

Return Shouts, Different Sentiments ↗

Alistair Nicholas, a Research Assistant with the CIS, reviews *Return to China* by Liang Heng and Judith Shapiro (Chatto & Windus, London, 1986), and *Shouting from China* by Helene Chung (Penguin Books Australia, 1988)

TWO complementary books on post-Cultural Revolution China (the China of Deng Xiaoping's economic and political reforms) are currently available for the amateur Sino-logist. Liang Heng and Judith Shapiro wrote *Return to China* after a visit to China four years after they left the country in 1981 thinking they would never see it again. Helene Chung, ABC Radio's Beijing correspondent for three years, wrote *Shouting from China* while on a visiting fellowship in journalism at Deakin University in 1987. Liang Heng's book gives the impressions by a survivor of the Cultural Revolution of the new China being forged through free market economics, while Helene Chung's work gives an international perspective on Deng's China as well as the views of a fourth-generation Australian Chinese returning to her ancestral homeland, much changed since the migration of her forebears.

Despite the awkward inclusion of Liang's wife's name, Judith Shapiro, in the authorship, *Return to China* is very much Liang's work, being written in his voice and portraying his impressions of his motherland. *Return to China* is

understand himself, what forces, what characteristics in the Chinese temperament brought about the Cultural Revolution. This infamous son of the Revolution asks himself whether Deng Xiaoping's new China is substantially different from the old and whether it too has the capacity for future grief.

Liang's thesis is highlighted by one of the episodes related in the book. Over dinner with two of the architects of the Special Economic Zones, Chen Yizhi and Ho Weiling, the conversation turned to the excesses of the Cultural Revolution. The reformer Chen told Liang that 'Shekou (one of the open cities) was built on the lives of hundreds of thousands'. He went on, 'It grew directly out of the lessons of the Cultural Revolution. China paid a great price, but perhaps history will prove it was worth it' (p.86). Chen's view, while not attempting to justify the excesses of Maoism, demonstrates the dangers of historical materialism. I have never accepted the argument of 'humanists' on the left, who maintain that the 'advances' of Stalinist Russia or Maoist China could not have been accomplished without the purges, collectivisa-

leaders decided the cat that would better achieve economic progress bears the ugly face of communism, they would not hesitate to bring it back. Then, pity the mice.

If there is a theme to Liang's *Return to China* it is the Chinese tendency to extremes. In the China of Chairman Mao the extreme was political repression, collectivisation, and communist puritanism. Today it is free market economics, political reform and even sexual curiosity, though not out of the moral depravity common in the West so much as a release of tensions after the lid has been kept tightly on society for so long (p.125). Liang is not opposed to freer markets or political reform; he just thinks it has all come a little too quickly for China. The Chinese have jumped too hastily onto the bandwagon of capitalism, without the thought or experience to build the democratic traditions taken for granted in the West. They have gone from one extreme to the other with only the slightest change in the direction of the ideological wind.

Liang traces China's problems, past and present, to its feudal past. He comments that they 'are all consistent with thousands of years of patriarchal central government. If free national elections were held in China today...yet another dictator would be chosen' (p.54).

The changes that have taken place appear to only be superficial. Below the surface of the reforms, China has not changed. The new leaders are as corrupt as the old; 'backdoorism' and connections are as important as ever in economic and political life (p.82); political instability, tense social relations, backward attitudes, and the tendency to extremes all continue to dominate the Chinese psyche (p.240).

On the other hand the reforms are what many inside and outside China place their hopes in for its future. Yet Liang notes that reform is common to China's history. As far back as the Qing Dynasty, intellectuals were busy trying

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about the terror of the Cultural Revolution remembered and accommodated in the new China. Though it is not necessary to have read Liang and Shapiro's earlier book, *Son of the Revolution*, to understand this one, it is advisable to do so for an understanding of Mao's China in all its grisly horror. Liang's analysis in both the earlier work as well as this recent piece is incisive.

Liang seeks to explain, indeed to

tion of agriculture and industry, hardships and sufferings of millions of people. Can history really exonerate mass murderers in the name of progress? Does the end justify the means? The danger in China is that the leaders, including the reformers, think so.

Deng Xiaoping once said 'It doesn't matter if the cat is black or white so long as it catches mice'. The problem, of course, is that if tomorrow's

to modernise China and to liberalise its laws. But also common to its history is the failure of intellectuals to realise their great vocation: 'What was happening in China today belonged to a long, hitherto unsuccessful tradition' (p.88). This is made poignant by reformer Chen Yihzi's comment that they

of the Democratic Wall movement he had himself exploited while consolidating his position as China's newest emperor. Liang needs to be reminded who it was that imprisoned Wei Jinsheng, the 29-year-old dissident who demanded the immediate introduction of real democratic reforms.

A more sceptical appraisal of China's future than that given by the exiled Liang Heng comes from Australian Helene Chung who visited China as recently as last year, after the clamp-down on 'bourgeois liberalisation' which culminated in the sacking of Deng's right-hand man, reformer Hu Yaobang, from the General Secretaryship of the Communist Party. Unfortunately, however, Chung lacks the same insight and vitality of Liang. She is after all a news correspondent, not a commentator on social or political issues. And much of what Chung reports can be found in a standard history text about modern China or recent newspaper articles. Her comments on political matters have been better made elsewhere by better-known academics and journalists such as the New York Times's Christopher Wren. Where Chung's *Shouting from China* stands out is in its account of her personal experiences of China. But that is not likely to impress the ordinary China-watcher so much as the itinerant journalist likely one day to be condemned to Beijing with its primitive telephone network, incompetent and unsympathetic bureaucrats, extortionist petty-officials, and cockroach-infested dwellings.

Nevertheless, Chung makes the enigma that is China a little less puzzling, though humbly admitting 'as I left [China], I was aware of how little I knew and of how less I understood' (p.xxv).

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have to work fast because Deng Xiaoping is 'very old and we haven't much time. We hope to accomplish so much in the next few years that no matter who gains power later, they'll never be able to turn back the clock' (p.98).

On reading Liang Heng's account of the new China, one cannot help but feel pessimistic. Can capitalism and democracy flourish in a system based on suspicion and distrust, with a centralised government, and with people too afraid to think for themselves? The thought of people doing 'business as if they were sheep' (p.110) does not elicit confidence in the new entrepreneurial spirit that will supposedly sweep China into the twenty-first century. Free markets and free politics do not work in collectivist situations.

Yet Liang seems to have mixed feelings about the future of China. He is optimistic that the lessons of the Cultural Revolution will spare the current reformers the fate of the Qing Dynasty intellectuals (p.98). He seems to have temporarily forgotten that Mao and Deng did not learn from their earlier suppressions of intellectual reformers such as in the anti-rightist purge of 1957. And that Deng, himself a victim of the Cultural Revolution, was responsible for recent clamp-downs on liberal reformers such as in the campaign against 'spiritual pollution' in 1983, christened the 'twenty-eight day Cultural Revolution', or in the suppression

By the book's end Liang is melancholic. Intellectual rigour has conquered sentimentalism. His concluding paragraph reads:

Of course, anyone could see that the reforms, within the limitations of socialism, were putting China on a better course. But if you looked deeper, even in this golden time of growth and relaxation of controls, you would still discover just below the surface many of the familiar

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failings, habits, and distortions of reality that had brought the nightmare upon us in the first place. It was easy to fear that the seeds of new disasters lay amid the optimism, and that China's way into the modern world was still bound to be a troubled one. (p.240)

Significantly Chung recognises the delicate balance of forces that comprise Chinese politics, the ying and yang of totalitarianism. In her introduction on 'The Spell of China' she comments that she admires Deng's progress in transforming China from a poor nation into a developed one, but is frankly 'skeptical

that he could achieve his goal' (xvi.). Less sentimental about China than Liang Heng, she asks rhetorically whether Deng would relent his imprisonment of Wei Jingsheng who, by 1986, was reportedly quite ill, mentally and physically. Realistically she answers: 'With Deng's record, and with the opposition of those even more conservative than he, it was unlikely'. She adds that it is not possible to be optimistic about liberalisation in China with what she 'had learned about the repressive regime and its violent swings of the pendulum....In China today's liberal wind may be tomorrow's repressive gale' (p.239).

In her last chapter, 'The Sky Falls In', Chung stands in the eye of the storm. Last year, following student demonstrations for more democratic concessions,

the party cracked down on liberalisation. What Liang did not have the opportunity to cover in his book, Chung used to conclude hers. However, rather than drive the political point home, she anti-climactically turns back to the difficulties faced by Western correspondents trying to file copy from China. They are left to shout from China; if they are like Helene Chung, much of what they are shouting is probably not worth hearing anyway and we should be grateful for the inefficiencies and incompetence of the Beijing telephone exchange produced by Chinese communism. That which is worth listening to will possibly get through when they return. Unfortunately we may have to sift through whole books like *Shouting from China* to find the few insights we could better get reading newspaper articles by

journalists who don't waste their time shouting over telephone lines from China.

Shouting from China could have been much more interesting had Helene Chung concentrated more on China's political, economic and social institutions and operations rather than indulging her interest in tracing her ancestral origins. Where *Shouting from China* fails, Liang Heng's *Return to China* excels. It is incisive even if not ideologically correct for the pure of mind unaffected by Beijing's quasi-liberalisation. The serious, if amateur, Sinologist's choice of which book to read this summer should be clear. Use the other one to help keep you warm next winter while you wait in hope for Christopher Wren to write his memoirs as a China correspondent. **CIS**

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