode of satire and he inserts a psychological dimension which in its turn tells another familiar story - men in mid-life crisis.

Panic opens with the Monday blues of Yao Chun-gang, the vice-director of the China Psychological History Research Institute, who in his better days 'had possessed a robust sexual prowess' and 'could have serviced three wives'. Bored at his office, the vice-director chooses to stay home with an alleged swollen foot – a move that does nothing to relieve his malaise. He tries to reassert his dominant role by barking at his wife, but when director Zhao, a soldier in command of psychologists who hears of Yao's inability to walk, sends his personal car to pick him up, Yao finds himself in the role of lapdog.

Later on, the institute is struck, first by a robbery, in which 'the official records had, sadly, been destroyed', and then by the death of the Chinese patron who was overseas. With its history no longer traceable, the institute is reduced to little more than a self-important structure bestowing symbolical capital upon its agents.

As the story unfolds, our protagonist is introduced to a woman visiting director Zhao's office, and things take their typical mid-life crisis course. But as he has proven that he is still in control of the world, Yao Chun-gang's delicate stability

is quickly thrown out of balance when he meets a former classmate who has miraculously transformed himself from the assistant leader of the school's Mao Zedong Thought Propaganda team into one of the nouveau riches without any moral principles. Theoretically, Yao despises this species, but in reality he envies his classmate's new lifestyle. In meeting this ghost of the past, he loses both his last bit of self-respect and his wife: he is rendered completely impotent in every single respect. He now has good reasons to panic!

Liang's novel *Deaf* drives home the lesson of being out of touch with reality: 'I had pretended I could hear when I was deaf; I'd pretended I was deaf when I could hear.' This time we are introduced to the emotional and psychologically complex world of the director of the Literature and Fine Arts Development Trust and Research Institute. Shortly before his inaugural speech as the newly appointed director, the narrator realizes he is deaf. But the show must go on and, equipped with Chairman Mao's teaching 'Be determined! Fear no death. Surmount difficulties and win victory!' the narrator, without a moment's hesitation, turns his disadvantage into an advantage.

Again we are presented with a contemporary A Q, but while Yao Chun-gang represents the intellectual type at the bottom of society, the protagonist of *Deaf* works from the top downward by succeeding in making everybody believe that writing is the normal way of communication. His enlightened secretary teaches him the good side of this mentally selective exclusion, and teaches the reader the moral of the tale: some look but don't see, some listen but don't hear, and

some talk but do nothing. The narrator realizes that 'if you weren't deaf and you had to face all those people applying for housing, or getting jobs for their children [...] would you be able to show anything like the terrific self-control that you've kept so far, and so successfully?' It only remains for the narrator to regret that they had not met earlier, since her words educate him 'better than ten years of schooling.'

In both stories the reader is informed about the psychomental landscape of an ageing Red Guard generation. These are tales of missed opportunities, as the characters continue to adhere to out-dated lofty ideals. Since the women in these stories adapt to modern life more easily - they can make love and money - the heroes struggle in vain both at home and in society. Similar to the author's *Confessions of a Red Guard* and *Random Thoughts on 1993*, we read a pessimistic prognosis of a society caught in transition, revealing Liang's own moral indignation. Unfortunately, the author seems unable to embrace the irreconcilable dilemmas of the time. I would, therefore, suggest that each story presents a refreshingly light and humorous tale about the very normal mid-life crisis of male intellectuals facing modernity, enriched by an exclusive historical experience of the Red Guard generation, rather than a 'contemporary understanding of the psyche of China's urban entrepreneurs and intelligentsia'. Otherwise, the somewhat tragic light of a moralizer shines through and tells the old, familiar story of self-pity and self-contempt which we have had to read for so many years. <

- Liang Xiaosheng, *Panic and Deaf. Two Modern Satires*. Translated by Hanming Chen, edited by James O. Belcher, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, (2001), 157 pp., ISBN 0-8248-2373-7

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