

One can point to other such mementos—the instant Auschwitz of nuclear destruction past and the promise of even greater genocidal potential for the future—but one can still see in the Holocaust the clearest evidence of humankind's failure to meet the moral and spiritual challenge our technological and scientific commitments present. As such, it deserves the continuing attention it has received as one of the truly pivotal events of our times. Both of these books contribute significantly to the fuller awareness we must achieve if the lessons of the Holocaust are to be learned. Today it is the human race, not just one of its unfortunate segments, that is threatened with extinction. [WV]

THE DRAGON'S VILLAGE

by Yuan-tsung Chen

(Pantheon Books, x + 285 pp., \$10.00)

Miriam London

In our unjust times only marketers of drugs or worldly goods are held accountable for truth in advertising; literateurs enjoy literary immunity. Thus, in his blurb for *The Dragon's Village*, Harrison Salisbury does not shrink from likening this meager, disingenuous autobiographical tale to Sholokhov's full-blooded masterpiece *The Quiet Don*. If one must really seek Yuan-tsung Chen's literary twin on the Soviet scene, it would more likely be a Vera Panova, one of those modestly talented but Party-broken scribes who survived and published in Stalin's time and are now quietly obsolescent. For the curious fact is that, although Yuan-tsung Chen left her native China in 1972 and evidently wrote her book in our permissive country, *The Dragon's Village* is essentially a minor exercise in the genre of socialist realism.

As a Russian proverb has it: "In the absence of fish, even a crab is a fish." Against the dead backdrop of untruth, the verisimilitude that Soviet socialist-realist writers permitted themselves, the faint play allowed to human waywardness and vulnerability, seemed almost true, almost live, almost real. There were even some people in those days who managed to mistake this poor literary fare for a feast. Finally, an honest man dared to rend the backdrop and bare the windows on the great house of

"The great virtue and service of Sidra Ezrahi's *By Words Alone*

is that more than any other book I know on this literature, it helps us to see the terrible events that formed it. Although her book is essentially a literary history, and displays the kind of quiet judgment that literary history requires, Mrs. Ezrahi makes us see the Holocaust itself as inevitably more real, urgent, terrible, than the writing that came out of it. That is as it should be. In the history of Jewish literature generally, the creation comes before the word and transcends it... To be a Jew is to know that words strive after the reality but can never adequately capture the human situation."

—From the Foreword by Alfred Kazin

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socialism—and then one saw the mold on the banquet, the gray dust on the wax fruit, and the rats scampering across the table.

I do not wish to be unkind or unfair to Yuan-tung Chen, whose narrative bespeaks a sensitive person. But she will not want for praise from others at present. For the sake of some future period of honest retrospection—a possible chimera—I am resigned to seem for the moment like the bad fairy at the ball.

The time spanned by the book is short—barely more than the year 1950, at the beginning of Communist rule in China. Its heroine, Ling-ling (the author as a girl of eighteen), chooses not to

accompany the rest of her well-to-do Shanghai family to the safe haven of Hong Kong. Instead she bravely and idealistically joins a group of young cadres (official workers of the new regime) who travel to far Gansu Province in China's harsh northwest to organize the peasantry for land reform. She finally takes up uneasy residence for this purpose in primitive Longxiang (Dragon Village).

The first half of the narrative is too transparently contrived to be engrossing. It is also heavily didactic. The author evidently has one eye fixed on the barbarian reader. One understands the problem of the uninformed Western reader, but it is not a clever solution

to force peasant speech into neat exposition. Thus, the author maneuvers one conversation so that the peasant girl Xiu-ying may recite: "When a girl lives at home, she must obey her father. When she is married, she must obey her husband. And when her husband dies, she must obey her son."

Possibly because the author never quite cuts her peasant characters loose from her strings they remain assorted queer ghosts rather than real people. And that is a pity because, to her credit, she does hew closer to life here, neither idealizing nor sentimentalizing them.

Just as one is about to give up and pronounce the book dead, something happens—a departure from predictability, a glint of the genuine. For the first time one reads with interest and, for a chapter or two, even with respect. (How electrifying an honest word can be in the midst of cant!) It is not that Ling-ling breaks form to reveal here and there a bourgeois sympathy for a few "wretched landlords" who "had just managed to make a mere pittance in these god-forsaken villages and now...were paying a heavy price for it." The merit of these few pages lies in showing how dogmatic interference, however benevolent, in the complicated lives of supposedly simple people can lead to as much evil as it was intended to exorcise. (The inevitability of such "evil consequences" is lost, however, on Yuan-tung Chen, even after thirty years of overwhelming demonstration by Chinese history.) It is no accident that this is the best-written part of the book. The author for once has let the story carry her; she is no longer the good little cadre arranging scenes and pushing puppets about.

The climax of this interlude is a paragraph that would not pass the state censor, even in the culturally liberalized China of Deng Xiaoping. A troubled Ling-ling falls asleep and has a nightmare in which she is pursued relentlessly by a man in a belted tunic and heavy boots. She awakens in terror, realizing that "these people who were chasing me were the same people who had been chasing Ma Li [a radical friend]. I could not care less what they called themselves. Guomintang [Kuomintang] or Communist, rightist or leftist, counterrevolutionary or revolutionary. They were the same people."

This nightmare truth is dropped without warning in the middle of the book—where it continues to sit like an

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unexploded depth charge or an indissoluble stone. Ling-ling (and the remembering Yuan-tsung Chen?) collects herself, as though it were not there, and returns briskly to the falsity of her waking dream. The narrative resumes, retrieving dropped ends of the original delusion and tying them properly, down to the last half-truth. A naive reader would close the book on the last line believing that, with a modicum of violence, a great justice—the distribution of land to individual peasants—had been done. Such a reader certainly would not suspect that the “wretched landlords” had only begun to pay a price in blood or that the peasants would not long afterward be forced to relinquish their lands to that far more powerful and exacting landlord, the totalitarian state. Of course an author can write about any period of time he chooses. Nevertheless, it does strike one as strange: Yuan-tsung Chen lived through more than twenty years in the People’s Republic of China—through collectivization, the Hundred Flowers Campaign and anti-rightist backlash, the establishment of the communes, the Great Leap Forward and its tragic aftermath, the Cultural Revolution, the Red Guard movement, the ensuing factional battles and incessant turbulence under the “Gang of Four.” Why does she return thus virginally to 1950—as though nothing has happened since then—and, yes, once again ritualistically beat that old dead horse, the Kuomintang? To most Chinese today the ineptitude and cruelties of the former regime under Chiang Kai-shek are ancient history, resuscitated only as needed by the current propaganda machine.

The questions continue. For instance, in an interview published in the *New York Times Book Review* (May 4, 1980) Yuan-tsung Chen states that had she not experienced excruciating hunger in 1959-60, during the Great Leap Forward period, she “couldn’t have written that chapter, ‘Spring Hunger’....” Does this mean that Ling-ling first suffered real hunger not in still “feudalistic” Longxiang in early 1951 but in some other Chinese village almost ten years later, well after the completion of the land reform that was to have eliminated such catastrophe? Is this what is meant by the line in the preface, “This story is fiction, but it is true”?

Oh, well, perhaps the times are more

interchangeable than one imagines. According to a *People’s Daily* article of November 26, 1978, the current living standards of peasants in a large area of China’s northwest, including Gansu, “are lower than those of pre-liberation days or the time of the war of resistance against Japan.” If so, the description of grinding poverty in *The Dragon’s Village* still informs the reader about much of China today.

In the same *New York Times* interview Yuan-tsung Chen quotes the words of a Chinese poet who once encouraged her to continue writing, although she never quite managed to follow the approved Maoist formula. “In China [he said] if you choose to write, you have to prepare to go all alone sometimes.”

True. And not only in China, may I add—not only in China. [WV]

DOCTOR FISCHER OF GENEVA OR THE BOMB PARTY by Graham Greene

(Simon & Schuster, 156 pp.; \$9.95)

Roger Mithrite

The considerable familiarity that I and many others have with the works of Greene must, I think, affect our judgment of *Doctor Fischer of Geneva*. So much is familiar, the opening sentences that almost immediately compel one’s attention (“I think I used to detest Doctor Fischer more than any other man I have known just as I loved his daughter more than any other woman. What a strange thing that she and I ever came to meet, leave alone to marry.”); religious skepticism coupled with theological themes; poetry, remembered or read, that has particular and unexpected relevance; and that particular gray emotional and psychic climate that seeps into and pervades so many of Greene’s novels, whether they are set in Vietnam, Haiti, Berlin, Africa, Latin America, or—as here—Switzerland.

This familiarity is more significant for the appreciation of this short novel than for his other novels. *The Human Factor*, which directly preceded it, is spare, pared down, relatively free of detail and ornament. But *Doctor Fischer* is so chaste and unadorned in its prose and narrative structure that it has the character less of a novel than of a

parable or a morality play. Despite the rewards of Greene’s prose, I think this story would lose less in translation than any of his others. Doctor Fischer, an immensely rich man, entertains himself by holding dinners for a select group of rich friends who undergo humiliation at his hands in return for gifts. How far can he push them? Will they risk even their lives for a very considerable gift? Will poor Jones, who marries Fischer’s daughter, be destroyed by the Doctor? “So you’ll let him take you into a high place and show you all the Kingdoms of the world?” Anna-Luise asks fearfully.

Greene can draw upon a vast reservoir of technique and talent as he develops this simple story. Nothing here is extraneous, nothing wasted. One can lean on every sentence, every incident with confidence; the authority of a master craftsman is behind them and nothing will give way. The lunch-time scene, during which Anna-Luise has an accident, is remarkably strong, moving, and it is achieved with disarming simplicity. But in reading this story, which is interesting, I found that I was also reading Greene. That is, I found I was giving weight and density to words, phrases, themes that I would not easily give to them in a novel by another author. And I was admiring what Greene, at his present age, could do with a theme that he would have developed differently at an earlier time. But I do wonder what those who first encounter Greene through this book will make of it. For it is, in the Greene corpus, relatively slight. I hope it will lead them back to some of his others—*The Power and the Glory*, *Brighton Rock*, *Travels With My Aunt*—to name a few of his best. [WV]

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Roger Mithrite discovered Greene’s first novel some decades ago and has been reading Greene ever since.