



Six Chapters from My Life "Downunder"

Yang Jiang

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By now the world is familiar with the disastrous consequences of the ten year period (1966-1976) in China's history known as the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. The mistakes of Mao Zedong's later years have been officially acknowledged, and the infamous Gang of Four publicly tried and sentenced for their crimes. But on the cultural front the thaw had no sooner come than gone. A campaign against what is regarded as "spiritual pollution" is being waged to inhibit free expression among creative writers.

Thousands of scholars, authors, respected professors and academicians, who as a class were the most persecuted in what some observers called China's "holocaust," are back at their respective stations, bent over the task of modernization. For understandable reasons, few have written candidly about their experiences during the Cultural Revolution. Yang Jiang is an outstanding exception.

In this memoir she gives a poignant account of the more than two years she and her husband were sent "downunder" to the barren countryside for reeducation through labor. Yang Jiang touches upon any horrendous acts only in passing, or by indirection; mainly she relates in well-tempered tones the everyday incidents at their "cadre school" which add up to a harrowing tale.

Patterned after Shen Fu's "Six Chapters of a Floating Life," a minor classic of the Qing dynasty, *Six Chapters from My Life 'Downunder'* is a testimony of remarkable sophistication, and at the same time a powerful indictment of the madness of ignorant, totalitarian rule. The author writes in a subtle, almost allegorical style, letting the reader share in her skepticism, disappointment, and frustration with the people, or the system, responsible for what was done to her family and her fellow victims. More in sorrow than in anger, here and there with a touch of wry humor, she records the backwardness and distrust of the peasants who were their "masters"; the utter waste of human resources; the vicious nature of political campaigns and the people involved in them; and, above all, the devotion between husband and wife which kept them going throughout their ordeal. While describing a society in one of its darkest moments, Yang Jiang reaffirms the endurance of humanity.

Although Yang Jiang lives in Beijing, *Six Chapters from My Life 'Downunder'* first appeared in a Hong Kong magazine in April 1981, and was published in book form there in the following month, attracting wide attention. It was published in the People's Republic of China later that year. The edition sold out quickly and no subsequent printings have been available. The present English translation, first published in the journal "Renditions," is issued here in slightly revised form and with the addition of footnotes and background notes.

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