

A Brief Introduction to Chang Hsien-liang

The many works of "scar literature" that appeared in China between 1977 and 1980, after the death of Mao Tse-tung, consisted primarily of works that, however worthy as expressions of genuine pain and suffering under Mao, were often simplistic and superficial. Not only were they inadequate to the magnitude and complexity of the historical events to which they were reacting; they were also far less penetrating and direct than were private discussions among both writers and ordinary citizens. Later in the 1980s, some published works probed the Maoist period more deeply than did scar literature, although still not as frankly as oral accounts.

The works of Chang Hsien-liang are among those that exceeded scar literature. Chang's willingness to raise taboo topics in public, as well as the controversial nature of some of his views, stirred public debate in China more than once during the 1980s.

Chang was born in 1936 into the family of a well-to-do Shanghai businessman. When the revolution came in 1949, he was about to begin high school. In school he was made to feel guilty about his "class background," but at the same time was drawn to the idealistic rhetoric about a "new social order." Upon graduation in 1955, he was sent to teach at a cadre school in Ning-hsia province. Two years later, during Mao's massive Antirightist Campaign, the authorities at the Ning-hsia school, who needed to fill their five-percent quota of "rightists," used Chang's Shanghai capitalist background to label him as such. Chang spent the next two decades in and out of labor camps and prisons. During some periods he roamed the countryside on his own, looking for odd jobs and begging for food. In 1979, when the policy to lift rightist labels was announced (about as arbitrarily as was the decision to apply them twenty-two years earlier), Chang managed to land himself a humble position as an editor with a Ning-hsia provincial literary magazine.

The job allowed him an opportunity to write, and he responded with astonishing profusion. In ten years he published a long novel, seven novellas (*chung-p'ien hsiao-shuo* 中篇小說), and at least seven short stories. Not surprisingly, haste brought an unevenness in quality. But, at their best, Chang's stories are rich with irony and symbol. He admires Tolstoy and in lyrical passages occasionally achieves a Tolstoyan texture of language. Most of his

stories are closely — and it seems honestly — tied to his personal experience, both social and psychological.

“Soul and Body” (“Ling yü jou” 靈與肉, 1980) — one of Chang’s earliest and best-known stories, if not his most subtle — tells of a “rightist” living in a small town in China’s northwest. Despite his political stigma, the man finds a wife and raises a family among the basically good-hearted common folk. When his long-lost father, who has made a fortune overseas, returns to China to hand his financial empire over to his son, whose rightist label has now been removed, the son, opting for “soul” over “body,” rejects the offer in order to stay in his bucolic village home. Three novellas called *Passionate Words from a Village Gulag* (*T'u-kao ch'ing-hua* 土牢情話, 1981), *Mimosa* (*Lü-hua shu* 綠化樹, 1984), and *Half of Man Is Woman* (*Nan-jen te i-pan shih nü-jen* 男人的一半是女人, 1985) are set in and around labor camps and present male protagonists who struggle outwardly with oppression, hunger, and cold and inwardly with problems of identity — ideological, social, and sexual. *Descendants of the River* (*Ho te tzu-sun* 河的子孫, 1983, in which *ho* suggests the Yellow River, and thus China) tells of a wily peasant who is willing to admit to a crime committed by a Party bureaucrat — and to serve his penal sentence — in return for the leverage that the official connection can bring him. “Shorblac” (“Hsiao-erh-pu-la-k'e” 肖爾布拉克, 1983), is a lyrical account of a young truck driver who loves the earth, the open sky, and the long roads of Sinkiang, and who falls in love with a young mother whom he meets as she hitchhikes to find help for her ill son. *Good Morning, Friends* (*Tsao-an p'eng-yu* 早安朋友, 1987), because it deals with sexual awakening among high school students, was banned in mainland China but published in Taiwan. The same soon happened to *Getting Used to Dying* (*Hsi-kuan ssu-wang* 習慣死亡, 1989), which, as it follows a Chinese writer on a lecture tour of North America, intersperses accounts of his amorous adventures with overseas Chinese women and his terrifying flashbacks about death in Chinese labor camps.

Not only for the Western reader, but for many readers in China as well, a paradox seems to lie at the heart of Chang’s work. Few writers equal the power with which he indicts the system that has oppressed him; and yet, in the end, he seems to affirm his loyalty to it. His labor-camp novels go well beyond other published accounts in presenting the minutia of life distorted by extremities of hunger, cold, humiliation, and forced celibacy. For these passages Chinese readers have credited him with unusual “boldness” and “penetration.” On the other hand, at the ends of stories, Chang’s protagonists tend to bounce back from exhaustion and mental involution to dedicate

themselves to the “great goals” whose zealous pursuit had caused most of their suffering in the first place. The pattern is discernible in many stories, but most obvious in the final paragraphs of *Mimosa*, where the ex-inmate hero turns sentimental in a surprising way:

In June, 1983, I attended an important United Nations meeting in our capital, Beijing. As a military band struck up our stately national anthem, I stood solemnly at attention . . . I, an intellectual born into a bourgeois family and raised to accept feudal and capitalist culture, today could join in the historical mission of revitalizing China, could meet with state and Party leaders in the Great Hall of the People to consider national affairs . . .¹

The saccharine, politically orthodox “tail” that Chang gives to his story, of which the above is only a brief excerpt, infuriated readers, especially among the young. Why had he done it? Certainly part of the answer must be — must always be, in Communist China — that literary works cannot be published unless they are acceptable to the government-controlled presses. But the issue runs deeper than that.

Many of China’s “middle generation” of writers, who were educated in the 1950s when Soviet influences on Chinese education were strong, and who were attracted to the Communist movement during its most optimistic years, in the 1980s found it impossible, however battered and disillusioned they now felt, to make a final break with the Party. (Younger writers, whose formative years were the chaotic 1960s, have been quicker to rebel, while older ones, educated before 1949, have enjoyed broader perspectives that allow more room, at least psychologically, for dissociation from the Party.) In various ways, many of the prominent writers in the middle generation — including Wang Meng 王蒙, Liu Pin-yen 劉賓雁, Chang Chieh 張潔, Ch'en Jung 謹容, Liu Hsin-wu 劉心武, and Feng Chi-ts'ai 馮驥才 — combine sharp indictments of social and political conditions in China with sentimental protestations of patriotism and loyalty to the Party, or at least to what they think the Party ought to have been.

Such a disposition seems to spring from several related causes. After long persecution as, among other labels, “rightists,” “class enemies,” and “cow ghosts and snake spirits,” many in this generation felt a need to protest their innocence — which in turn entailed the claim that they had been loyal all along. This attitude appears, for example, in Wang Meng’s *Bolshevik*

¹ *Chang Hsien-liang chi* 張賢亮集 (Foochow: Hai-hsia wen-i ch'u-pan-she, 1986), p. 383.

Salute (*Buli* 布禮, 1979),² as well as in Chang Hsien-liang's emblematic line in "Soul and Body" that a "son" (that is, an intellectual raised by the Party) "does not reject his mother as ugly." Added to the wish for self-exculpation seems to have been a need to avoid the conclusion that one's lifetime had been a waste: if we cannot cling to a "rectified" Party, then what do we have? Who have we been? Finally, in some cases (including Chang Hsien-liang's, according to people who know him well), ambition to serve in government office has been a factor in deterring an open break with the Party.

The events of June 4, 1989, forced a rupture with the Communist Party even among those who had been most reluctant to let go. Some who are outside China, such as Liu Pin-yen, have made this point unmistakably clear, while the repression that continues on the mainland prevents Chang Hsien-liang and others who live there from announcing viewpoints publicly.

The three articles comprising the following symposium on Chang Hsien-liang examine various aspects of his labor-camp fiction and the question of psychological "remolding." Jeffrey Kinkley uses a comparison with Nazi camps to look for human commonalities in such experience. Yenna Wu distinguishes Party-directed remolding, which fails for Chang Hsien-liang's protagonists, from a genuine redemption that many of them find through relationships with female characters. Philip Williams relates the remolding experience inside camps to life in the society as a whole.

² Translated by Wendy Larson, *Bolshevik Salute* (Seattle: U. of Washington P., 1989).