
OTHER NATIONS

Good Earth For Fiction

"New Chinese Literature" by Judy Polumbaum, in *Poets & Writers Magazine* (Jan.-Feb. 1995), 72 Spring St., New York, N.Y. 10012.

Most observers of cultural developments in China assumed that the 1989 Tiananmen Square protest and massacre would have an extremely chilling effect, particularly on Chinese literature. But the cultural frost was not as severe as expected. Indeed, literature in China seems to be flourishing today, reports Polumbaum, a journalism professor at the University of Iowa. In the past year alone, about 10,000 short stories, 1,000 novellas, and 100 novels were published, and they include many "innovative and experimental" works.

From the founding of the People's Republic in 1949 through the Cultural Revolution of the late 1960s, writing was "a politically foolhardy occupation," Polumbaum points out. As a result, novels and stories from that period were populated with "heroic workers and peasants. The characters were stereotyped, the plots banal, the language uninspired." But with Mao Zedong's death in 1976, new voices began to emerge and the range of acceptable characters was expanded. These new writers started to express "a backlog of grievances" dating from the late 1950s and the Cultural Revolution of 1966-69. Their writing was "a prelude to more daring and sophisticated work."

Today, Chinese fiction regularly features such topics as "abuse of power, romantic love and family life, the complexities of traditional culture, and the contradictions of contemporary life." Many of the new works—such as Wang Anyi's *Brocade Valley* (English translation, 1992), whose female protagonist has an extramarital affair, and Zhang Xianliang's *Good Morning Friends* (1987), about the erotic experiences of secondary school students—also include the kind of sexual explicitness that in decades past might have landed the author in a re-education camp. "These days," writes Polumbaum, "demotion or loss of one's job are more realistic dangers." While the risk of imprisonment for "the vaguest of offenses" reappeared after the Tiananmen tragedy, it is

far more remote today than in the past. "Prepublication censorship," says Polumbaum, "is [now] actually a rarity in China: certain topics ostensibly must be cleared by authorities ahead of publication, but this may or may not occur, and the list of literary taboos is constantly in flux." Outright bans "often backfire," Polumbaum notes, "by fueling demand and creating a black market."

Even controversial writers find a range of publishing options. An author whose book is rejected as too subversive by one publisher can now turn to another of the "more than 500 publishing houses and more than 4,000 printing establishments, along with legions of unlicensed, often fly-by-night operations," or strike a deal with one of the 500 literary journals or thousands of popular magazines and newspapers. Zhang's *Good Morning Friends*, for instance, first appeared in a provincial literary journal.

Some authors have even managed to turn the appearance of government censorship to their advantage. Jia Pingwa published his racy 1993 novel, *The Abandoned Capital*, with blanks in place of words supposedly excised by the censors, and the book became a runaway best seller. Although the novel eventually was officially banned (with little effect on sales), it now seems that the blanks may have been merely a promotional gimmick.

Church and Stasi

"The 'Stasi' and the Churches: Between Coercion and Compromise in East German Protestantism, 1949-89" by John S. Conway, in *Journal of Church and State* (Autumn 1994), P.O. Box 97308, Waco, Texas 76798-7308.

"*Kirche, wir danken dir!*" ("Church, we thank you!") proclaimed a large banner paraded through the streets of Leipzig in late 1989. The Evangelical (Protestant) churches of the former East Germany had been instrumental in bringing down East German communism. But after the files of East Germany's hated secret police, the Stasi, were opened, the churches suddenly were cast in a much less flattering light, notes Conway, a historian at the University of British Columbia. Not only