Red Azalea. By ANCHEE MIN. [London: Victor Gollancz, 1993. 252 pp. £16.99. ISBN 0-575-05529-4.]

Red Azalea was the name of an autobiographical film devised by Mao's wife, Jiang Qing, but discarded after Mao's death and the Gang of Four's arrest in the autumn of 1976. *Red Azalea* has now reappeared, this time as the title of the autobiography of Anchee Min, an idealist Red Guard enmeshed in political intrigue after being selected to train for the title role in Jiang's film.

The first part of the book is set against the revolutionary fervour of the mid-1960s, when the 17-year-old author went down to the countryside. Once in the Red Fire Farm, living in conditions of hardship and deprivation, confronted with hypocrisy, malice and brutality, she becomes trapped between personal desire and a sense of responsibility toward the revolution. This focuses on her passion for the commander of her company, Yan, a tough, uncultured woman of superlative revolutionary credentials. A steamy love affair develops under the unlikely protection of a shared mosquito net which separates them from the jealous watch of their joint enemy, Lu.

Just as the affair is on the point of being discovered, the heroine is selected to go to Shanghai to rehearse for the lead part in *Red Azalea*. Ensconced in the glamorous and competitive world of Gang of Four culture, Anchee Min is drawn into another affair, with the director of the film, Jiang's emissary from Beijing, the "Supervisor." A mysterious figure, the anonymous "Supervisor" wears expensive perfumes, enjoys tending peonies and watching foreign films in the secrecy of his mansion – pleasures associated with Jiang Qing's own life-style. The denouement of the story comes just as filming is about to begin; Mao's death and the fall of the Gang of Four envelop Beijing in political crisis, the "Supervisor" is disgraced, and Anchee Min suddenly finds herself deprived of a glorious future.

Much, if not all, of the early part of the book reads as a plausible account of life in the countryside during the Cultural Revolution. It details characteristic aspects of the rusticated youth's experience, including the extreme sexual and social constraints imposed by leftist ideology, which turned any individualist act into a target for revolutionary condemnation. The second half, however, suggests something approaching fantasy. In all but gender – and even that is sometimes ambiguous – the "Supervisor" mirrors Jiang Qing – her past as an actress in *The Doll's House*, her penchant for beautiful things. As the book ends, even the dialogue confuses the identity of the "Supervisor," as he insists that despite her counter-claims, Anchee Min had met Jiang Qing, and that "Jiang Qing had been a spectator to [her] passion."

Hence a narrative that starts as an autobiography ends as a novel of romance and intrigue. As the former, its contribution is not to the political understanding of the period, but to describing the adolescent naivety, the competitiveness, jealousy and vulnerability that constituted such important experiences for many young people at the time. As fantasy, though,

its interest is of a different order, for through the heroine's absorption into the world of the "Supervisor," it reveals a fascination with political power, a compulsive pull towards danger, towards the world of the Gang of Four. In this, it treads on sensitive ground, for few representations of the Cultural Revolution have yet suggested an interpretation that encompasses experiences not contained by its brutality and horror.

HARRIET EVANS

The Lost Boat: Avant-garde Fiction from China. Edited by HENRY ZHAO. [London: The Wellsweep Press, 1993. 187 pp. Hard cover £14.95. ISBN 0-948454-83-0; paperback £7.95, ISBN 0-948454-13-X.]

This book is a much-needed collection of mid and late 1980s stories and novellas. Included are five stories: "The Brake-Stone" (Li Rui), "Mistakes" (Ma Yuan), "The Mad City" (Wen Yuhong), "The Dry Ravine" (Yang Zhengguang), and "In a Little Corner of the World" (Li Hangyu). In the collection also are three novellas or long stories: "The Lost Boat" (Ge Fei), "Fabrication" (Ma Yuan) and "One Kind of Reality" (Yu Hua). Translations are by J. Q. Sun, Helen Wang, Sally Vernon, Henry Y. R. Zhao and Caroline Mason.

In his informative but brief introduction, Henry Zhao states that in text selection, "literary value has been our primary consideration." Zhao and his co-translators have tried to choose texts radically different from those translated in earlier anthologies, where, the editor claims, sociological or political content is the guiding principle. Some of the stories included date from the mid-1980s "roots" period, and represent an attempt to critique Confucian culture at its base, while others are from the later and more vaguely defined "avant-garde" period of experimental fiction, a speciality of writers who seem to live and work in the Yangzi River valley.

Zhao defines one of the central elements of avant-garde fiction of this period as the refusal to give the reader a hint about what may be the correct interpretation of the story. Not only in content, but in narrative style as well, avant-garde stories does not imply a "real meaning," and the reader is left floundering as he or she tries to decide which elements are significant and which are not.

Those seeking literary interest in this anthology will not be disappointed, nor will those looking for a good collection to use in a survey of modern Chinese literature. The stories are intriguing, and the translations uniformly good. Stories such as Yu Hua's "One Kind of Reality" will shock the reader who believes he or she has a good grasp on exactly what Chinese literature is all about. Although the story appears to centre on the old theme of a family feud, the lack of causal historical background, the seeming illogical nature of many actions, and the author's denial of personality or deep structures of desire as motivations all serve to sever any attempts at conventional interpretation.

Thanks to the work of earlier translators, we have in English a number