

## TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION

*Half of Man Is Woman* was published in China in late 1985. It immediately became the object of enormous controversy. About a political prisoner in a labour camp, it is also about lust and impotence. In China, these subjects are normally still taboo, but here the author uses details of his own life to expose the anatomy of a mass psychosis. By describing individual loss of control over private functions, from language to sex, he condemns the pervasive impact of totalitarianism.

Zhang Xianliang writes from his own experience. For two decades he was either in jail or in labour camps in north-west China's equivalent of Siberia—he is qualified to write of China's Gulag.

From 1966 to 1976, the period covered by this book, China experienced a triumph of absurdity, the attempt to politicize every detail of life. One quarter of humanity lived in a state of anarchic chaos. This book describes that chaos, on a personal level. It describes a language in which words mean their opposite, to the point where people refuse to speak at all, a society in which wives inform on their husbands to gain political points, a world from which civilization has been scraped away, revealing the most basic and primitive of animal reflexes.

*Half of Man Is Woman* is not about some future 1984. In China, the Orwellian nightmare has already visited.

This is a book about survival in an insane world. Zhang describes a country that went mad. Along with all Chinese, he himself was part of that madness—short of dying, there was no way to avoid it. Zhang is, in the novel and in real life, a survivor. After 'crawling out of a pile of corpses' in a labour camp during the famine of 1960, he lived through another two decades of political hysteria. He writes about human resilience and the costs of survival, and he asks questions: under a totalitarian system, at what point does a person or a country decide to say no? At what point does a person lose the power to say no? What does a survivor hold back as his core of integrity, and what has a survivor, by surviving, lost?

on writers in China. As part of that crackdown, Zhang's latest writing has been banned. The reason given is that his work is too vulgar. It is less vulgar, however, than it is human and political. One of his main themes is that China's political system has desexed its population. It has not only instilled in its people profound distrust, which ranges from distrust of the Government to distrust of one's own relatives, it has castrated the will of people to stand up for themselves. They have been made both mentally and physically impotent. In *Half of Man Is Woman*, Zhang wonders if China's entire intellectual community has not been emasculated.

Zhang Xianliang was born in 1936 in Nanjing. The People's Republic of China was established in 1949, and Zhang went to high school in the early years of Communist rule. In 1955, as a young man of nineteen, he was assigned to teach in a cadre school in the north-west province of Ningxia. In 1956, Mao Zedong began the 'Hundred Flow-

ers Movement' which is currently described in China as 'a trick to entice snakes [intellectuals] out of their holes'. In the brutal campaign following that movement, those who spoke out against Mao's policies were accused of being 'rightists' and were either killed, jailed or ostracized. Zhang was put in jail at the age of twenty-one, ostensibly for writing poetry.

For the next twenty years, he was sent back and forth between prison and hard labour in China's Gulag. Once a person has been labelled an outcast in China's polarized society, he becomes a natural target for the next movement that sweeps the country. Mao's policy of continuous revolution required a focus of attack for each successive 'struggle'. Like the others in the labour camps, Zhang repeatedly served as such a focus.

In early 1965 Mao Zedong lost control over most of the Communist Party apparatus in China's provinces and cities, particularly in Beijing, and in 1966 he launched the Cultural Revolution. Begun as a power struggle aimed at toppling the leadership of the Party apparatus, the Cultural Revolution developed its own momentum which brought China close to civil war. Zhang Xianliang spent the ten

years of the Cultural Revolution in jail, in a re-education reform camp, and working on a State Farm. The camp and the farm are described in this book. The novel begins in 1966 and ends in 1976, after Zhou Enlai's death in January but before Mao's death in September. Various factions were vying for power as Mao died: the 'Gang of Four' was arrested one month after Mao died and the Deng Xiaoping reform faction took over power in late 1978.

The country slowly began to recover from the self-destruction of the previous decades, and intellectuals and others expelled from society were 'rehabilitated'. Zhang was rehabilitated in 1979. In the peculiar language of this event,

formal apologies were made for his having been 'wrongly dealt with' for roughly half of his life. He began to write again, still in Ningxia, describing what he had seen and experienced.

The interweaving of politics and poetry in this book may strike a non-Chinese reader as contrived, but to a contemporary audience in China it is only natural. Personal lives and decisions are unavoidably tied to politics. The warping of minds is a difficult subject to address when one has been through the warping process oneself. Chinese know this, and have found Zhang's work powerful. It has hit a very deep nerve in China today.

Zhang's audience in China includes a great many young people. To them he represents a person who not only experienced what he writes about, but who, unlike most of the older generation, was not broken by it. In *Half of Man Is Woman*, the protagonist feels that if one wants to influence the world, 'the least one must do is shout—never mind that it is a muffled shout from under a blanket of repression.' This book is such a shout. Zhang hopes that there are people listening.

No translation can do justice to the subtleties of expression and the slang that make this story so alive in the original. The author and the translator hope that even in this form the work will help non-Chinese readers understand contemporary China.

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