

BITTER LOVE:

A SILENCED MOVIE OF CHINA AND ITS IMPLICATION

A Movie of an Unrequited Patriot

History... a series of genuine history! I didn't let anyone rape her, and that is why I am now impoverished... This is a book that will not be published until after hundreds of years. By that time, archaeologists will dig out my bones and discover this manuscript. The only thing that I wish for is that, after reading this manuscript, they will say, "Ah! I can't believe that in 1976AD there was such an honest old chap! A Miracle indeed!" Enough! I will keep my mouth shut in Hell and be silent for ten thousands of years...

— *Bitter Love*, Bai Hua

Ling Chenguang, a gifted artist without a father, endured hardships during his childhood

with the help of benevolent people. During his adolescence at the time of the Japanese occupation, he was forced to join the army of Kumingtang (KMT). He was saved by a young lady named Lu from a fisherman's family who later became his wife. After joining an anti-government movement, Ling was warranted by agents of KMT and consequently escaped to a foreign country. He eventually became a successful painter who lived as a bourgeoisie. When the New Modern China was born, he and his wife forwent the comfort of their past and went back to their motherland with patriotic aspirations.

All the hopes were gradually gone when the Anti-Rightist Movement and Cultural Revolution came. As a former bourgeois and a "revisionist" who deviated from Mao's orthodoxy, Ling's family became political outcast. Together with their

daughter, they were confined and secluded in a tiny windowless house with no sunlight and countless spider webs. The painter was even severely beaten up during his birthday. When his daughter grew up, he ran away with her boyfriend. She left him after asking, “You are bitterly loving this country, however, does this country return your love?”

After all the misfortunes, Ling exiled himself into the wilderness of snow. The hermit finally used his last footsteps to paint a huge question mark on the snow, and he finished it with his freezing body as the dot.

Bitter Love: A Movie of Controversy

Waves of political and social movements have suffocated millions of common people’s lives after the establishment of the People’s Republic of China since 1949. The Land Reformation, the Anti-Rightist Movement, and the Great Leap Forward (1958-1961) had all created devastating political, economic, cultural and environmental disasters. However, the Great Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), also known as “Calamity of Ten Years”, had redefined the conception of political chaos— a further advancement of Maoist orthodoxy that eventually led to almost complete collapses of political institutions, social norms and cultural artefacts, of which were replaced by lies, ignorance and greed.



Bai Hua

Bai Hua (白樺, 1930-), a Chinese intellectual and former dedicated CCP member, became a “rightist” from 1958 to 1976. During that time, he had been deprived of his chances to write basically anything. His conviction has been removed by Deng Xiaoping in 1979 and his play manuscript *Bitter Love* (苦戀, originally known as Sun and Man) was firstly published by the same year. It was subsequently re-published in a Hong Kong leftist newspaper as well. The short novel was considered to be one of the pioneers of Scar Literature (傷痕文學): a new fiction genre that was fermented specifically right after the waves of Maoist political movements from the end of 1977 to 1979. It was considered as a cultural blossom of the “Second Hundred Flowers Movement”.

The work had then been made into a movie, directed by Pang Ning and screen played by Bai Hua and the director himself. Before the actual movie could be possibly shown to the public, a sample of the movie has been previewed by the Secretariat of the Communist Party of China Central Committee and the Committee strongly opposed it unless the screenplay was heavily redrafted. Nonetheless, from 1981 onwards, the movie has received an overwhelming support by intellectuals, directors, movie critics and screenwriters. For the People’s Liberation Army General Political Department and the Central Party School, the feelings of their members were mixed but the majority was against it. The situation exacerbated by the fact that the Newspaper of the People’s Liberation Army reminded the intellectuals that there were four types of principles that writers should be abided by them. Together with tens of other government-controlled newspaper and radio broadcasts, Bai Hua and his screenplay *Bitter Love* were severely criticized. Consequently, the movie was banned to show anyone in public. Yet, according to Bai Hua, the original copy of the movie was stored in good condition at Changchun Film Group Corporation. One should be noted that there was a Taiwanese version (1982) of the mov-

ie, known as "Portrait of a Fanatic" in English, can now be bought easily. Thanks to the Internet, one can also freely download and synchronously looped somewhere on the web with no English subtitles.

The Silenced Question Mark

As Maureen Duffy says, "The pain of love is the pain of being alive. It is a perpetual wound." Ling, the painter, loved his country deeply, yet in return, the country never attempted to heal the hopeless and hapless man. He was the modern version of Qu Yuan (340BC-278BC) who kept on demanding answers from Heaven after having been expelling by his beloved country of Chu. We should not enquire for whom the question is asked; the question is asked for countless persecuted Chinese intellectuals. Through the painter's life, Bai Hua asked profound questions about the Maoist era, which are still extremely crucial and somehow relevant to today's China. One of the most important questions is: *What is left in Chinese nationalism if the people of China were remorselessly ill-treated by the Communist Party?*

According to statistics, the farce of the Great Leap Forward has resulted in catastrophic deaths of over 40 million people, mostly due to hunger. The movement aimed at boosting up the steel production of the entire country, ambitiously claiming that the production would surpass that of the British and American Empires. However, when most of the citizens were brainwashed and the system was socially re-engineered by setting up People's Communes, who were going to grow crops to feed the whole population? Exacerbated by years of serious and comprehensive droughts, Mao's political ideal became one of the massive human exterminations in the 20th century.

During the Cultural Revolution, innocent lives were labelled as, very often without any substantial and sound evidence, "counter-revolutionaries", "revisionists" and "capitalists". They had to go through the political processes of

"criticism" and "self-criticism"— mockery parties held by winners of the power struggles, aiming at condemning ones' political stances, re-establishing their "correct" political belief system (i.e. Maoist orthodoxy), and eventually depriving the will and dignity of the political, social and cultural elites. During the processes, they were often severely beaten up without any justifications. In order to preserve ones' personal safety, the "dominate strategies" for them were either to cheat, or betray, even the closest ones. Committing suicide became the only way out for some of the victims, and for some of the others, they were sent to Re-education Through Labour (RTL) in various remote places like the North-east provinces.

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Ling the painter, like every other Chinese by that time, was living and suffering in a nation of poverty, chaos and a nation lack of credibility. Bai Hua attempts to test the limits of every Chinese patriot: Why do patriots still love a wounded country if they can no longer count their very own scars? Why did some of them stay in China if exit was a viable option (there was huge number of illegal emigration during the Cultural Revolution though)? If Chinese nationalism (or nationalism in general) is a lie, what could be an ultimate "resting place" for the Chinese souls? 

Implications

China in the 21st century is no longer a Communist nation. As Deng Xiaoping, famously asserted, “Only (economic) development makes hard sense”. In post-Mao China, economic development was the only concern of China. As a result, China is now the second largest economy and is the world’s fastest growing economy. It has been sustaining an average growth rate of 9.4% for the past 30 years.

As a drawback, the economic gap between the rich and the poor of China (Gini coefficient in 2010: 0.47) is huge and widening. As Deng also said, the nation should “let some people grow rich first”, but we never know when and how such an ideal can be realised. The uncontrollable accumulation of wealth is concentrated in a handful of party members as well as some local capitalists. In addition, the Party firmly believes that by ensuring a high economic growth rate leaders can maintain their legitimacy. Nonetheless, the systematic and structural corruption is so incurable that as a result, the Party is losing the “hearts and minds” of the people.

Economic progress has led to social and irreversible environmental degradation throughout

the country. Injustice in local provinces and villages are widespread that has led victims to point of no return. Without an independent judiciary system, an extrajudicial political action formally called “Letter and Complaints” or *Xin-fang* in Chinese, becomes a widespread phenomenon. Over five million petitions have been received each year and the victims have been packed in Beijing to lodge complaints against their local authorities and to protect their basic human rights. Unfortunately, most of the petitioners has failed to redeem their justice and many of them have been severely threatened and beaten.

Worse still, the environmental problems are devastating. For instances, more than 30% of water in China is not drinkable and more than 500 million people are affected. Moreover, countless health problems caused by pollutions are common namely, respiratory problems, cardiovascular damage, heavy metal poisoning, and cancer.

Together with the recent tragedy of the high-speed railway system due to unacceptable governance, ethnic minority conflicts and terrorism, the daily violence of Chengguan (The City Urban Administrative and Law Enforcement Bureau) against the street-sellers, the



Chengguan Officers

persecution of public intellectuals and other countless social problems piece together a mosaic picture of Modern China in the 21st century.

In an earlier article named “Hong Kong Democracy: A Pessimistic Review” of *Political Reflection* (PR), I contend that,

The concept of a “harmonious society” has become an over-arching theme campaigning over the years in China. The Chinese central government advocates that it is necessary to construct a “harmonious society” while enjoying the economic prosperity. The term has been repeatedly criticized as a strategy that underplays the democratic reform of China.

China is never a “harmonious” place due to its undemocratic and injustice environment. The “haves” are the exploiters and the “have-nots” are severely oppressed. As I said, “the only reason for a government to promote harmony is because the society it governs lacks harmony.” (*Political Reflection Issue No.2, Vol.1*)

In 2010, there was a successful Chinese Spaghetti Western style movie written, directed and starred by Jiang Wen, *Let the Bullets Fly*. Towards the end of the movie, the protagonist “Pocky” and his subordinates were about to overthrow a local authority (Chow Yun-Fat). They at first shot many holes onto the gate of a mansion. Later, one of his subordinates shot an exclamation mark on the gate while Pocky shot a question mark. Pocky finally said, “Release all of your bullets through that question mark dot!” The symbolic messages here are clear: The gate refers to the barrier between the people and the government. The hundreds of fire holes are the grievances of the people. The question mark can possibly mean two things. It can mean thousands of inquiries imposed by the director towards the regime. It can also be understood together with the exclamation mark — the compound symbol actually looks like hammer and sickle (☩) — meaning that the Communist Party of China. By shooting all the remaining bul-

lets through the question mark, people can be then “re-liberated” again.

Like Jiang Wen, the people have been tired of waiting for meaningless slogans, official apologies and empty promises. As we can see, all the tragedies and reactions of the Chinese citizens are dangerously alarming to the seemingly unshakable regime. Are huge storms about to come? I do not have a clear answer. However, as Zhong Zukang, a Chinese author who now lives in Norway proclaim, “I don’t want to be Chinese again!” I am sure from time to time, unacquainted patriots of China will eventually wake up and strive for a better change. If patriotism and nationalism are

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mythical constructions, a liberal democratic “irresponsible compound” might be a more realistic utopia.

Note:

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