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10-20-2004

One Who Grew up Drinking Wolf Milk and Her Writing

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Panel: Why I Write What I Write

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Recommended Citation

Chen, Danyan, "One Who Grew up Drinking Wolf Milk and Her Writing" (2004). *International Writing Program Archive of Residents' Work*. 638.

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One Who Grew up Drinking Wolf Milk and Her Writing

Chen Danyan

On my first day in primary school, the first sentence I heard at the opening ceremony was, “Boys and girls, the Cultural Revolution has begun.” And the Cultural Revolution lasted until the year when I graduated from middle school. With no access to normal education, my generation of people who grew up during the Cultural Revolution period were like children with no mother’s milk to drink. In China we were named a generation growing up drinking wolf’s milk and were considered to be wolf children.

When I was in college, China set out on the long journey of re-opening to the world after the Cultural Revolution. Young people at the time eagerly absorbed various thoughts, cultures, and art from all over the world. This was the time when I began to read Freud’s works on psychoanalysis. He asserted great influence on my writing and view of the world. Additionally, my experience in childhood also shaped my attitude toward the world, as well as the designation of my writing practice. Hence, in a sense I still belong to the world of the Cultural Revolution, even though this world is now silent, absent, and deeply buried at the bottom of the people’s heart.

My parents fell under assault during the Cultural Revolution. As former diplomats they frequently changed places of residence. Hence our apartment and furniture were all rented from the State. Personal belongings were only suitcases. At the start of the Cultural Revolution my home was confiscated. Then my father’s books and my mother’s discs and high-heeled shoes were burned and all the rented furniture was taken back overnight. All of our savings were frozen in the bank. My parents had little income and for a period of time the entire family had to sleep on the floor. For a small child, such huge change is certainly hard to understand.

My father in danger and my mother deeply worried, the family atmosphere became very tense; even I who was a little girl could distinctly feel it. However, since they themselves were not sure about their own attitude toward such changes, no one could explain the discrepancy between father and mother to me. As the youngest child of the family at the time, I was only told to stay at home and not to mention to anyone anything about my family. Very often at supper my brothers would talk at the table about what was happening in their lives. Sometimes they would stop all of the sudden and look at me, for they noticed me and took care not to let me know certain things. At times my mother would kick my brothers’ feet under the table to stop them from talking about what I should not know. Sometimes she would kick my feet by mistake. What happened under the dinner table at home thus shaped my attitude toward the world around me: I believed an immense world of truth was concealed from me so that I would not be hurt by it and so that I could not tell others about it.

Thus it became my dream to discover the hidden and untold with my own eyes.

I decided to become a writer when I was very young and started my first novel at the age of fourteen. Thanks to my passion for writing, I soon became a quiet child and grew

accustomed to long times in solitude. My parents approved of this at the beginning, since writing separated me from the chaos of the outside world. Later, my mother was bothered by the idea that I might really become a writer, which was a dangerous profession by then; however, at that time writing stories was almost the most important part of my life, partly because in the world of writing I am aware of facts of which the characters in the story have no knowledge.

Gradually I came to the belief that the truth of a certain event is already independent from the imagination of human beings, the evaluation of historical narratives, and even from the feelings of those who have experienced that event. Every event is marked with its own truth, logic and even sentiment, not unlike an independent individual. In writing it is my aim to explore this truth in the event and tell others about it, with no flattering or preaching down; just to keep it original and let the inner truth stand out. This is also the reason why most of my writing has many characteristics of non-fiction.

Of the many books that I have written, there are two signal features in most of them: the general context of the City of Shanghai and the shadow of the Cultural Revolution. I could not help but locate my stories and concerns in this city, in this era, and under the shadow of this age.

Shanghai is a city which is proud of a unique history and has witnessed the mixture of various cultures. Since the Opium War in 1846, Shanghai was forced to change from a prosperous port city in China into a leased territory of western countries. In the 1860s, British businessmen, French factory owners, American missionaries, Jewish opium businessmen from Baghdad, Russian bankers, silk and tea merchants, as well as large number of laborers from inland all contributed to the miracle of the economic boom of the city. By the 1930's, Shanghai was already the most developed westernized metropolis in Asia. In the Pacific War of 1937, it was occupied by Japan and forced back to one of the Asian city. That was the beginning of the fall of Shanghai. The liberation in 1949 ushered in the first peace period in Shanghai after years of war. At the same time this brought a time of total closure, which ended Shanghai's history of being a non-defense city for nearly one hundred years. For the first time, Shanghai was compelled to become an inland city.

In 1966, Shanghai went through the Cultural Revolution, reopened to the world in 1978 and, since 1983, has begun the transformation from planned economy to market economy. This is a city which has witnessed significant historical transformations and is permeated with stories and meaning, like an old man who has experienced the vicissitudes of life. With fictional and non-fictional writings, I attempt to record the experiences of people here and their life stories, to depict what might be one of the earliest globalized cities in the world, which was once named a city of cosmopolitanism. Moreover, it is also my intention to portray how common people manage to spend their hardy-quiet lives; with what beliefs they support themselves while they search for and define their identity in such a city which is stained with an inevitable sense of original sin in traditional Chinese culture. How do these people of mixed cultural descent, like those

of mixed-blood, persistently struggle to define their origin and insist on their urban identity and ways of living despite various prejudices.

Such writings would often stay on national best-seller lists for several months; one even remained onboard for eleven months. However, besides the commercial success of these books, they were always exposed to criticism because critics questioned the lack of the so-called “critical perspective” in the depiction of urban life in these writings and could not understand why they focus on Shanghai people’s insistence on their urban identity; why these writings, instead of showing a critical attitude, gave expression to the mixed-blood nature of Shanghai culture, which was considered the shame of the nation. These critics mentioned the approval of the market and considered my writing to be purely aimed at the book market. In traditional Chinese culture, commerce is of lower class and would not have been respected. However, starting with my childhood memory at the dinner table, I have questioned everything and will not believe any demonized depiction of the city of Shanghai in traditional Chinese urban literature. Instead of studying the city and classifying human beings with Mao Tse Tong’s methods of class analysis and thus working with prejudices in mind, I wish to uncover all the concealed facts and tell others about them. I am writing for the unacknowledged truth. One who grew up drinking wolf milk can be very stubborn and persistent.

The city I depict is one stained with original sin under the shadow of colonialist practice on the route of the East Indian Company in the 19th century. Hence, my writings are stained with this original sin as well. Nevertheless, this does not seem to be enough to justify an escapist attitude. Thus, I will not stop writing. My next work is a non-fiction book about the region of the bund, which is the historical landmark of Shanghai, the most important east and west cultural, economic, and political center. Even on a traveler’s bag made in Shanghai in 1970’s, there is the mark of the bund, the heart of mixed and bloody Shanghai.