

BOOK REVIEW

Thirty Years in a Red House: A Memoir of Childhood and Youth in Communist China.

By Zhu Xiao Di. University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst, 1998.
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Reviewed by Michael J. Sloboda, M.M.

“Arising from the mud yet remaining unsullied,” (*Chuyu wuni er bu ran*) is a literal description of a lotus which is rooted in the mud of a swamp yet produces a pure white flower above the scum covered surface. It is used as a metaphor for a Buddhist monk who transcends the world, even more strongly for someone who manages to be active in society while remaining uncorrupted.

This book is as much a hagiography of the author’s relatives (especially his father) as it is an autobiography. Grandfather Zhu was a bank manager whose family “enjoyed an upper-middle-class standard of living in a society of mass poverty” (p. 5) until his death in 1923 caused them to tighten their belts. The author’s father was born in 1914. He was the firstborn of four children, three boys and one girl. He left Nanjing for a prestigious high school in Tianjin in 1927, the year when Chiang Kai-shek abruptly began killing Communists. Father Zhu read widely and became a student activist. After the Japanese invaded the Northeast (Manchuria) in 1931, his patriotism was aroused and he joined the Communist Youth League in 1932. Despite being expelled from his first high school, he later entered Beijing University, majoring in economics and organizing student demonstrations. He was an underground Communist during the war against Japan (1937-45) and in the civil war, with the Nationalists, that followed, as was one of his brothers. They both survived some dangerous missions and were given administrative jobs after Liberation as their reward. Yet Father Zhu never received the promotions he deserved because he was too honest to tell his superiors only what they wanted to hear. His younger brother was expelled from the Party during the Anti-Rightist Campaign.

The author, Zhu Xiao Di, was born in 1958, old enough to remember the famine of the early 1960’s but too young to become a Red Guard and be sent to the countryside like his older sister. His happy childhood ended in mid-1968 when Red Guards searched the

house, and arrested his father who was sent a few weeks later to a labor camp. Even after his release, his father's name was not cleared, and for eleven years he held no job commensurate with his skills. His mother also spent time in detention camps on two occasions. During those ten years (1966-76), Zhu Xiao Di comments that urban workers wasted 200 billion hours on Wednesday afternoon political study sessions (p.174), not to mention the disruption of life in the countryside and the inferior education offered to students in the schools.

The author took English lessons from his father and read whatever he could lay his hands on. He graduated from high school in 1975, and while waiting to be assigned to a job, put that year to good use in private study. After working for a year in an electronics factory and discovering the intricacies of office politics, he passed the two university entrance exams. In February 1978, higher education was just beginning to return to academic calm after eleven years of politics in command. Life on campus was Spartan, but morale was high and students were industrious as Deng Xiaoping began his reforms. "Our high spirits coincided with the generally optimistic mood of the nation...most people believed that China would have a great future" (p. 181).

In January 1982, the author was a member of the first class to graduate from a four-year university program in sixteen years. He immediately began teaching English at a college in Nanjing. A year later he applied to study in Australia, but someone else who had better connections was sent instead. As the saying goes, "It's not what you know, but who you know". The Party launched a campaign against Spiritual Pollution in October 1983, which got nowhere. Gradually his generation began to lose faith in the possibility of the Communist Party, which "was designed to consist of only those of the highest moral caliber" (p. 231), ever reforming itself. They began talking about the three roads to success in life: the red road of Communist Party membership, the black robe of academic success (from the black cap and gown worn at graduation), and the gold road of business. The author chose the black road and left on August 19, 1987, six months after his marriage, for graduate school in the U.S. In August 1990, he did not feel safe enough to return to China to attend his father's funeral, as the Tiananmen Incident was still fresh in everyone's mind.

Rather than end on this uncertain note, and unwilling to predict a hopeful or pessimistic future for his country, Zhu narrates an incident involving his father as a key organizer of a student protest in Beijing on December 16, 1935. The author concludes by saying, “Only one thing is sure: youth is the future of a nation. No matter how debatable may be the outcome or value of the youths’ activities, we should at least remember their efforts and respect their sincerity” (p. 247).

This book chronicles the major events of New China from the 1950’s to the 1980’s, explaining their significance for a reader who knows little or nothing of recent Chinese history. Macro history is linked to life at the micro level as the Zhu family responds to political buffeting and tries to carry on as normal a life as possible under the circumstances.

Thirty Years in a Red House has some inaccuracies. The famine after the Great Leap Forward killed millions, not thousands (p. 11). It is clear why China and Vietnam fought a border war early in 1979 (p. 193): first Vietnam invaded Cambodia, China’s ally, then China punished Vietnam by retaliating.

An annoying omission is the author’s failure to give complete names of people involved in his story. They are always mentioned as this or that relative of the author. The real hero of this book deserves to be remembered by name, not merely as the father of Zhu Xiao Di.

