

*The Execution of Mayor Yin and Other Stories from the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution.* By CHEN JO-HSI. [London: George Allen and Unwin, 1979. 220 pp. £5.95.]

The controversial short "Scars" provoked much debate in China at the end of 1978 over the question of whether it was possible for tragedy to occur in socialist society; this debate in turn gave rise to a wealth of literature, both official and unofficial, depicting the sufferings and injustices of the Cultural Revolution decade. Chen Ruoxi has the distinction of having anticipated by several years, with her "Mayor Yin" collection of short stories, the general theme of this "Scar Literature." Written in the mid 1970s, on the basis of the author's experiences as a returned overseas Chinese (originally from Taiwan) in China during the Cultural Revolution, the "Mayor Yin" stories offered early insight into the scale and intensity of the tragedy now commonly acknowledged to have occurred in socialist China during the "10 years of chaos."

In these subdued and ironical sketches – now available to the English reader in this very competently translated edition – of the daily lives of individuals caught up in the various mass movements of the period, Chen strives to divest the Cultural Revolution of the reassuring sense of anonymity which it had come to assume for many outside China. Upon a drab background of disillusionment and despair, she casts disturbing images of common people forced into a state of fear and alienation as they seek to defend themselves against the threatening realm of politics. It is an oppressive picture, relieved only by an occasional glimmering of simple solidarity amongst individuals brought together by a shared distrust of authority. Chen's skilful portrayal of the tense relationship between ordinary citizens and authority – whether in the form of ambitious Party cadre or precocious Red Guard activist – imparts a much-needed sense of content and immediacy to that cosy abstraction, "contradictions among the people." The lonely and squalid suicide of a falsely accused "counter-revolutionary," the panic and desperation felt by a young couple upon discovering that their four-year-old child has been overheard shouting "Down with Chairman Mao!" – this is the dark side of the Cultural Revolution, and Chen Ruoxi, writing with compassion and considerable artistry, depicts it in all its unpleasantness.

Whilst it is perhaps inevitable, and certainly just, that 10 years of panegyrical writing on the Cultural Revolution should now be challenged by a vigorous and flourishing literature of disillusionment, it is apparent that the new genre – of which Chen Ruoxi is one of the earliest and most accomplished exponents – neither gives, nor claims to give, a carefully balanced account of the Cultural Revolution experience. Today's authors understandably feel little inclination to look for positive gains which might be marked up on the balance sheet, alongside the heavy losses, of "the revolution to touch men's souls" – the dark side of society has been covered up for too long, and the suffering is still too fresh in the mind.

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