

Confessions



AN INNOCENT LIFE IN
COMMUNIST CHINA



KANG ZHENG GUO

*"This may be the best account of daily life
in Communist China that I have ever read."*

—Perry Link, Princeton University

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An Innocent Life in Communist China

KANG ZHENGGUO

TRANSLATED BY SUSAN WILF



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Opposition is the movement of the Dao.

—LAOZI

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INTRODUCTION

THIS MAY BE the best account of daily life in Communist China that I have ever read. It stands out not because it recasts the broad outlines of history but because of the extraordinarily lifelike quality of the writing and the credibility of its account of life under Mao. Hundreds of writers of both fiction and nonfiction have given accounts of “the people” (aka “the masses”) during China’s Mao years, but nearly all use an ideological lens that flattens the perspective and homogenizes the background, indeed starches the clothing, tidies the town square, recolors the sky, and, most important, tells you what to think about a social problem in terms that are usually oversimplified and often grossly false. This account, in contrast, is clear-eyed.

After Mao there was a quick literary reaction against much that Mao had done but not so much against the Maoist style of writing. The scar literature of 1978–80 reversed direction on some key points (Mao’s top lieutenants, once infallibly correct, now included the all-evil Gang of Four; the Cultural Revolution was not glorious but violent and bloody; corruption, formerly unmentionable, was acknowledged as a big problem). But the colored lens problem persisted; only some of the colors had changed. Maoist literary style survived as a habit even among writers who consciously sought to pull themselves free from Maoist ideology. For a few who became aware of this problem, the quest for self-extrication itself became a sort of obsession, and this too created problems when they tried to look squarely at history.

Kang Zhengguo, who never bought into Maoism, does not have to tell us how he got out of it. His writing is a powerful indictment of life under Mao but not because he is pushing any alternative ideology. What he gives us is daily experience written from the ground up, as it were, and with a charming transparency that spares no one, including himself; the prose conveys a sense of authenticity that is extremely rare in accounts of life in Communist China. It is startling, when you think of it, that the world has so far had almost no honest accounts of daily experience in a country as large as China over nearly half a century of its modern history. Here, though, we do have one.

Although Kang reveals a great deal about ordinary life in China, his own path is not exactly ordinary. He is by nature an adversative character, a square peg unsuited to the round holes laid out by authorities of any kind, be they his father, his school, his wife, or the Communist Party of China. He thinks for himself and is a bit too quick to assume that if something makes sense to him, it ought to make sense to everybody and

therefore be acted upon. His wife says of him, “You always stick your neck out when everybody else has the good sense to lie low.” Yet Kang’s blunt approach turns out to be an excellent tool for exposing the submerged textures of everything around him. While most of his contemporaries submit to authority, get used to doing so, and eventually regard this as so normal that they become entirely unaware of the patterns that their own lives are observing, Kang does none of this. He trundles his way through life rather like a good-natured rhinoceros, ignoring boundaries, inadvertently dislodging rocks, and occasionally trampling the tails of snakes that spring up to bite him. We follow him from college to brick factory to labor camp to prison and finally into rural exile. The odyssey is revelatory at every stage.

For the social historian, Kang’s book opens the door on the mechanics of the Mao-era control system. We get to see, for example, how the use of the official stamp to coerce conformity had a power that went far beyond the particular issue at hand. You want a job? A residence permit? A marriage license? From the point of view of the omnipresent control system, exactly what it is that you want is almost irrelevant. The important point is that I, the official, have the power to withhold it from you, the supplicant, and this power gives me leverage over *every* aspect of your life, whether related to your request or not. You want that marriage license? Behave better at work. You want a job assignment? Submit to authority in your neighborhood. And so on. The “smart” way to handle such pressures is to learn to toady. Kang’s way (and he was not alone here; a number of the inmates in the labor camps and prisons are like him in this regard) is to reason on principle, to resist, and in consequence to be snared by the system and labeled a troublemaker in a broad sense that follows one wherever one goes, year after year.

Once snared, miscreants are squeezed. After Kang has been expelled from college and sent home, he finds that his ration coupons have been withheld. He has to impose on the rations of family members, and this makes him feel an increasing pressure to move out. But then he finds—and this pattern repeats itself several times—that the only route *out* is *down*. You can leave home, but only by “volunteering” to live and work at a squalid brick factory. You don’t like the factory? You can leave (farther down the social scale) for a rural labor camp. Your counterrevolutionary record is getting the better of you? You can renounce your past, your childhood, your family name, your everything and offer yourself as an adopted son to an elderly bachelor in the countryside. No problem! A few banquets and gifts to grease the wheels, and we in the system can arrange all this for you. The bizarre comes to seem so normal that the simplest of unapproved human expression resembles the derring-do of a spy; an old friend silently passes a note about where to meet, at a later time, for frank talk in a cornfield. Watching Kang spiral downward, the reader is led to muse on the mechanics of social mobility in the other direction. Just what kind of behavior would help one *rise* within a system like this?

Following Kang on his tour of the innards of the Mao years, we come to see the surface impressions of that era quite differently. Take the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, for example. How much writing has there been about its radical zeal, its pushing of Communist theory and practice to a new level? Kang does not bother to tell us that this writing is superficial. He just relates what he saw and heard in daily life and in passing makes clear that much of the popular rage that burst forth during the

Cultural Revolution was born of recoil from what the Communists had already done, not from a demand that they do more of it. The Cultural Revolution also brought Kang more, not less, access to “bourgeois” pleasures like reading non-Communist books, smoking cigarettes, and chatting with friends.

Kang’s supple writing moves seamlessly between his external context and his inner world of thoughts and feelings, thereby showing us not only social patterns but the psychological struts that support them. Fresh insights emerge. In official language, for example, the “collectivism” of the Mao years has always been officially presented as a kind of idealistic group-mindedness, and we do know from other memoirs, such as Liu Binyan’s, that elite young people in the 1950s and 1960s did pursue group interests with enthusiasm. But in daily life at many other social levels, the party’s power engineering created very nearly the opposite of group-mindedness. It focused sharply on the individual person: *You are wrong; you are alone, you need to join the mainstream; and your only route to rejoining it is to submit to me, the one who holds power over you.* Not just Kang but most of the people in his memoir are actually or potentially trapped by this kind of threat. They are isolated as individuals—or at most in families or small circles of friends—and they perceive the larger society as a majority arrayed against them, while in fact that majority is itself a sea of people who are similarly frightened and isolated. The collective consciousness of the mainstream is an illusion.

One important reason why the illusion can persist is that people fear guilt by association. When one person’s political taint becomes known, everyone else keeps a distance. So-and-so is counterrevolutionary? Has a prison record? Stay away! On the surface, the party can claim that this reaction demonstrates collective political will. See? The Chinese people hate counterrevolutionaries! In fact, though, what everybody hates is the possibility that political leprosy will spread to him. Thus each person’s calculations about how to survive, when viewed alongside every other person’s, produces the surface appearance of unanimous support for the party. The Chinese people were (then as much as now) certainly smart enough to figure all this out and could have done something about it if public discussion and organization had been allowed. But they were not, and everyone knew that anyone who moved to claim these rights was only asking to become yet another political leper. The party further suppressed such thoughts by seeing to it that errant individuals remained intensely aware of their own guilt. After his release from prison, for example, Kang is forced to reimburse the state “for the expense of imprisoning me.”

Prohibitions against misbehavior eventually sank in as permanent and unquestioned features of life, as obvious as the rule that you get wet if you go out in the rain. This is why Kang’s parents, and later his wife, find his resistance neither admirable nor courageous but simply obtuse. Yet when Kang’s fortunes hit rock bottom, he finds (and this has happened with other dissidents) that his spirits get an unexpected lift. When he learns that a friend has burned his diaries, “the thought that I had nothing to lose was strangely calming,” Kang writes. The psychological pressure generated by the fear of loss dissipates when little or nothing remains to be lost, or as the Chinese proverb puts it, “Dead pigs do not fear boiling water.” Later, after Kang recovers and eventually emigrates—and again comes to feel that he has significant things to lose—he once more is ready to compromise, albeit reluctantly. When he

returns to China in 2000, he arranges his itinerary so as not to rile his hometown police during the “sensitive period” of the June 4 anniversary of the Beijing Massacre of 1989.

In the 1970s, when Kang goes to live for several years in the Shaanxi countryside, he arrives there as a cultural outsider and immediately turns into a keen observer of rural life. His book, among its other virtues, presents some excellent anthropology. Other accounts of Mao-era commune life have too often bristled with one or another kind of jargon: either the political cant of Maoism, which paints a superidealized picture that is essentially false or, in more recent times, the puffy academese of certain strains of Western anthropology, whose language can leave the ground and ascend into clouds of splendid uninterpretability.

Kang the anthropologist, in his concrete and lively language, combines an acerbic eye with a good-natured respect for China’s folkways. We see how the language of “commune” and “work team” overlay a daily life in which people in fact were acutely aware of private property; no one was in doubt about who owned what tools, grain, animals, or housing, and there was considerable jealousy over who got how many work points. As in pre-Communist China, the boredom of village life put a premium on every small distraction, so that, for example, when someone fell ill, the whole village had an opportunity to drop by, offering “unsolicited advice and expressions of feigned concern.” Traditional notions of peasant egalitarianism had been strengthened by Maoist dicta, and villagers, even while coveting their hoes and work points, believed that anyone in the village who got a windfall should be obliged to share some if it. Hence, when Kang’s parents in the city pay for a pile of pretty red tiles for Kang to use to put a roof over his head, a stream of villagers drops by to let it be known they would like to “borrow” a few. How to handle these requests and still have enough tiles for the roof became a problem for Kang, who concludes that “a stroke of good luck could be a nuisance in disguise.”

The brilliant 1980s short stories of Gao Xiaosheng (“The Money Purse,” “Fishing,” and others)¹ reveal this same mentality among farmers in another part of China, Jiangsu Province; both Gao and Kang also show how the mental world of Chinese villagers, despite the blandness of daily life (or perhaps *because* of it), could be surprisingly complex and sophisticated. Why, for example, do the people in Kang’s village vote for his adoptive father Li Baoyu to be chairman of the Poor and Lower-Middle Peasants’ Association? Li had a mixed reputation, “not greedy or dishonest,” but often “mulish and stingy” and not very bright, indeed “practically the village idiot.” Li’s singular credential for office turns out to be that his house is the only one in the village that has no wall in front of it. With no wall, he can hide nothing. Unable to hide things, he will not pilfer from the group. And everybody knows that he is too poor to build a wall. So elect him!

Countryside people are forbidden from moving to the cities, where life is better, and for this reason feel inferior. On the other hand, their envy of urbanites melds into rivalry, so that they sometimes regard urbanites “as monsters, a different species,” just as, Kang wryly notes, “Chinese people in general regarded foreigners.”

But for all its good sociology and anthropology, the special virtue of this book is its fine writing. Kang’s prose is fluent, lifelike, vivid, graceful. His characters stand up and walk off the page, and his charming turns of phrase are an added treat: The

stillness in his village is broken only by “the raucous braying of bored donkeys” when he is forced to write yet another self-criticism, the blank page “mocked me like a fun house mirror.” The credit for capturing Kang’s art in English belongs to Susan Wilf, his superb translator. Wilf understands, as many translators of languages as different as Chinese and English do not, that word-for-word reflection of syntax and lexicon can be a pedantic sort of fidelity and that the life and art of a piece are more faithfully served by reading a whole sentence, or several at once, and then contriving to give the reader the fullest and most natural re-creation of the original that one can manage, even if this means completely rethinking the syntax and being “free” with the lexicon.

My field of study is modern Chinese literature, and I have often felt puzzled by the difficulty Chinese writers have had in looking deeply into Maoism and its aftermath. Where is a Chinese Solzhenitsyn, or Vaclav Havel, or Primo Levi? For other modern societies that have endured severe trauma, literature has played a role in facing difficult truths and helping transcend them, but in modern China it’s as if a huge reverse magnet lies at the core of the issue. Writers of several kinds have aimed at the heart of Maoism and begun to move toward it but, as they draw near, are deflected in one direction or another.

The scar writers of 1978–80 denounced the Gang of Four and spoke of “ten years of catastrophe.” But they told only a fraction of what they knew and felt. They had seen such things as murder, gouged eyes, and parents forced to pay for the bullet that executed their child but wrote only of “unhealthy tendencies.” Deng Xiaoping’s demand for “stability and unity” blocked their way forward, and most eventually passed from the literary scene after only, as the Chinese idiom puts it, “scratching the itch from the outside of the boot.”

A few did persist, in one or another way. Zhang Xianliang, for example, went on to produce a large corpus of fiction and memoirs about labor camps. Zhang is extremely good at describing the psychological consequences of hunger, thirst, sex privation, and captivity, and his insights gain credibility from their congruence with accounts of human beings who have endured extremity elsewhere. Primo Levi’s memoir of Hitler’s camps, Someth May’s account of Pol Pot’s, and Ōoka Shōhei’s tale of a starving soldier in the wilds of the Philippines,² among others, reveal the elemental human nature that Zhang Xianliang finds, in himself and in others, inside China’s labor camps. But Zhang, despite all that he achieves, cannot in the end extricate himself from a supplicatory attitude toward the Communist Party of China. Like Wang Meng, Cong Weixi, and many others of the generation of Chinese writers who rode on high hopes for their revolution until the Maoist havoc forced a reappraisal, Zhang emerged from the Mao years “wishing it hadn’t been so” and addressing authority, the very authority that had oppressed him, in an almost apologetic attitude. Zhang remains couched in this politically recumbent position even as he records the harshest cruelty of the labor camps. He somehow cannot pull himself free to “live in truth,” in Vaclav Havel’s phrase, or to transcend to a higher level, as Primo Levi was able to do in his later writing or as Ōe Kenzaburō could do in looking back on the A-bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Some of the “modernist” literary works that appeared in China in the late 1980s and the 1990s can also be seen, in part, as posttraumatic symptoms of the Mao years. Worlds filled with murderous toddlers, incestuous fathers, belching grandmothers,

horn-blowing deaf-mutes, hoodlums who grin as an electric drill penetrates someone's kneecap, sunlight so hot that it melts the sand underfoot, family history that gets more and more grotesque the deeper one digs, narrative dreaminess that blurs reality and nightmare, and more, all were the creations of a generation of writers who had grown up during late Maoism. However bizarre, these images bear a certain authenticity. Can Xue, whose stories are among the strangest of all, has said that she writes in a sort of trancelike state, allowing, as it were, content to vault from the back of her brain directly onto the paper before her, and then never revises. It may be hard to imagine a more honest way of writing, but for the reader it leaves daunting problems of interpretation. What does she mean by unexplained references to "the man locked up in the hut banging furiously against the door" or "dead moths and dragonflies scattered on the floor"?³ If such images are one way of looking back at the Maoist disaster, they are yet another kind of oblique expression. They still submit to the power of that giant reverse magnet, the same power that stunted the growth of scar literature and kept writers like Zhang Xianliang locked in supplicatory mode. Twenty years after the death of Mao, after the purge of 1987 and the bloody crackdown in 1989, most Chinese writers had given up fighting the reverse magnet. Many turned around, plunged into the sea of innocuous topics, and, in terms of living standards and fame, found good careers.

We should note in passing that the reluctance to look squarely at the Maoist past is not just a Chinese problem. Westerners have also fallen into self-censorship and have been caught up in a variety of supplicatory poses. These have arisen in part from the same kinds of implicit threats and rewards that affect Chinese people but also in part from the West's old romantic notion that the East is an exotic world and an appropriate receptacle for Western wishful thinking.

Now we have Kang Zhengguo, whose writing is quite free of self-censorship, supplicatory attitude, bizarre modernism, or other deflections of vision of the sorts just reviewed. Kang is free as well from the kind of distortion that, in some writers, grows out of conscious rebellion against such deflection. Kang seems, as he wanders through his memories, completely unaffected by questions of how close he may or may not be coming to politically radioactive turf. He tells us what he saw, heard, and felt and uses the same tone whether or not he happens to be implying that the emperor is naked. For example, when local officials categorize him as "the dregs of society" (a technical term, in Communist jargon) and assign him to labor, he neither accepts the insult nor turns sarcastic toward it but is almost childlike in his observation of a contradiction in how they have presented things to him: "If labor was so glorious, why did they give all the dirty work to us, the dregs of society, instead of doing it themselves?"

Before the Communist revolution, a few writers, like Xiao Hong in her wonderful *Tales of Hulan River* (1942), were also able to write in this tone of childlike lucidity. But since then examples of the style have been extremely rare in mainland China, where guidelines, "forbidden zones," and required jargon and conceptual categories have driven pre-Communist writing styles deep into the crannies of society, far from the printed page. Pu Ning's *Red in Tooth and Claw*, which Kang Zhengguo admires, is a rare example of writing that somehow survived in one of those crannies. Pu wrote as Wumingshi ("Anonymous"); his account of life in labor camps, which reveals Mao-era realities in unusual depth, reads as if sealed off from both Maoist literary influence and

the recoil from it. Kang and Pu are similar in this regard.

It would be wrong, though, not to acknowledge and admire those Chinese writers who at one point did embrace Maoism or were simply engulfed by it and who later consciously sought to pull their writing free from the Mao mentality. This too was done in a variety of ways. Some, such as Zhong Acheng and Wang Zengqi in the 1980s, sought refuge in the language and narrative technique of traditional Chinese fiction and storytelling. In so doing, they drew upon the latent power of Chinese cultural habit, which perdured despite attempts during the Mao years to stomp it out. Other writers, such as the “misty” poets of the late 1970s and early 1980s and some of the modernist fiction writers a decade later, borrowed Western literary form and technique to help with the self-extrication process. In this they had a powerful ally in the widespread assumption in China (whether stated or not) that the West is “advanced.” Some writers went, as it were, all the way West-ward in literary terms by adopting Western languages as their very means of expression. Ha Jin writes in English, as, sometimes, does Zha Jianying, while Dai Sijie and Nobel laureate Gao Xingjian have written in French. It may seem odd that a writer’s leap “out” of China and into a Western language can leave him or her more free than before to evoke the mood and subtleties of life in China. But this, in a few cases, has indeed been true. I know of no fiction written in Chinese that reveals the mood of Chinese urban life in the 1970s better than does Ha Jin’s *Waiting*. Readers of Kang Zhengguo’s memoir will note a similarity between it and Ha Jin’s prose. Both penetrate daily life in the Communist period very effectively, even as neither carries the slightest hint of Communist literary practice. This is rare.

We might wonder why it is so rare, and has taken so long, for Chinese writing “free of Mao” to appear. At least in one sense the delay is normal. Literary transcendence of major disasters in other modern societies has also taken time. Anne Frank kept a diary during the Holocaust, recording what she saw, heard, and thought in her immediate environment, and after the war some other accounts of pain and suffering appeared soon enough, but it took about forty years before Primo Levi and others had sufficient distance from the catastrophe to be able even to attempt comprehension of it. The literary recoil from Stalin’s terror and from the dropping of the atomic bombs on Japan shows a broadly similar pattern. In China the effort to transcend has been more difficult because of the Communist Party’s continuing ban on public criticism of Mao. German writers could attack Hitler within months of his death, while Russian writers had to wait about three posthumous years before taking on Stalin. By contrast, Chinese writers, nearly thirty years after Mao’s death, still need to tiptoe around his image and pretend to respect certain fundamentals of his language and his worldview. Communist Party leaders, fearing that their rule might collapse if its Maoist strut were removed, took steps to ensure that Mao’s reputation stayed in place.

These included censorship, which blocks unapproved ideas from publication, and enforced self-censorship, by which a writer withholds or alters his or her expression from fear of some kind of punishment. Both these deterrents have been important in preventing honest literary engagement with China’s recent past, and Kang Zhengguo avoids both of them. But he avoids yet another important barrier, which is the controlling power of language itself. This is more subtle and insidious, and it may be

worth a short diversion to try to make clear what it is.

To adopt the lingo of people one interacts with is natural, indeed so common that we might call it human nature. It happens even when one does not admire the terms that one's interlocutor uses, as, for example, when I as a professor talk with my registrar about "units" of course work in literature even though I find a metaphor that suggests "measurable lump," like cheese or tofu, to be ridiculous when applied to literature. The pressure to adjust to someone else's terms grows stronger when the other party holds pervasive power over one. During China's Mao years the Communist Party's use of language caused certain patterns of expression to become entrenched within the public so deeply that people took them for granted. Eventually it did not seem strange, but only reasonable, to master the official language in order to protect oneself or to get what one wanted. Public discourse became a sort of language game. In the late 1970s, for example, when it became a national policy to make amends with persecuted intellectuals, professors who wanted better housing did not go to their local party leaders and ask, "Can I have a bigger apartment?" They would say something like "Could the recent policies of Party Central be concretized in my case?"

Eventually, moreover, official language seeped into unofficial contexts where it affected daily-life expression. "Annihilate (*xiaomie*)," for example, was prominent in the Communist lexicon because combat was common in the party's history. Mao Zedong became partial to the word. People who grew up in China in the 1950s through 1970s began to use the word metaphorically in daily-life contexts. When, for example, a bit of food is left on a serving plate at a dinner table and might best be finished off, someone might say, "Let's annihilate it." (The usage is not idiomatic in Taiwan or in overseas Chinese communities.) In 1988 on a public bus in Beijing I heard a little boy say to his mother, "Ma, I gotta pee!" The mother said, "Persevere!," using *jianchi*, a term that had been used for decades for upholding one or another political line but that had come to permeate daily life so thoroughly no one on the bus seemed to find it remarkable.

The seepage of political language into daily life affected literature as well. With the categories and concepts that it entails, political language has done at least as much to impede clear-eyed writing as have editorial censorship and conscious self-censorship. Moreover, its effects have been harder to get rid of because most writers, most of the time, have been unaware of them. Writers in the 1950s were drawn into what Chu Anping called "the world of the party," in which all public expression observed stylized norms that signaled, regardless of topic and even of viewpoint, "I am part of this partyworld." When Miklós Haraszti observed that Hungarian writers in the 1950s were living inside a "velvet prison,"⁴ he was referring not only to the system of material rewards that lured and held them but also to the velvet unreality of official language that cushioned their intellectual work. For China in the late 1950s, in my view, the metaphor of velvet is not quite strong enough. Chinese writers "inside the world of the party" were then more like George Orwell's depiction of Henry Miller, swallowed like Jonah and "inside the whale"—i.e., its stomach—"like a womb big enough for an adult." Orwell invites us to imagine: "the dark, cushioned space that exactly fits you, with yards of blubber between you and reality, able to keep up an attitude of the completest indifference, no matter *what* happens. A storm that would sink all the battleships in the world would hardly reach you as an echo. Even the

whale's own movements would probably be imperceptible to you. He might be wallowing among the surface waves or shooting down into the blackness of the middle seas..., but you would never know the difference.”⁵ Were Chinese writers in the 1950s aware of where the great Maoist whale was headed? When the great famine began devouring tens of millions of lives, could they, from their position inside the whale, cushioned by yards of blubber, even begin to describe the sea and the storm? Did the public domain offer them adequate language for such an effort? Twenty years after the great famine, when writers could begin to address what had happened, they were still constricted—by continuing political guidelines and implicit threats but also by language. They spoke of “mistakes,” of “prices that were paid,” and of how too bad it was, for example, that Mao Zedong had outmaneuvered Peng Dehuai in 1959. Their views were passionate and worth a salute from us, but they still could not say plainly what needed to be said.

When we read Kang Zhengguo, it can seem oddly striking that we find his outlook so commonsensical. How did such a sense-making approach emerge from such “crazy” times? Moreover, we see that Kang was not alone; we see other ordinary Chinese coping their ways through life, thinking and behaving not like Mao models but in ways that human beings elsewhere in the world can relate to. That human beings in Maoist China were fundamentally the same as human beings elsewhere ought not to count as an insight, and yet given the dearth of honest writing from the period, it does appear as one.

As we read Kang and get deeper and deeper into the nonparty world that it unfolds, the party world seems correspondingly to shrink. It still dominates, to be sure, and is still frightening. But we see more and more that the party world is not coterminous with “China.” Since the 1950s the Communist Party of China has always spoken of itself, both internally and to the international world, as if it were China: Nation, state, and party are all one. This rhetorical gesture of course has its political purposes: to suggest that support of the party is support of China, that criticism of the party is criticism of China, that to oppose the party is to be non-Chinese, and so on. Perhaps the most life-affirming fruit of Kang Zhengguo's memoir is that it opens a small space around Kang's daily life and then, as Kang meets others and the space expands, pushes back the hegemonic claim that “party and China are one.” The party eventually comes to seem not the whole of the country but a sort of private membership group—albeit a very large one—that rides atop the populace. In 1991 Wan Runnan, the famous chief of the Sitong Company who was obliged to flee China after the Beijing Massacre, commented that “China belongs to the people of China; it is not the private property of the Communist Party.” This assertion, obvious in one sense, was unutterable during the Mao years and still sounded radical in 1991. Kang Zhengguo does not repeat the assertion but just assumes it and then tells us how the true owners of China made the best of their lives during difficult times.

—Perry Link
Princeton University
August 2006

CONFESSIONS

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Liberation

ONE DAY IN the early summer of 1949 Nanny bundled up all her silver jewelry in a piece of blue homespun, grabbed me by the hand, and fled with me out of the Dongguo Gate of Xi'an. Much later I learned that that had been the day of Xi'an's Liberation. "Liberation" was a brand-new word at the time, and I was only five years old, too young to grasp its full meaning. All I remember is that Nanny had been discussing the news with everybody for days: The Nationalist troops were retreating in defeat, and the Communist Eighth Route Army was coming. Nobody could explain exactly what this "army of bumpkins" was, but I could sense the worry in people's faces and tones of voice. The idea of an army, any army, struck terror into Nanny's heart. Her nervousness led me to fear that they were going to sack the city as soon as they arrived. All she had in the world was this bundle of jewelry from her trousseau. Over and over again she took out her silver bracelets, hairpins, and necklaces and then wrapped them up again, as if this would protect them from the marauding hillbillies.

Outside the city gate there was a fork in the country road. One way led south, to Nanny's in-laws' house, and the other side led north, to her parents'. She had told me her story many times. Her firstborn daughter had died of umbilical tetanus in the year that I was born. Before her milk could dry up, she had hurried off into the city, where she had found a job as my wet nurse. She hated her simpleminded husband and never wanted to go back to her in-laws' house again. She took me with her to visit her parents on holidays, so I could reel off the names of all the villages along the road as fluently as any bus conductor. I remembered where there was a cemetery or temple and where you could buy chilled tea.

On past occasions there had been almost nobody on the road, and the rural scenery had been dull, but this time I saw something different: refugees streaming in both directions, in and out of the city, and bare-chested deserters from the retreating Nationalist Army with red welts on their shoulders from carrying stretchers. I heard the muffled booming of cannons in the distance, and the loud explosion of the great Chan River Bridge being destroyed by the retreating Nationalists. People were lugging all kinds of bundles in their hands, on their shoulders, on carrying poles, and in carts. They were afraid that their personal property would be seized by the passing troops. They feared the retreating army, but they feared the approaching one even more.