

BOOK REVIEWS

Thirty Years in a Red House

A Memoir of Childhood and Youth in Communist China

By Zhu Xiao Di

AMHERST: UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS PRESS, 1998
320 PAGES

China has a long history. The history of the People's Republic of China (PRC), however, is short since the PRC has just celebrated its fiftieth anniversary. The PRC's birth since 1949 is merely a drop of water in China's long and turbulent river of civilization. Short as it is, the world has seen many calamities in the PRC. There have been border and ideological wars, natural disasters and man-made catastrophes, a blind cult of a capricious dictator, a revolution that destroyed the cultural fiber and economic system of the nation, and a suppression that made the whole world shudder in disgust.

Historians, political scientists and sociologists in the West, as well as those Chinese who have escaped the "bamboo curtain," have tried to list the crimes of the PRC and interpret the sources of



the unspeakable suppression of her own people. What makes Zhu Xiao Di's book unique is three-fold. First, he is no political dissident who advocates the overthrow of this political and social system. Second, he lived in this red nation for thirty years, from 1957 to 1987, beginning with the nation careening very hard to the left and ending with its government getting into a historic rebirth. Third, he is one of those few whose family

members were not only instrumental in establishing this system but also have been victimized by it. As a result, we see a new angle, a new perspective, and a new tone that make the story less sad but more revealing. If a well-connected and well-protected family could go through a life so unpredictable and suppressive, it is easy to imagine how other ordinary Chinese have fared in the past fifty years.

Zhu tells his family saga in a quiet but thoughtful voice. We don't see a lot of tears or blood or moral tirade. In between the lines, we see the transformation of a young kid from feeling proud of his father's position to feeling humiliated and angry when his father was publicly denounced. We see the agony when his family was driven away from a large apartment to a group-housing unit and his mother put under house arrest. We see his puzzlement at the difference between life in the government compound and outside. We see his bitterness when his opportunity to go abroad is taken away by a less intelligent woman whose father was more powerful than his father.

The book traces what Zhu's family members have gone through before, and particularly after, the founding of the new republic. The reader feels his pain, his bewilderment, and his diligent pursuit of the answer to an elusive question: what has gone wrong with the nation that made a new mandate so terribly oppressive and out of pace with the desire and yearning of its people? Silent anger is always more effective than self-righteous shrill and ill-intentioned repudiation. In this sense, Zhu's book is much more powerful than a moralistic political treatise or a tear-jerking recital of misery and inhumanity. It is emotional without revealing much emotion. It is angry with anger being deliberately concealed.

Zhu's book is not without flaws. The author seems to be possessed by a question asked by many Chinese, ancient and modern: how could his pure, upright and caring father not be put into a much more important and powerful position in the government? This point is most intense when Zhu Xiao Di mentions at the end of the book that his father's comrade during the famous Chinese student protest movement, Yao Yilin, was one of the standing members of the Communist Politburo when the Tiananmen incident took place. He seems to invite people to think that had his father been promoted and put in a more significant position, he would have been able to

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make a significant difference and reduce the misery of the Chinese people. On the contrary, a much deeper and more important question should be: to what extent had his father and his compatriots cooperated willingly or unwillingly with the Party so that all decisions made at the top were carried out dutifully and enthusiastically? Should later historians and political scientists also hold his father's generation accountable for the establishment of this authoritarian system in China?

The second flaw is the lack of "self-centeredness" in the book. It is Xiao Di's thirty years in the *Red House*, not his father's, his uncles' or even his nanny's. The book contains numerous stories of his family members, but very few of his own emotional growth, his pride and arrogance as a privileged child, his ambition to step into his father's shoes, his disillusionment, his naiveté, his mischief, his "wickedness," his love and his decision not to go back to China when his father was dying. What we see more is a detached storyteller who focuses on people and things around him. He is an objective observer rather than an active participant. Ross Terril praises Zhu's conscience and sensitivity in the preface. We hardly see the struggle in his conscience. We rarely see the vulnerability of his sensibility. We don't see how he managed to survive the political storm and drastic changes in his social standing in the society.

These two flaws have by no means belittled the value of this book. It forces people, particularly Xiao Di's generation, who are now taking the responsibility to lead in China, to think how their lives intersect with the nation, to reevaluate our parents' role in this nation possessed by continuous revolution, and to trace the origins of the tragedy of this nation called People's Republic.

The book can best be used as supplementary reading for a course on contemporary China. It provides insights to the rise to power of the Communists, culminating in the founding of the Republic in 1949, and adds sound and fury to the history of the Republic. To assign chapters of this book, in conjunction with a textbook, will make a course on Chinese history, politics or sociology much more fun and productive. ■

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