

## ARTS &amp; LETTERS

## Rice Balls in Wonder Bread Land

FISH SHAVINGS, DRIED wood ear mushrooms, and seaweed gelatin weren't sold at the local grocery store in Versailles, Indiana, when Linda Furiya was growing up there during the 1970s. She often accompanied her

Japanese parents on trips to ethnic markets in big cities in search of such ingredients, which were utterly exotic to most Midwesterners but essential to dishes such as her mother's sukiyaki. So began Furiya's own lifelong obsession with food.

Growing up in the Midwest, where her parents settled because of her father's job in the poultry industry as a chick sexer (someone who determines the sex of newly hatched chickens), Furiya straddled the world of her family's traditions and her own desire to fit into their small community. Now a *San Francisco Chronicle* food columnist, Furiya reveals the world of Japanese cuisine and tradition through the meals and recipes of her childhood in *Bento Box in the Heartland*. But food is also the means by which she reconstructs history and memory in order to understand her family and her own identity.

Early in the book, she recalls that in elementary school she pleaded with her mother to pack American-style bologna sandwiches for her lunch. Instead, she was sent to school with *onigiri*, the rice balls her mother knew she loved. Even as she hid in the bathroom during lunch hour to eat in secret, she could not resist this Japanese treat: "My teeth ripped through the crunchy seaweed wrapping, through the salty rice, to the surprise center, a buttery chunk of salmon placed precisely in the middle of the rice and seaweed ball." Food connects Furiya

**BENTO BOX IN THE HEARTLAND:**  
My Japanese Girlhood in Whitebread America.

By Linda Furiya. Seal Press. 307 pp. \$15.95

irresistibly to her heritage.

Furiya's struggle to fuse these parts of her identity was mirrored in the duality her parents exhibited. At home, where her father was the voracious eater and her mother the steadfast cook, her parents sternly communicated their expectations for their children and for how the household was to be run. But they were deeply reticent in other settings. On one occasion, Furiya watched as they silently endured the degrading outbursts of a meat counter clerk who misunderstood her father's English. "I hated them for always bowing down," she writes, "for letting the other person be right."

After years dreaming of escape from Versailles and her own household, Furiya left to attend Purdue University. Though she continued to resent her parents' formality, she gradually realized that through food, they showed their love. "When I left for college Mom didn't tell me she would miss me with tears," she writes. "Instead she packed a box of rice balls into my pile of belongings."

Furiya's writing on the artistry of Japanese cuisine reflects a passion for food to rival a chef's, as when she describes "simple poached mushrooms topped with herbs stacked to resemble a shrub, and small lightly seared scallops arranged to look like a stony hill." Other parts of the book are not served up so carefully. Later chapters lack the tenderness of her earlier stories, and at the book's conclusion Furiya deserts her evocative prose for neatly explained lessons. Her observations about the surprising ways identity presents itself may be valid, but, like a bite that's too big, they are not easy to digest.

—Angela Balcitra

## Solitary Genius

WHEN THE NOBEL PRIZE for Literature was awarded in 2000 to Gao Xingjian, the first Chinese writer to receive this honor, not everyone in

**THE CASE FOR LITERATURE.**

By Gao Xingjian. Translated by Mabel Lee. Yale Univ. Press. 181 pp. \$25

China was pleased. Gao had lived in exile in Paris since 1987, precariously surviving on sales of his paintings, and many Chinese literary and political figures could neither recognize Gao's genius nor accept the Swedish Academy's elevation of someone who had turned his back on his homeland.

Moreover, the novel singled out for special attention, *Soul Mountain*, challenged prevailing literary and political norms. A fictional record of Gao's 1983 journey to China's interior, *Soul Mountain* was first published in 1990 in Taiwan and appeared in English translation in 2000. A health crisis and the threat of imprisonment had prompted Gao to set off, at the age of 43, on a five-month voyage from Beijing to the mountains of Sichuan in southwest China and back to the east coast, fleeing the conformity—literary and social—enforced by the Communist government. Out of the depths of his solitude, in a sweeping panorama of stories and descriptions of China's seemingly infinite variety of landscapes, *Soul Mountain* celebrates the power of the imagination to discover meaning in the world—even if it turns out that there is no meaning at all.

Gao does not mince words about the disastrous decisions taken by his countrymen in the name of revolution. In his Nobel lecture, included in *The Case for Literature*, he charges that Communist cultural policies have posed "enormous difficulties" for Chinese-language writers. "Chinese literature in the 20th century was worn out time and again, and indeed almost suffocated, because it was manipulated by politics," he said. "The revolution in literature and revolutionary literature alike passed death sentences on literature and the individual. The attack on China's traditional culture in the name of revolution led to the public prohibition and burning of books. Countless writers have been shot, imprisoned, exiled, or punished with hard labor over the past hundred years."

This is not history that an authoritarian government—and a rising superpower—likes to be reminded of. But literature cannot be subservient to anything except the truth, a constant

refrain in the dozen wide-ranging essays, talks, and speeches collected here. In addition to meditating on his own fiction and plays, Gao discusses literature as testimony, the relationship between writing and metaphysics, the role of loneliness in creativity, and the importance of the individual. "I am highly suspicious whenever the name of a collective is invoked," he writes. "I actually become afraid that this collective name will strangle me before I have a chance to say anything." What is remarkable is that Gao carved out a space—physical, spiritual, aesthetic—in which to say what had to be said.

Two phrases—"without isms" and "cold literature"—recur like musical motifs, the first denoting the necessity of writing without subscribing to any political or literary ideology, the second describing writing as "a luxury, a form of pure spiritual pleasure." A luxury, one hastens to add, that to serious readers feels like a necessity. Gao's prose is dense, but his thought is far-reaching, his range of reference wide, his commitment to freedom absolute. This is required reading for those who want to see how a brave spirit overcame seemingly intractable political forces to create an enduring body of work.

Translator Mabel Lee provides a useful introduction to Gao's life and work, placing him in the context of modern Chinese literature, and she adds a bibliography. *Soul Mountain* is, of course, the place to start reading Gao Xingjian. But after you have experienced the play of his mind, the clarity of his vision, and the heartbreaking scope of his subject—the fate of the individual in a mass society—*The Case for Literature* will reveal the foundation upon which he builds his utterly original house of fiction.

—Christopher Merrill



Gao Xingjian in New York City last fall