

China in Ten Words



Although I've spent some time in Asia, I never visited China, so when I came across this personal narrative that combines essays on life in modern China with growing up during the Cultural Revolution, I couldn't resist. Through the focus of ten simple words, contemporary novelist Yu Hua presents a vivid picture of how Chinese life has changed in many ways, yet in others remained the same for over fifty years. With humor and an incisive take on his own culture, Hua shows how conformity vies with individuality in his country and how conformity often wins.

The chapter titled "Leader" focuses on the era of Mao Zedong. Although Yu was only a boy when Mao was Chairman, Yu entered the spirit of things by writing big-character posters. These were signs that were put up in all public place: movie theaters, schools, stores, and outside people's houses. In these anonymous signs, people criticized their neighbors for being landlords or for not following the precepts of the little red book. Yu Hua himself wrote many about his teachers and parents. In fact, he traces his love of writing from this childhood activity.

He also tells the story of one very unimportant man in his village who grew in status by quoting everyday from Mao's book, but unfortunately one morning he had an accident and his copy fell into a latrine. After that, this man never recovered his good name in the village and he seldom appeared in public again.

Another fascinating chapter is called "Copycat." It describes how Obama's image has been employed throughout China to sell cell phones and other electronic gear. Even more interesting is how people slyly engineer a copycat mentality to criticize the government or the wealthy by producing "copycat news" and "copycat talent shows." The "copycat news" sounds very similar to our fake news broadcasts by John Stewart and Steven Colbert.

Wordsworth once said that "The child is father to the man." Not only does this book present a compelling personal narrative (May you live in interesting times!) but it also provides a lot of background for westerners trying to understand this great power to our east.

Posted by Dory L. on December 26, 2011

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