success, and inclined to speak of it less defensively now. I looked at the gray streaks in his hair, the small wrinkles spreading around his eyes. He'd grown older, his laughter shorter and less easy than I had remembered; but he also seemed more composed, more confident, than he had for a long time. In a few days, a gold-plated trophy would restore him to his pride of place in Chinese cinema. Even before the award, though, as he headed back into the night streets of Beijing, he had the air of the man who knows whatever sacrifices and concessions he has made will have been worth it.

5

The Whopper

Tier 1: Communism Lite

On January 1, 1993, *China Culture Gazette* (*CCG*), the official organ of China's Ministry of Culture, was transformed. For years *CCG* had been an infamous stronghold of the hard-line apparatchiks, choking with dull, harsh tirades of Communist Party propaganda. With a new issue of its weekend edition—the *Cultural Weekend*—the paper changed color overnight: from red to yellow.

Nude pictures did the trick. The four-page *Cultural Weekend* on that day displayed so many photographs of nude and seminude women (most of whom were busty Westerners) that it instantly became known as "the coolest paper in Beijing." It also ran a front-page interview on the subject of nudity with Liu Xiaoqing, China's brash movie queen. The issue sold like hotcakes.

The Ministry of Propaganda was furious. The Ministry of Culture wasn't happy about it, either. Rumor had it that Communist Party General Secretary Jiang Zemin, who has a propensity for showing off his "high-culture taste," happened to pick up a copy of *CCG* at a subway station. The general secretary couldn't believe what he saw, and afterwards expressed grave concerns about the moral health of society.

Graver concerns these days center around economics. Considered to be on the front line of ideological battles, Chinese print media have always been both financially dependent on the party and under its tight control. For the past four decades, the basic axiom taught in all Chinese journalism departments was "news is the Party's throat and tongue." Every newspaper had—and still has—a Party secretary, who would often take the post of the chief editor as well, and who would report not so much to his readers but directly to his Party boss.

However, with the economic reform, and with new papers and journals springing up to compete with the old ones, the situation had changed significantly. *CCG* had been in the red politically and financially—in fact, the paper was so deep in debt that it was on the brink of folding, and everyone on the staff knew that the Party wouldn't bail them out. As inflation had continued and the price of paper had climbed, the government had ladled out only the same meager subsidy.

Fortunately, just around this time, Deng Xiaoping, China's de facto emperor, issued his call for wider and deeper marketization. Following Deng's orders, the General Press and Publishing Administration announced new guidelines. Publishers were given more power to decide matters such as printing adult erotic materials and kung fu novels; the previous ban on printing pictures of girls in bikinis, foreign movie stars, and pop singers on Chinese calendars was lifted, and publishers in specialized fields could now cross over to general subjects in order to boost sales.

So, when Zhang Zuomin, a short, urchinlike former Red Guard, took charge of *Cultural Weekend*, he was given a free hand to make it profitable—and he knew exactly what direction to go in and how far to go. What was remarkable was that *CCG*'s hard-line chief editor stood firmly behind Zhang when the nudity scandal broke. The wily old apparachnik even snapped at his grumbling superiors at the ministries. "Are we no longer 'marching toward the market'?" he demanded, employing a Party slogan currently in fashion. "If not, I quit."

Such a rationale could not be questioned for the moment, so the muttering stopped. *Cultural Weekend*'s circulation soared to 260,000—not as high as some of China's most popular papers and magazines, with circulations of a half million or more, but breaking *CCG*'s old record by far. Thanks to a steady outpouring of front-page reports on women, sex, and the pop culture scene, written by Zhang Zuomin himself, *Cultural Weekend* soon became one of "the four little dragons of the Beijing press," and Zhang the newspaper man everyone loves to hate. While some dismiss him as a disgrace to the profession, others acknowledge grudgingly that he may be a journalist for his times.

Zhang himself seems to delight in his notoriety, and he takes pride in all the irreverent pranks he has gotten away with over the years. "I'm making a name now, so I need to shake things up a bit, to send some shock waves to the market," he told me. "In any event, I believe we must smash open Chinese culture, and apply 'the great fearless spirit' to our newspaper work." He was lapsing into Red Guard jargon! Indeed, it was during the lawless period of the Cultural Revolution that it dawned on Zhang that a newspaper could be a profitable venture. He and some young comrades had once printed a small propaganda sheet with a stolen mimeograph machine, and Zhang had pocketed the profit they made from selling the first batch. Another "fearless" act Zhang proudly recounted to me was that in 1987 he had worn plastic sandals while covering a high-level state function. "The chairman of China was present!" Zhang bragged. "I'm sure I was the one and only person who did *that*." All the same, Zhang knows what lines he cannot cross: "I will not run anything antiparty in my paper," he said emphatically, "and I will not run pornography." He went into an absurdly meticulous explanation about how the degree of bodily exposure in the nude photos he prints falls well within the prescribed rules of decorum. This seems to be a particularly Chinese technique among the professional orders: the art of creatively interpreting Party policies to protect and advance your own interests, while in the course of it portraying yourself as engaged in a nobly subversive cause.

In their pursuit of the average reader, many papers are testing the new boundaries the government has staked out. The average reader is apparently tired of "hard news"—the kind of stories found in the official print media that go on and on about Party congresses, production rates, and ideological education but remain silent about political oppression and abuses of power. How much more inviting is gossip about movie stars and millionaires! Look at those colorful photos, sensational titles, lurid tales! Readers are sure to gulp it down. With the new formula, the papers have begun to support themselves, attract advertisements, and relieve the government of its financial burden, but only at the expense of the official papers. Once-dominant organs—such as *People's Daily* and *Guangming Daily*—still arrive in the offices of all state enterprises nationwide; but few look to them for interesting coverage of popular events. They can't compete with what's on the newsstands.

Some frown at the vulgarity of it all, some criticize the degrading fact that most Chinese journalists now take fees or bribes from the people they report on, and some think that all this "soft news" is the new opium for the masses, intended to distract them from harsh realities. "I'm deeply disappointed by our reporters," said the prominent dissident journalist Dai Qing. "They are totally corrupted by commercialization." Another noted magazine editor hissed, "All these noises they've made, and you can't find even one paper of a quality and weight that's comparable to *World Economic Herald*"—referring to a Shanghai-based reformist paper that the government shut down around the time of Tiananmen Square. (A good number of dissident journals that had been quietly building up semiautonomous bases within or on the margin of the official press were also either suspended or purged, destroying almost overnight the scattered yet lively pre-Tiananmen growth of a Chinese version of "civil society" structures. Dai Qing herself was jailed for a year, and her reporting is still banned in China.)

Chen Xilin, the young director of the weekend edition of the sober and serious *China Business Times*, is impatient with such criticism. "Don't talk to me about Tiananmen; it gives me a headache. Those elites have done a good

job of enlightening us. They taught us a lesson. But their time is over. Tragic, yes, but that's history. The new elite is a lot smarter, and one thing is certain about the future of China: it belongs to smart people."

With his reputation for having created the first Chinese paper for white-collar professionals, Chen is typical of China's post-Tiananmen elite; he works hard and plays hard. He edits by day, frequents expensive restaurants and karaeoke bars in the evening with visiting Hong Kong and Taiwan colleagues (who pay the bill), and stays up late with pots of coffee to draw editorial cartoons for his paper and to dash out short essays that bring him extra income. By shunning harsh political propaganda and focusing on the economy and lifestyles, his paper embodies a brand of journalism that is smart, slick, and politically moderate.

Chen's contempt for papers like *Cultural Weekend* is thinly veiled: "It's OK—but I wouldn't call it journalism." On the whole, though, he is optimistic about Chinese media: "After a while, some of these small, gossipy papers will fold, some will remain. The society always needs this sort of reading, but not so much of it. They play an important role in the eventual freeing of the press: they've broken up the official news language, shifted the concerns from the government and state affairs to ordinary people and social lives. They are already affecting the big papers, forcing them to loosen up a bit, to compete, to be more attractive to readers. Isn't this a victory in itself?"

A lot of people in the profession echo this sentiment. Many people I meet in Beijing these days have changed their minds about Tiananmen. They see direct confrontation with the state as hopeless and politically immature, and see Western democracy as unfit for Chinese circumstances. Four years ago, Deng Xiaoping was widely cursed as the butcher of his own people; today many talk about him as the wise patriarch who knows the only right way to handle the messy transitions China is going through. "It's like getting a hard punch in the face from your father," said a media reporter who had been deeply involved with the Tiananmen protests, "very hard to get over. Only by and by, do you realize he's your father after all. And there is nothing you can do but slowly chip away at that hard socialist wall." Heroism is dropped; pragmatism is embraced. This surge of what the Chinese call "new conservatism" recalls the ancient Taoist wisdom: water is the strongest thing in the world.

Can the soft really hit hard? Or is this all a matter of self-delusion, an easy rhetoric to absolve people of moral responsibility in treacherous circumstances? The answers to these questions aren't clear; what *is* clear is that ponderous questions of this sort are out of keeping with the tenor of the times. Today, the national mood favors News Lite. Culture Lite. Communism Lite.

Old taboos are being broken and new frontiers crossed, but the transgressors often wear a sly grin, ready to duck or backtrack at the first sign of danger. Gone is the kind of romantic uplift with which the Chinese cultural scene was imbued in the eighties.

Tiananmen was a turning point, though the direction the country has taken up in the wake of the tanks and blood caught many by surprise. As the engine of economic reform has shifted into overdrive, the largest population on earth has set off on a frantic race for material wealth. Popular culture is shifting gears too.

"Serve the people" was once Mao's famous slogan; now it is seeing a second, speedier life in which even the Chairman himself is repackaged and served up. One of the best-selling cassettes in China in 1992 is *Red Sun*, an adaptation of famous old hymns praising Mao to soft rock rhythms with electronic synthesizers. The vogue spread quickly: all sorts of revolutionary songs are dug up and set to the beat of the new time. Mao meets Muzak and MTV.

The scene has changed so quickly, and quite often so absurdly, that for those who labor in the culture industry, adaptability has become a quality both valuable and suspect. There is a generational split too. Those who stick to the good old socialist habit of taking the long view and sitting things out, watch with growing apprehension. These tend to be people over 45. Those who seize the moment with entrepreneurial flair—often people in their twenties and thirties—see a different vista and have different stories to tell. "It's like watching a bunch of monkeys throwing somersaults," a Beijing movie director coolly remarked to me. "Energetic, fun, agile, but oh the dust! So much dust is kicked up."

The king of these agile monkeys is Wang Shuo, the thirty-five-year-old Beijing "hooligan writer" with a knack for turning culture into a commodity. A colorful character with a roguish sense of humor, Wang started out as a fiction writer, then moved on to writing scripts for movies and television, all as a free-lancer and all with sweeping success. He has helped to create three of the most talked-about television series in recent years. The last one, a soap opera called *No Choice in Loving You*, set a precedent: instead of producing the series in house, CCTV (Central Chinese Television), China's most official television network, had to pay a handsome price to buy it. Wang has a publicist's knack for attracting media attention, and a politician's shrewdness for sidestepping sensitive issues. He advertises himself the way celebrities do and talks about fame and money with open bravado. The tabloids love him, and he never fails

to supply them with a punchy line or two. He certainly has what Beijingers call "an oily mouth and a slippery tongue," but when it comes to political dissent, he is definitely not a loose cannon: if you ask him a question about human rights, you are likely to be treated with a joke that makes the question seem ridiculous. Wang is the first writer since Mao to publish a four-volume *Selected Works.*

Wang admits that his commercial instincts were honed from his early days hustling as a small businessman: "I learned to watch what my customers need." Posing as a writer for common folks, he uses his homegrown, sardonic wit to mock both the communist ideologues and the elite intellectuals. While he pokes fun at the former carefully, the latter are really his favorite target. One of Wang's famous epigrams goes: "Before you die, have your high!" And one of Wang's highs is to let his cynical, smartass hooligan antiheroes poke fun at everything holy and serious. "I can't stand people with a sense of mission," he declares.

Wang remains a controversial figure in spite of (or because of) his immense popularity in the pop culture scene. People are passionately divided over what "the Wang Shuo phenomenon" means. For some, it is an alarming sign of the nihilism among the young generation. One of the famous lines in *No Choice in Loving You,* for instance, has a young man tell his girlfriend, "Although my feelings for you don't add up to love, they are more than enough for marriage." Citing this, the noted young Shanghai literary critic Wang Xiaoming wrote:

> Here is the currently trendy Beijing youth culture, and Wang Shuo's works are its artistic expression: to be cool is to mock everything. It results from disillusionment and a sense of powerlessness; it's a logical spasm of a withering Chinese spirit that has been under oppression for half a century. It mocks a dated official ideology which has long lost its grip over the public; more deadly, it dissolves all that might form the foundation of any new spiritual belief, including reason, passion for rebellion, and even certain basic values such as sincerity, steadfastness, respect for others. In fact, it has already been acquiesced to by the authorities, becoming a part of the new ruling ideology. What's amusing is that the trend thinks of itself as having something in common with postmodernism in the West. There is nothing more laughable than this.

Wang's fans, however, defend him ardently. China's educated elite has long been alienated from the ordinary people, they argue, and there was always something hypocritical and hollow about their timid idealism and oppositional posturing, since they themselves were politically and economically dependent on the state. Wang, on the other hand, is a true independent spirit: he earns a living on his own and refuses to participate in any political game.

He cares about ordinary readers and is refreshingly candid about matters like money and success. Some contend his cynicism is long overdue.

One of Wang's avid readers is Fang Lijun, a young Beijing painter known for his large portraits of merry, dopey-looking urban hoodlums, which he has successfully marketed to foreign patrons. Fang echoes Wang Shuo this way: "We prefer to be called the lost, bored, crisis-ridden, bewildered hoodlums, but we will not be cheated again. Don't think about educating us with old methods, for we shall put ten thousand question marks across all dogmas, then negate them and toss them on the trash heap." Fang's combination of defiance, disillusionment, and determination is a sentiment increasingly common in today's China. As he concludes cheerfully, "Only a jackass would fall into a trap after having fallen into it a hundred times."

Tier 2: McArt, with Small Fries

In late April, two months into my stay in Beijing, news came through the grapevines that a big art exhibit was to open at a prime location—the McDonald's in downtown Beijing. An art show at McDonald's? It struck me as doubly odd. First, McDonald's in Beijing has the distinction of being the only McDonald's in the world with a Communist Party secretary. However, this seems not to have barred its management from taking the universal corporate view: sponsoring art is good publicity for business. Second, there was the list of the artists in the show: some had the distinction of being members of China's avant-garde who, only a few years ago, had displayed experimental works in major Chinese museums. But that obviously has not made them hesitate to move their works to a McDonald's. In fact, it was precisely the point: now they want to sell art to ordinary consumers.

This effort required some ingenuity. Among the many pieces shown were denim outfits covered with Jasper Johns–style designs, recorded cassettes of pop songs taken from famous advertising lines, and greeting cards with Ninja Turtles and Superman emblazoned on reproductions of antique Chinese vases. One greeting card showed a bizarre creature—with the body of a dragon, the head of Donald Duck, a foot in a Nike sneaker, and claws clutching a stack of dollar bills—against a Ming vase pattern. The artists gave the show a trendy, sales-oriented title: "New History: 1993 Mass Consumption." They issued beguiling, earnestly lowbrow statements such as: "We want to change our elitist attitude. We'd like to get our art into commercial circulation." Some might call this kitsch, but doing so would undercut the radical nature of staging such a show at McDonald's—for what other place could

better highlight the idea of "art as fast food, ready to serve the people"? Push things to an extreme, and, with a bit of luck, you may end up at the cutting-edge all over again. Indeed, the local intellectual grapevine was of the view (in other words, was hoping secretly) that this would be another ground-breaking action in the Chinese art scene. In later accounts, it might come to be tagged as, say, the "Whopperfication of Chinese Art," or, to be more site-specific, the "McDonaldization."

By April 28 it was all set: the artists had arrived by train, their "products"—"Not *works*, just *products*!" they kept correcting me—had arrived by truck and foreign reporters were notified, as were friends and a long list of concerned, important citizens. A friend of mine, a long-haired rock musician, phoned up just an hour before the opening, informing me in great haste: "Want to see an event? Go to McDonald's now!" He was rushing to finish his final round of calls.

To everyone's disappointment, though, the show organizers had forgotten to notify the Beijing police, who detained the artists the night before the opening and canceled the show in the morning. The People's Congress has just ended, and the fourth Tiananmen massacre anniversary was drawing close: it was a sensitive time of the year in Beijing. The long-haired rock musician hissed afterward, "Bunch of dopes, coming in from the provinces with their eyes closed. Or were they just hoping not to get caught?" He was more annoyed with the bumbling artists than with the merciless police. Already, his voice was lapsing back to boredom: there was to be no event after all.

So it was business as usual when I arrived at McDonald's that day: potential art buyers stood in long, orderly lines to get their Big Macs and fries, ignorant of the better goods they could have purchased instead. On the stairs I ran into Ren Jian, the leading artist in the canceled show. Wearing plain jeans without his Jasper Johns design, he looked rather artless—and clearly sleepless—but otherwise cool. Greeting me casually without slowing down his brisk pace, he squeezed two words between his teeth: "Be careful." Suddenly I noticed the clusters of idle individuals around: the place was filled with plain-clothes policemen.

The irony, of course, is that these artists really meant no harm. They'd like to make a stir, but only the sort of stir that would help get their "products" sold. They were ready to cooperate with the police, but they were wrong to assume that the police would give them a chance to cooperate. In the past four years, the cultural scene in China has changed a great deal, but certain things won't change for a long time to come.

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Ren Jian showed work in the First Chinese Modernist Art Exhibit in 1989, which opened in the National Fine Art Museum, and opened with a bang: a young woman artist took out a revolver and fired two shots at her own installation, and riot police in full gear rushed in to make arrests and close the exhibition down for inspection. When the show resumed, publicity was maximum: for two weeks it was the talk of the town. The public was so shocked and excited by various behaviors of the "action artists" (distributing condoms, selling shrimps, washing feet in a basin with Ronald Reagan's head painted all over it, and so on) that the show had to shut down once more when the museum, the public security bureau and *Beijing Daily* all received bomb threats. It was a hard act to follow. That was the heyday of the avant-garde, when the government was more tolerant, the artists bolder, and the public more responsive. Today, the same kind of show probably wouldn't cause a ripple, and the police would make sure to shut it down for good. People are too busy getting rich or making ends meet, and those with time and money to spend are not likely to spend it on the avant-garde. The mixing of economic openness with tight political control is proving to be a poisonous potion for counterculture artists, who lose out on every front: most have lost their domestic audience and their economic advantage, some have lost their defiant idealism, but none have lost the police.

Already, intellectuals talk about the pre-Tiananmen period with incredible nostalgia: that was the golden age for arts and ideas, but now we are in the age of the gold rush, a paradise for hustlers and the tasteless masses. When there are so many real scandals out in the open, who has the patience for the art of fake scandals? When you can get so many quick and easy thrills through the tabloids and best-sellers, who cares about slower-paced books and difficult readings just because some call it "writing" or "literature"? These may be simplistic distinctions, but who has the time for complications in an overly complicated world?

Such is the pathos of the avant-garde in a fermenting transcommunist third world milieu: in a country where "marching toward the market" is described as an advance, and commercialization is viewed as the inevitable route for guarding national interests, the avant-garde lags feebly behind; they have, in a way, become the rear guard. Standing at the crossroad between aristocratic patronage and the bourgeois marketplace, the nineteenth-century Parisian Bohemian artists at least knew what lay behind them and what lay ahead. But what values and heritage are the Chinese avant-garde trying to uphold and defend? And for whom? The Party had been too much for them:

in the eighties it was both their patron and their target, their blessing and their curse. They had built a career out of biting the hand that fed them, because that hand had robbed them of the riches of history and culture. Today, the artistic rebels have been dumped, crippled orphans with chains around their ankles, in a curious place called "the socialist market," which may be the coldest place on earth in spite of the deafening clamor for prosperity. Just what right do they have here to consider themselves trendy and ahead of the society? Many of them can't even afford to buy a pair of decent shoes! And the shine on their erstwhile prestige is growing dull, rather like the scruffy, old shoes they drag about: they used to set a trend, now they aren't even good enough to stop the cold.

Some kind of change is necessary.

McDonald's cannot be their destination. The trick, though, involves proving their artistic worth to the consumers of Big Macs. The "normalization" of Chinese art is under way: those who are moving out of their paralyzing depression but have not abandoned their profession must now compete for places in their respective fields.

Aesthetic norms, for the time being, are largely set in Hong Kong and Taiwan, where most of Asia's wealthy are concentrated. The judges are often from there too. These smart, professional art dealers can create wonders on the market, and they are a species not yet born on mainland China. In the past few years, they have opened in Hong Kong an almost unthinkable market for Chinese oil paintings, turning an essentially Western form of art into an expensive local fad. Today, some dealers are trying their luck with promoting the mainland avant-garde, envisioning huge dollar signs down the road.

These dealers know how to use political sympathy to spark market interest, as was made clear in both the title and the media coverage of this year's "Post-Tiananmen Chinese Art Exhibit" in Hong Kong. The Hong Kong curatorial team coined classifications like "Political Pop" or "Cynical Realism," knowing the full impact of Tiananmen in the minds of potential collectors. Yet they also pride themselves as true connoisseurs of good art—and, as such, they were able to arrange deals in which some Chinese dissident art pieces fetched thirty thousand dollars and more. Four Political Pop painters, moreover, became the first mainland Chinese artists shown at the Venice Biennale. Handled by their Hong Kong, Taiwan and European brokers, the mainland avant-garde may have a real shot at a new life on the international scene. Some Chinese artists may feel uneasy about the jaded Western

sympathy, or about being patted on the shoulder as a suffering, exotic third world darling, but after all, it's a more friendly and sophisticated place than the "socialist market" at home. And haven't the Chinese avant-garde been craving international recognition all these years?

The happy ending, of course, can only be reserved for a select few.

I rode my bike with two friends, an art critic and a painter-turned-businessman, to the "painters' village" at Yuan Ming Yuan, a sort of a peasant version of SoHo on the outskirts of Beijing. A few dozens painters, mostly struggling young men without a Beijing residence permit, have rented small, pristine cottages here in order to live and paint.

The art critic knew several residents here, but since most of them have no telephone, we couldn't contact them in advance—so when we arrived, we knocked at a couple of doors. Nobody answered in the first place, a one-room cottage. A neighbor, an old peasant woman, came out and told us that there had been an all-night drinking party, and everyone had left that morning. Nobody was at the second place either, but it was a courtyard house, and the yard door was left open. Ignoring the warning—"Mad dog inside, please ring bell"—written on the door, the art critic stepped right in to leave a note. I looked around the yard: no sign of a dog, only artworks on display. All abstract installations, each with a title written out in Chinese and English next to it on the wall. The art critic informed me that a lot of foreign diplomats and some foreign tourists have been dropping by, since the village had recently received some coverage in the news. I stared at one installation entitled "Life Trembled to Recover": a few tiny white skeletons, two electric bulbs and a dirty basketball, all wired together and hanging from a rotten tree trunk. The artist, the art critic told me, is an older man of some distant fame who now volunteers as a liaison person for the villagers.

Then we visited Ding Cong, one of the success stories in the village. A Taipei gallery signed a longterm contract with him: he must produce at least five paintings per year, and in return the gallery offers him a good living. So Ding moved out of his small cottage and got himself a spacious courtyard house about a mile away from the village. He has a telephone, and was expecting us that afternoon. Dressed in denim from head to toe, Ding had quietly intense manners. He wore thick, black-rimmed glasses, and his face was very pale and serious. His courtyard is quaintly Bohemian, with a stone water tank. The rooms he showed us are all spartan and unadorned with domestic trinkets. In one of his two studio rooms, a small single bed is placed by the window, with blankets neatly folded military-style. Everything seemed piously

austere. The house sits in the middle of farmland, and a warm breeze carried the smell of hay and dung. In the middle of the night, Ding can stand in his courtyard and look at the wide expanse of a starry sky. Here it is not so absurd to talk about communicating with the divine spirits, which is what Ding claims to do in his art. After we had looked at rows of large and small canvases covered with thick, violent oil splashes of brown mountains, earth, and enormously elongated human figures crouching in anguished postures, the air seemed to grow heavy and stuffy in his studio. Ding offered us cans of Sprite. My two friends fell into a rather heated discussion over a new magazine, *The Art Market,* what the trends were that year, whether money is a good thing or not for Chinese artists, who's making it and who isn't. "Let's not talk about money," Ding suddenly interrupted. "*Meijin* (it's not uplifting). It doesn't make you feel good."

Unfortunately, the feel-good subjects (art itself) didn't last very long either. I was sure that Ding was disappointed by the whole conversation. Everybody jumped up at my first suggestion to leave.

On the way out of the village, the art critic remembered someone else he knew, whom he wanted to say hello to. We all ended up in yet another cottage: this time, after some serious pounding, the artist-in-residence emerged with disheveled hair and bare feet. A diminutive young man with an open, friendly grin, he had been to the all-night party and was still sleeping it off. He grabbed the art critic's arm and wanted us all to have a good drink with him. There's no water in the house, he apologized, but don't you people want a drink? He pointed at the small cluster of liquor bottles on the table.

He had three small rooms and shared a narrow courtyard with another family, which made him a member of the upper middle class in the village. It was a good life there, he said. I was told that he has a girlfriend who has a job in the city, waitressing or some such thing. One of his rooms was stacked up wall to wall with paintings; some of the rolled up, dusty canvases were clearly his own unsold works. There was a cluttered hominess to the bedroom and the studio-cum-sitting room. Judging from what was on the walls, he was an abstract installation artist: nothing terrible, but nothing that caught my eye. He had been living from hand to mouth, and maybe always would. Maybe one day his girlfriend will leave him—that happens often in the village—or maybe he will give it all up and become, say, a good carpenter and a happy father. Nobody stays in such a painter's village forever—it would be very sad. But for the time being, with a sprightly expression on his face, this young man spoke of the good fortunes of some of his avant-garde buddies. The selected few. So-and-so had been poor for years, and didn't care, just painted and

painted, and then one day was discovered, justly, and became rich and famous. Now he lives in the city, got himself a foreign mistress, tours Europe, and only comes by once in a while to his old cottage when he needs some quiet to paint. It's all fair and just, the young man said, because So-and-so is really good, and whoever is good deserves it.

Tier 3: Paper Money

Corruption in China's newsrooms has gotten so out of hand it's beginning to make news itself. While Americans are fretting about "checkbook journalism," China's problem is exactly the opposite: too many journalists get paid by those they report on. The result is that most of what the Chinese read in the paper or see on television as "news" these days is little more than paid advertising.

The transactions aren't always in cash. Some journalists take stock and bonds from companies they write about, others take cameras, television sets, computers, automobiles, furniture, or even apartments. The mainstay of the system, though, is the "red bag" phenomenon—which refers to the traditional custom of offering a gift of money wrapped in red paper. Nowadays, a plain white envelope replaces the emblematic red paper—after all, one mustn't go about it *too* ostentatiously. When a journalist goes to a press conference, he or she nonchalantly picks up the cash-stuffed envelope at the door, along with other materials, such as the "report" to be filed on the person or company supplying the envelope. A press conference without red bags could count on the early departure of half of the reporters in attendance, and word of mouth would travel swiftly, ensuring that the cheapskate host organization will suffer a collective press boycott.

The fact that advertising is still a novelty to the Chinese press may be one reason the public confuses it with news. It was only since the "spring wind of marketization" in the late eighties, as the government subventions dwindled, that Chinese papers and television stations began to seek advertising money in earnest. However, with survival at issue, media managers played hardball. Some papers give their journalists an obligatory annual quota for obtaining advertisements; some journalists even use the threat of negative publicity to blackmail companies into placing ads in their papers. A well-known scandal of this type involved the Tianjin-based company that produces Huaqi Fruit Tea. When it refused to pay the modest eight thousand yuan "service fee" requested by a magazine, the angry magazine editor used his press connections to spread reports that the quality of Huaqi Fruit Tea was not up to stan-

dard. Orders for the product dropped rapidly after the report, resulting in an overstock worth eighty million yuan. Other companies learned the lesson: don't mess with journalists.

As advertising prices rise steadily, some advertisers have begun to make deals with journalists: instead of paying, say, eighty thousand yuan for a proper advertisement, they pay a journalist ten thousand yuan under the table to write up a full-page favorable report on the manufacturer. "News" is more effective advertising—and the journalist can make three years' salary in one shot. And as the business of "paid news" has become lucrative, agents have emerged to professionalize it. Whoever wants friendly media exposure can sign up with such an agent, who then procures a willing reporter or a news editor to print or broadcast the desired news report for a price. Both parties are spared awkward negotiations; the reporter or editor can make all the arrangements without leaving the office.

Somehow, though, word of "bad reporters" has started to spread. A popular ditty sums it up this way:

> The first-rate reporter plays with the stocks,
> The second-rate reporter gets advertisements,
> The third-rate reporter takes bribes,
> The fourth-rate reporter writes for other papers,
> The fifth-rate reporter writes for his own paper.

A Beijing television program director told me that aside from the international news and top-level state news, everything else in the news section of the television has money behind it. Money is paid not only to the network but is also slipped under the table to reporters and staff editors. She gave me an example. "You know the popular central television program *Half Hour on the Economy*? Well, all the reporters and editors on it are loaded, because the whole business sector in the country lines up to get in there." I asked if she could help me get an interview with one of the program staff. She stared at me in disbelief. "What for? You think they'd be eager to confess how much graft they all took in?"

Another young journalist told me stories about his corrupt boss. The chief editor at his paper, a married man, used public funds to set up three different places for his three mistresses, he claimed. "He had the nerve to bring one of them to a dance party at the paper! I danced with her just to sound her out about the old man's virility, so I could spread rumors around afterward." I shook my head, but couldn't help laughing. "He deserves it!" he insisted. "Everybody at the paper knows about his embezzlement, and my friends at

the paper and I even wrote an anonymous letter about it to the municipal investigation committee. But nothing ever comes of it. He's still the big boss. And when you have a corrupt boss like that, how can you expect the rest of us to be clean?" He himself has just become an agent for a private advertising company where cheating is, he said, workaday business. "After being a journalist," he bragged, "your skin is so thick you can do anything or succeed in any other rotten profession."

This spring in Beijing, a local reporter offered me an extra invitation card to an expensive press junket. The occasion was the release of a series of paperback romances by a Hong Kong novelist; the publisher, Joint Literature Press, was one of China's most prestigious houses. The affair was held at a swanky, four-star hotel decorated with the usual chandeliers and waterfalls, and served by a stiffly outfitted staff.

As we lined up to enter the conference room, my friend signed in first and was given a green bag the size of a standard shopping bag. "Just give the name of a local paper," he whispered to me. But when my turn came, my mind drew a blank, so I signed in with the name of my research center in Chicago. Abruptly, a young bespectacled woman behind the long table leaped up and hurriedly consulted with the two other staff members. I heard a few murmured words and received a few glances before their huddle broke up. Then the young woman, with an ever so friendly smile, handed me a red bag.

Inside the conference room, my friend shook his head at me. "Why didn't you do as I said? I bet you got only 'spiritual food.'" He was right, of course. As beers and various refreshments were being served, we opened our bags: his contained a set of the paperback romance novels, promotional literature on the Hong Kong novelist (including one written in the format of a press report), and a white envelope with a one-hundred-yuan bill. Mine contained nothing but the set of paperbacks, which seemed to be the sort of books that stock the wire racks of American supermarkets. I looked around the roomful of guests and reporters. The reporters all had green bags, others had blue bags; I seemed to be the only one honored with a red bag. The blue-bag constituency, I soon found out, were members of Beijing's literati: veteran literary officials and critics who might be called upon to give congratulatory speeches. Their press kits plainly contained gifts of a different order.

Naturally, all speakers were quite complimentary of the Hong Kong novelist. There was something comic about the high seriousness with which each speaker lauded the literary merits of the new publication: the language, the

characterization, the plot structures, and so on. The list of eulogists included some genuine luminaries, including the head of the Literature Institute from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. The real host of this expensive reception, I was told, was the Hong Kong novelist herself, who had flown in with her rich businessman husband. A fiftyish woman in heavy makeup and a white miniskirt, she demurely told the reporters about her pious Christian beliefs and the solitary pains of the writer's life.

Afterward, I asked my reporter friend how he would evaluate this press conference. He shrugged: "Pretty standard stuff. The red bag wasn't much, but it came on top of a pretty decent reception with beverages and stuff." I asked him if he was now going to write a report about it. He said he actually had to write two: one would be a brief piece for his own paper, but the other would take a bit of work, because it was a well-paid commission from a friend of his. Did the friend happen to be a friend of the Hong Kong novelist? He hesitated, but finally told me: "Well, it's a sort of business arrangement. My friend's company is interested in doing business with the novelist's husband."

Journalists tend to blame the epidemic of graft on the meager salaries they receive. If they don't take a red bag or two, how can they pay their bills these days? Then too, the kind of professional education Chinese journalists receive at schools and at work doesn't help. Proper political conduct has always been emphasized over proper professional conduct. The typical Chinese editor does not mind his reporters looking after their own welfare, but he *does* mind infractions of the political rules: one "incorrect" investigative report may cost him his own job.

Many Chinese believe that the arrival of capitalism makes all this inevitable, at least until a more developed legal and professional framework emerges. Some economists even have a term for this state of affairs, "inclusive corruption." They point to a trickle-down effect: if so many people participate in it and benefit from it, isn't it just another mode of redistributing wealth?

The real problem is that this sort of pervasive corruption breeds equally pervasive cynicism. Whatever advantages such arrangements have for cash-starved newspapers, the cost in public trust has been immeasurable. A young Beijing technician I know bought a pair of sneakers that had been recommended by a local newspaper report; two weeks later, the soles fell off. "All our lives we lived a political lie, and now we are living an economic lie," he told me, shaking his head at his credulousness. "The one sure thing you learn from this life is, an honest person is always at a disadvantage."

But even more worrisome was the reaction of one young man who appeared on Beijing Television Network when they questioned people in the street about what they considered the "most enviable profession today." His answer was immediate: "Reporter." Why? "Because reporters are practical-minded . . . just think of all the material benefits you can get."

Tier 4: Food Is Heaven

> I want to eat!
> Anything that flys in the sky but kites,
> Anything that has four legs on the earth but stools.
> —*Pledges of a Chinese gourmet*

HERE ARE the menus for two banquets held in honor of visiting dignitaries; they were printed in a Chinese newspaper for the reader's amusement:

MENU 1:
Boiled eggs with asparagus
Chicken livers
Fried rice
Carrots, spinach
Egg pudding
Strawberries
Cheese

Host: Queen of England
Guests: top Chinese statesmen

MENU 2:
Seafood platter
Young chicken
Baked tomatoes
Green peas
Lemon ice

Host: George Schultz, Secretary of State, USA
Guests: top Chinese statesmen

To a Chinese reader, this is the kind of joke that has a certain national proportion, and the newspaper commentator knew it. "By Chinese standards," he wrote, "these menus are at the level of a snack shop. In China, any banquet at any restaurant of any star rank would be far superior in sumptuousness to this."

When the South Korean President Kim Jungsam treated his guests to a simple bowl of noodles at his inauguration luncheon, it made headlines across many Chinese newspapers. What—is this a *joke*? A bowl of noodles, and nothing else? No lobster sashimi, no shark-fin soup? OK, Mr. Kim might be trying to make a point about his good intentions of running a self-restrained, virtuous government—but this was trying too hard.

For most Chinese today, when it comes to eating, qualities like simplicity, restraint, and virtue are not merely irrelevant; they are precisely what you cast off so long as you can afford to. The popular, admired, and inspiring attitude is to eat with abandon, to eat sinfully, to eat with style and flair and extravagance and ecstasy, as if there is no tomorrow.

This is probably the most savored aspect of the current Chinese economic prosperity: suddenly, there is so much to eat! You see edible things everywhere: the store shelves stuffed and stacked high with groceries of all sorts, the restaurant menus getting more and more lavish and dazzling, the street food fairs emerging in every city and town, the dinner party tables laden with dish upon dish, the long lanes of farmer's markets full of the freshest produce at affordable prices—fish jumping in buckets of water, turtles crawling in bamboo cages, chickens noisily talking to ducks, snakes slithering silently . . . and all are sure to be gulped down, with pleasure.

Austerity is gone, hedonism is in. The annual expense of functional banquets on mainland China these days is reportedly 100 billion yuan (about $19 billion). And that's only *official* feasts. As for the ordinary folks, Mencius, the number-two sage after Confucius, had this to say about them: "For the ordinary folks, food is heaven."

This is a China both ancient and new. Whatever businesses may have brought you to our land, ladies and gentlemen, you are cordially invited to share our table.

Have food, will do.

FOR ANY Chinese over thirty-five, memories of the great famine of 1960–63 must still linger on.

The famine was preceded by Mao's famous "Great Leap Forward," which, in retrospect, was really the beginning of a nationwide great leap into irrationality. How could people actually believe such lunatic reporting as wheat

growing so densely in the field that it won't even bend with a baby rolling on top of it? But they did. In those days, the Chinese Communist Party had an incorruptible image; it held fantastic powers over people's imagination. It made people believe that the human will could create miracles, that economically China could surpass England and catch up with America in a matter of a few years, that a communist paradise was within reach. But famine came instead, and exercised *its* power relentlessly.

Born in late 1959, I was a baby delivered right into the famine. By the time I turned three, the famine had taken thirty million hungry souls and left the country devastated. It is said that in those years, even Chairman Mao and Premier Zhou Enlai had no meat on their plates. Even in big cities such as Beijing, people could get no more than a small bowl of rice in their stomachs each day. Bodily resistances ran so low that hepatitis and all sorts of epidemics raged out of control. People went to bed at eight every evening because they had no energy left to do anything else. And they would gloat over some tiny radish purchased at ten times the normal price from a peasant vendor; after making it into a clear soup seasoned with nothing but salt, they'd consider it an excellent dinner.

Yet, amazingly, the irrationality went on. All sorts of magical solutions were invented and earnestly taken up. Rice, for example, was said to rise twice as much if you just doubled the cooking time and added water to it after the first half of the steaming; scholars wrote articles about how much more nutritious this "double-steamed rice" was than normal steamed rice, and the government called on people to adopt the method widely. An even more puffed-up thing was "black tea fungus," a kind of duckweed one could grow at home in a water tank or a vat and eat as food; scholars wrote about the exceptional amount of protein this fungus contained, and claimed that it could even cure cancer. For a while, one could find a vat of black tea fungus brewing in almost every household: somehow the famine hadn't made people any less gullible. Their faith in the system remained virtually unbroken.

Still, the famine raged on. Due to food shortages and malnutrition, dropsy became widespread. My parents had to run all over Beijing in order to scrape up some milk powder or soybean milk for me. Even though their own stomachs were often empty, or half stuffed with chaff and wild herbs, they made desperate attempts to feed me properly. Still, I grew up with slightly bowed legs; like most people of my generation—nicknamed "the beansprouts generation"—I have a stringy figure.

By the time of my earliest memories, the famine had receded. Many things were still rationed: grain, meat, cooking oil, in fact almost all the essential

food items—but at least we could once again eat three meals a day. The government relaxed economic policies; the commune system returned, partially, to conditional private ownership, and it worked. Agricultural output rose, the country was slowly recovering. In my memory, the only thing reminiscent of the famine years was a children's game: in springtime, we would go around the neighborhood, beat the branches of tall Chinese scholar trees with long bamboo poles, and collect the small white flowers that fell to the ground, and, carefully blowing the dust off, we would eat them. The flowers had a faint fragrance, the taste was not particularly unpleasant, but after you chewed several mouthfuls, a puckery, almost bitter flavor would linger on your tongue for a long while, bringing to mind the shabby taste of hunger, shortages, and poverty.

My husband, Benjamin Lee, nutty anthropologist and organizer of international conferences, after countless work meals and banquets he had been pleased or pressed to attend over the years in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and mainland China, observed: "China has, it seems to me, as many public spheres as there are banquet tables." He was traveling in China, working on an academic exchange program involving debates about Jürgen Habermas's theory of the public sphere. "If you want to get a sense of what's going on in China, you've got to sniff around at the banquet tables."

"*Corruption*! Corruption is what's going on at the banquet tables," says Wang, a young Beijing reporter friend of mine. When a great flood broke out in the mostly rural central area of China in 1991, nobody at his paper wanted to go there. Parts of the flooded areas were poor, parts well-off since the reform of the eighties; but under the circumstances, they couldn't possibly promise a good field trip—the kind in which reporters from a major Beijing paper are plied with banquets and gifts from local officials wanting favorable press coverage. However, Wang, being an upright young reporter hungry for experience, volunteered to go. Once there, he was shocked, he tells me—not so much by the ravaged landscape as by the banquet scenes. "I went down and under to get stories about suffering and hardship, but everywhere I saw people eating and drinking up a storm, surrounded by the debris of catastrophe!" Where did the money come from? Mostly from the aid the central government allocated to the flooded regions. Everyone in Beijing had been required to donate something. My mother, for instance, had packed off a bundle of blankets and clothes; Wang himself had given away his winter cotton coat. International aid poured in, too. The bulk of it came from Hong Kong, a total of about $80 million U.S. The official media kept on talking about the solidarity of the Chinese as a nation, and how only in a socialist society is such generous mutual aid among the ordinary citizens possible. Even though a lot of ordinary citizens in Beijing were grumbling about being forced to help, Wang had not thought what the government said was completely false—until he saw how the aid money was being squandered, gulped down. At every bureaucratic level, officials in charge of flood funds found excuses to spend it generously on "work banquets."

Soon enough, Wang found himself being coopted for just such an end.

The strangest event of his trip, though, involved a small group of Christian volunteers from Hong Kong. The group had brought from their constituency a handy donation, which was to be used to rebuild a local school in a poor village. The group of young believers arrived there to supervise and help with the construction. Before stopping by their temporary tents, a local Party cadre had invited Wang to a banquet and gave him some advice: "Be careful, Little Wang," the older cadre patted his shoulders after a couple of drinks of good liquor, "those people from Hong Kong, we don't know what their real intentions are. We've got orders from above to keep folks away from them." The banquet table was covered with dishes, but the cadre apologized: "You'd have tasted some first-rate soft-shell turtles if you had come at a better time." His wrinkled face turned red, his eyes watery from liquor and food, and he told Wang: "When you reach my age, you'll appreciate the old wisdom more: the meaning of life lies in two words—eat, and drink."

The Hong Kong group was eating their dinner inside the tent when Wang called. In one glance, Wang could tell it was no banquet—just some steamed rice and soup. A young man rose and greeted Wang rather coldly, without inviting him into the tent. They stood outside and talked for a while. Before parting, the young man from Hong Kong suddenly smiled at Wang: "I thought you reporters weren't supposed to approach us." "Frankly," Wang says as he recounts this to me, "I felt like getting it all off my chest right there and then, telling him what I really thought—but I couldn't. Part of it was embarrassment. That Hong Kong guy looked so young and so innocent, sort of bookish with his glasses and a straight manner. In those surroundings, their frugality and generosity seemed almost jarring." The last words Wang heard in that poor village were from an old peasant woman. She held Wang's hands and said: "Young man, you must tell everybody it's true: the Communist Party is good! We all got our blankets here, and we have food on the table."

"The wind of eating and drinking with public money," as the Chinese media normally put it, has blown stronger in the recent years—so much so that whenever there is an official rectification or anticorruption campaign,

the restaurateurs suffer severely. Since fancy business banquets are nearly always paid with public money, restaurant business fluctuates a good deal by the official thermometer. However, as economic reform erodes central control more and more, these campaigns no longer carry the force they once did: as soon as a campaign peters out, the winds of eating and drinking return, with a vengeance, sweeping across the country like a storm. Smiles return to the restaurateurs' faces as they watch waiters and waitresses busily zipping around the packed floors and partitioned banquet suites. It is indeed a warm, happy scene: bustling, noisy, filled with sounds of clinking glasses, lively talk, hearty laughter, and, from time to time, blissfully contented burps and the smacking of lips.

Food softens people. A good, satisfying meal often has a way of making someone a bit warmer, a bit more easygoing, to bring out his or her humanity. With a sated tongue and a full stomach, people are somehow more inclined to be generous and loose about the world and its inhabitants. The Chinese come alive at such an occasion: it's time to relax and enjoy, to appreciate food and friends, to spin tall tales, swap jokes and exchange opinions, to show character and bravado, to gossip, and to impress.

At the other extreme, though, faith in an iron will and abstract virtue, rather than acceptance of gluttony and generally flawed human nature, can be a truly scary thing. I often find the formal, incorrigible Chinese men at banquet tables more threatening: they may be incorruptible, but in their unswerving, rigid goodness they may also be more willing to kill and destroy others without blinking an eye.

Chinese culture, it is often said, is an oral one: eating and talking are two essential things the Chinese love to indulge in, and the two are best when they go together. Dinner parties and banquets are thus a central form of Chinese social communication. It's hard to think of anything else comparable to communal dining: not singing, dancing, drinking, sports, movie- or theater-going, temple- or church-visiting—none is nearly as important or as widespread. A banquet, on the other hand, is an age-old social form, well tested, well practiced, shot through with layers of complicated etiquette on scales both high and low.

All sorts of things go on around a Chinese meal table. Business and political intrigues are two of them, though usually one doesn't bring up business topics at a banquet. Rather, here one is expected to socialize, to bond, to display one's worldliness and prowess at banquet rituals, such as toasting respected elders before the younger ones, helping certain guests with certain dishes, paying compliments in the right way, and so on. In short, one should

above all create a good impression—and a good impression goes a long way in business or politics.

Conversations at a banquet or a dinner party have a special thickness and style. The shape of a typical Chinese meal table is suggestive: it is a perfect round. One rarely sees rows of long banquet tables as in the West, which force guests to carry their entire conversation with one or a few other people nearby. The Chinese banquet table creates a different atmosphere and a different experience. It is almost like a show, a theater, in which a central theme or a couple of stars usually dominate at a given moment, though all have the freedom to jump in and take a turn in the performance. Surrounding the eminences, the rest can choose to watch or applaud, making wry asides or chorus noises as they like. The psychology behind this style is distinctively Chinese. At the core of it, I think, lie the roots of a deeply collective, hierarchical culture. Chinese attitudes toward gender, age, and social status all come into play at a banquet. The social hierarchy is reflected clearly here: more often than not, the older, male, powerful, and well-off ones dominate the conversation, receive the first toasting, and pay the bill. In both Hong Kong and mainland China, wealthy senior men are usually expected to pay the restaurant bills. If a woman has more money than any man at the table, in the more commercialized south, where men tend to be pragmatic, she pays; but in the more traditional north, such as in Beijing, men still find it disconcerting to let a woman pay. I have often encountered such situations in Beijing: to save my male friend's face, we end up going to small, cheap restaurants, pretending to look for "authentic local flavor," so the men can pay in the end.

To some extent, a Chinese meal table is a prototypical Chinese public space, a paradigm of the Chinese society and its conventions. Maybe that's why, at least until now, it is anything but romantic. A Chinese restaurant is by definition too public a place for romance: the bright lights, the noise, the openness, the closeness of others, the smells and the jovial laughter . . . the ambience is altogether too earthy, and the idea of a romance begun in such surroundings almost turns your stomach. Afterward, maybe; but here, the most you can do with a date isn't much more than filling up for later.

Yet when it comes to showing off wealth and flair, Chinese restaurants are known above all others to go all the way. I can't think of anywhere else I've seen restaurants presenting for the super rich such astonishingly extravagant meals with such guiltless, and some might say tasteless, flair. To pay one thousand yuan per person for a Qing court-style banquet of over a hundred dishes? That's like tossing away five months of an average Chinese man's salary just for

one seat. But think of the exquisite splendor of an imperial banquet room, the culinary masterpieces, the rare delicacies, the showmanship of both the chefs and the hosts . . . People are fascinated by such fare. In recent years, as the economic boom has produced more and more local millionaires, banquets like this have caught on. Sensing the public's curiosity, the local media never fail to cover them with enthusiasm. Especially in the prosperous Cantonese south, many are willing to pay extra to taste rare delicacies—again, to satisfy not only gourmet proclivities but also to show off. A man who pays a half month's salary just for a small portion of a roasted pangolin or some monkey brains is not likely to miss the opportunity of bragging to his friends the next day; "My, you don't know how delicious pangolin meat is. It's heavenly!" It is this attitude that has induced a local essayist to comment upon the pledges of the Chinese gourmet I quoted at the beginning. "Let's eat!" the essayist wrote. "After finishing off all but kites and stools, we'll just have to eat kites stir-fried with stools."

I myself haven't met any extremist gourmets in Canton. During my last few visits there, my hosts, a Cantonese couple who repeatedly took me out to sumptuous meals, loved to eat, but the meals were in no way extraordinary. They are in their late thirties and have become quite rich in the past few years through private business, but they are neither pretentious nor extravagant. The husband wore the same sports jacket every time I saw him: "I don't care about clothes at all, as long as I have something to wear," he told me. "But food is everything." To reciprocate his hospitality, I proposed several times to take them out to a nice restaurant. They would readily agree and show up promptly—but when time came to pay, the husband would quickly put his shining Great Wall credit card on the bill plate and insist firmly: "No! No! It's my treat, of course. It will always be my treat no matter where it is: here in Canton, or in Beijing, or even in America if I were to visit you there in the future. You must indulge me in this, because honestly, besides doing business, food is my only passion."

6

Yellow Peril

The best-selling author in China after the great Chairman Mao may be a slight little man named Jia Pingwa. Instead of the Little Red Book, Jia has written a big yellow book—yellow being the color that signifies sex and pornography in China. In *The Abandoned Capital (Feidu)*, Jia's thick, juicy new novel about contemporary life in an old Chinese city, the red fire of revolution has long since faded. What burns in its place in the hearts and minds of today's Chinese men and women is a flame much more ancient and enduring: sex. And what does life mean besides a good fuck? Well, for the citizens of the abandoned capital, it means eating, bribing, scheming, and generally gypping each other off.

The novel and its author, though they've taken as much beating as touting, have taken China by storm. Described by the media as "the event that caused a great literary and publishing earthquake in 1993," *The Abandoned Capital* sold a half million copies within the first few months of its publication and, with more than ten pirated versions available, countless more later on. Wild accolades, from both critical and popular sources, have showered on it. The novel has been hailed, for instance, as "an epic work of the Chinese intellectual soul" and "an extraordinary monument of contemporary Chinese literature." A lot of intellectuals and Chinese literati, on the other hand, have condemned the novel, outraged by its "unbearably vulgar sex scenes" and "despicable male sexual psychology." If Jia must write nakedly about sex, they demand, why couldn't he at least write about it with some beauty and depth, as D. H. Lawrence had done? All decent, educated Chinese readers admired *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, which had only been released in China a few years earlier. Why couldn't our novelist elevate sexuality and render in it some spiritual meaning? In place of a world of emotion and romance, Jia had us toss and tumble in an arena of flesh! A Beijing graduate student drew the distinction between Lawrence and Jia this way: while reading both of them may cause a young man to masturbate, with Lawrence he may feel a bit ashamed of himself afterward, but never with Jia!

Government officials at the antipornography office weren't happy about the situation, either. For years now, they have been fighting hard the swelling