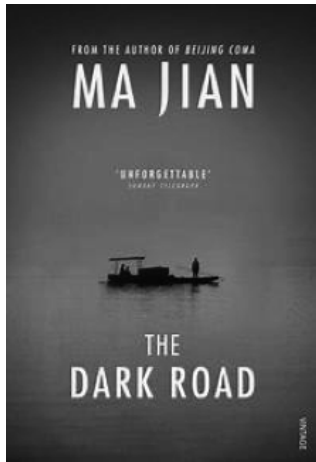


Stewart Donovan

My Past Keeps Bursting Through

A review of *Ma Jian's The Dark Road*, Vintage, 2013, pp. 360, and *China Dream*, Chatto and Windus, 2018, pp.192.



Speaking as an Irishman living in England, the poet Louis MacNeice once asked what we mean to Ireland or Ireland to us. MacNeice was one of the major leftist poets of the 1930's, along with Auden and Day-Lewis, so he was naturally conflicted over the Ireland of his time. Ma Jian is one of China's greatest living novelists and he too continually asks what we mean to China and China to us. Like MacNeice and Joyce before him, he too lives in exile but his exile, unlike the Irishmen, is not voluntary. Ma Jian is one of the great critics of the modern Chinese State and its totalitarian communist party. He has been called China's Solzhenitsyn; he is that and probably its Svetlana Alexievich as well; he is also, to keep the Irish card in play, its Jonathan Swift. Ma Jian is 65 years old and for the past 15 years he has lived in London with his wife and translator Flora Drew and their four children. He has written an award winning travel book, short stories and novels including *Beijing Coma*, his *cris de coeur* for the slaughtered protestors and students of Tiananmen Square. It was his early short story collection, however,

Stick Out Your Tongue, 1987, that got him banned and exiled from China. (Though he has only recently been permanently forbidden to return to his homeland, even for short visits). The five stories in *Stick Out Your Tongue* are about Tibet and the state censors denounced them as “a vulgar, obscene book that defames the image of our Tibetan compatriots.” The portrayal of their tradition of sky burial, in particular, indicts both the primitive ritual and a Chinese occupying government that enables the cultural practise as a sign of their “benign” imperial presence.

In his latest book *China Dream*, 2018, Ma Jian moves more directly into the world of Huxley, Orwell and the dystopian futures so familiar to readers and viewers of *Blade Runner*, *Westworld*, *The Handmaid's Tale* and other narratives that chronicle our fearful anthropocene and its attendant nightmares, past, present and to come. But it is important to note that Ma Jian's protagonist, while he participates in fiction—China Dream Soup and neural implants—also directly represents the world espoused by President for Life Xi Jinping and his world of China Dream Bureaus, Red Guard Nightclubs and mass wedding anniversary ceremonies for octogenarian couples. Henry James once called the novel a superior form of history, for Ma Jian it is that and so much more. Like Jonathan Swift before him, he writes out of a savage indignation about a world and a people deprived of human dignity, and his fiction—even as it embraces it—must step outside of both tradition and the individual talent. The works of Ma Jian are not to be read for aesthetic pleasure, nor were they written for that purpose (this is not to say that they are artless; quite the contrary); here, he most resembles Solzhenitsyn in his moral, prophetic and spiritual quest, but unlike the great Russian his embrace of orthodoxy involves sticking out his tongue (this is especially true of his portrayal of Confucius). Though his style has an Orwellian clarity and he records the contemporary world with a journalist's eye, he has command of a vocabulary of time and being that Heidegger and Freud might envy. In this he reminds me not of fellow novelists or artists but rather of some contemporary theorists, and especially that great eccentric, darling of the

West, Slavoj Žižek. Žižek of course is familiar with Ma Jian's world, having spent much of his life growing up under Soviet totalitarianism, and in his selected commemorative edition of Lenin's writings for the 100th anniversary of the Russian revolution, *Lenin 2017: Remembering, Repeating and Working Through* (Verso, 2017), Žižek does not forget to comment on the present and recent past of the Middle Kingdom and its now ersatz status as the last communist regime:

With Deng Xiaoping's 'reforms', the Chinese proceeded in a radically different, almost opposite way [to the Russians]. While at the level of the economy (and, up to a point, culture) what is usually understood as 'communism' was abandoned, and the gates were opened wide to Western-style 'liberalisation' (private property, profit-making, hedonist individualism, etc.) the Party nevertheless maintained its ideological political hegemony—not in the sense of doctrinal orthodoxy (in the official discourse, the Confucian reference to the 'Harmonious Society' practically replaced any reference to communism) but in the sense of maintaining the unconditional political hegemony of the Communist Party as the only guarantee of China's stability and prosperity. This required a close monitoring and regulation of the ideological discourse on Chinese history, especially the history of the last two centuries: the story endlessly varied by the state media and textbooks is one of China's humiliation from the Opium Wars onwards, which ended only with communist victory in 1949, leading to the conclusion that to be patriotic is to support the rule of the Party. When history is given such a legitimising role, of course, it cannot tolerate any substantial self-critique; the Chinese had learned the lesson of Gorbachev's failure: full recognition of the 'founding crimes' will only bring the entire system down. Those crimes thus have to remain disavowed: true some Maoist 'excesses' and 'errors' are denounced (the Great Leap Forward and the devastating famine that followed; the Cultural Revolution), and Deng's assessment of Mao's role (70 per cent positive, 30 per cent negative is enshrined as the official formula. But this assessment functions as a formal conclusion which renders any further elaboration superfluous: even if Mao was 30 per cent bad, the full symbolic impact of this admission is neutralised, so he can continue to be celebrated as the founding father of the nation, his body in a mausoleum and his image on every bank note. We are dealing here with a clear case of fetishistic disavowal although we know very well that Mao made errors and caused immense suffering, his figure is kept magically untainted by these facts. In this way the Chinese communists can have their cake and eat it: the radical changes brought about by economic 'liberalization' are combined with the continuation of the same party rule as before.

And now enter Ma Jian the contemporary recorder of this 'new' 'liberalized' China. *China Dream* is a gentler (if I can

use that adjective) way perhaps to enter Ma Jian's world than some of his other works, and I recommend it to readers who might have difficulty in taking on, for example, the content of a particularly graphic war novel. It is similar to the dilemma faced by students of the Holocaust, the novels of Eli Wiesel and the non-fiction works of Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz* and *The Reawakening* (also translated as *The Truce*) make particular demands upon their readers. Though *Survival in Auschwitz* is a much smaller text, I always chose to teach *The Reawakening* to undergraduates as it provided, however tentatively, some sign of hope for the survivors. I note this because *The Dark Road*—this unique masterpiece—takes up the major part of this review essay and is, at its core, a survivor novel of sorts, if not a war story. And the war it records is primarily a civil one conducted against the rural people of China, also known to China and the world as Chinese peasants. Asked by a passing stranger what documents are needed to avoid arrest, the novel's central male character replies: 'Identity card, health certificate, temporary urban residence permit, temporary work permit, birth permit, marriage licence. . . ' Kongzi says, rattling off the list. 'But even then if you have them all, if you are in a big town or city and you look like a peasant, they'll still arrest you. And once you're in handcuffs, they'll squeeze as much money from you as they can.' And the major victims among these peasants are, not surprisingly perhaps, women (Meili is the novel's heroine) and children, or rather the unborn or just born. On its first publication, one reviewer in a British publication described the clinical descriptions of Meili's body as it is probed, inspected and penetrated by both doctors and her husband as "unsettling". But we are not in the land of Jane Austen and there are few moments in China's history that could be described as bucolic. The reviewer forgot or chose not to mention that there is also a rape scene with all the clinical and graphic brutality we find in *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*, *Deliverance* or *Straw Dogs*. The American, Peckinpah could never get his film released in Britain, but the Englishman, John Boorman, had no such trouble with *Deliverance* in the U.S. or Britain. The violence recorded by Ma

Jian is never gratuitous and always serves the greater design of the novel and the message it carries. The rape of Meili, for instance, is carried out by the man who has bought her from a kidnapper to “work” for his prostitution business. Ma Jian here is highlighting the plight of thousands of rural Chinese women caught in a state sanctioned misogyny and forced into sex work because of their dispossession and rural poverty. Much of Ma Jian’s background for the novel was obtained from interviews he collected from the rural poor as he travelled inside China passing himself off as an itinerant worker. He was permitted to travel in China until 2011 when he was finally prevented from crossing the border from Hong Kong to the mainland.

The trauma of the single child policy begins in 1978 when it is first unleashed upon hundreds of millions of Chinese subsistence farmers and labourers, and it comes to an end of sorts in 2016 when the policy is finally abandoned. It was a practise— we are reminded by Ma Jian and the novels’ characters—praised by the United Nations and by many people in the liberal and neo-liberal West. However, before we consider *The Dark Road* in detail it may behove us to recall, by way of a footnote of sorts, China’s first contemporary conflict with its peasant population. In 2008 Yang Jisheng published *Tombstone* in Hong Kong. Its subtitle is *The Great Chinese Famine, 1958-1962*. To put this famine in perspective for an Irish, US, Quebec, Ontario and New Brunswick readership, the Great Irish Famine of the 1840’s, known also as *An Gorta Mór*, saw a million Irish die and, eventually, as a direct and indirect result of the famine, Ireland’s 19th century population decline from eight and a half million to just over four million by the turn of the century. The vast majority of the deaths and the millions of migrants who were forced to leave would have been rural Irish, most of them peasants, many of them Irish speakers. In *Tombstone*, Yang Jisheng records that at least 36 million people died between 1958 and 1962. Later, official fact-finding missions in the early 1980s would place the number as high as 45 million. In the middle of his powerful narrative Yang Jisheng records that:

The assignment of all food supply to the communal kitchens and the prohibition against cooking at home put life-and-death power in the hands of cadres, enabling them to seize public property and enforce official privilege. While peasants ate gruel, cadres ate rice; while peasants ate vegetables, cadres ate meat; and while peasants ate only a mouthful of meat, cadres ate several days' worth.

Time and time again Yang Jisheng records the brutal actions of cadres and party bosses as they deny food and divert resources with all the efficiency of an Anglo-Irish landlord packing corn and peasants to be shipped from his estate: In Sichuan as elsewhere, cadres routinely took more than their share of scarce food supplies during the famine. A report by provincial inspectors found that at Changning County's Taoping Commune, nine out of twelve party branch members had corruptly diverted resources. At least 60 per cent of the commune's cadres had corruptly diverted or divided up resources for personal use. In the commune's Shizi administrative district, Yan Hichen and four others privately divided up 7,000 kilos of millet, while the head of the Zhongba administrative district, Jhang Jichen, corruptly made off with more than 1,500 kilos of grain. Commune members said, "All of the food we've worked so hard to grow has been gobbled up by the crows."

Despite these first and fierce indictments of the Communist Party, Yang Jisheng, unlike Ma Jian, still lives in China, retired but publishing occasionally in scientific journals. Slavoj Žižek points up some of the reasons as to how he achieved what he did and why he is left alone:

With the privileges afforded a senior Xinhua journalist, Yang was able to consult state archives around the country and form the most complete picture of the Great Famine that any researcher, foreign or local, has ever managed. He was helped by scores of collaborators within the system, demographers who had toiled quietly for years in government agencies to compile accurate figures on the loss of life; local officials who had kept ghoulish records of the events in their districts; the keepers of provincial archives who were happy to open their doors, with a nod and a wink to a trusted comrade, pretending to be researching the history of China's grain production. The reaction? In Wuhan, a major city in central China, the office of the Committee of Comprehensive Management of Social Order put *Tombstone* on a list of 'obscene, pornographic, violent and unhealthy books for children', to be confiscated on sight. Elsewhere, the Party killed *Tombstone* with silence, banning any mention of it in the media but refraining from attention-grabbing attacks on the book itself.

The Dark Road, like *Tombstone*, is a book that records what happens in a totalitarian system when officials refuse to value human life over ideology and self-interest. The novel tells the story of Meili, her husband Kongzi, a schoolteacher, and their two-year-old daughter Nannan. Though they are peasants and therefore subject to harassment and eviction because of their class, there is an added complication to the traditional Chinese couples' desire for a male heir to look after them in their old age—Kongzi we learn is 'a 76th generation descendant of Confucius in the direct patrilineal line'. And though he and Meili already have a daughter, 'filial piety' possesses and obsesses Kongzi and he is determined to continue the male line even though it means untold suffering—especially for Meili—as they begin their lives as 'family planning fugitives' and head for a clandestine life among the egg families, people who live on boats that look like half eggshells on the Yangtze, its tributaries and backwaters.

They eventually head for a town that is being pulled down to make room for the Three Gorges Dam project. This project put three million people on the move almost over night and the reference to the plight of these economic migrants is part of Ma Jian's wide critical sweep in the novel which includes many of the headlines Western audiences would be familiar with, including the plight of the Falun Gong, the tainted baby formula scandal, China's pollution problem, its electronic waste and references to Tiananmen Square. Although living on the water allows them to avoid detection and arrest, Meili pregnancy is eventually spotted by the Family Planning Police and one of the novel's most gruesome scenes takes place when she is forced to undergo an abortion at 8 months and her just born baby boy is murdered by the doctors. It is a *Slum Dog Millionaire* moment and one of many that the reader must endure on this journey through a Dantesque Hell with a Chinese version of the river Styx roiling with female foetuses, the corpses of the elderly, chemicals and e waste. Finally, Kongzi must pay the murderous servants of the state, the doctors, 775 Yuan for the slaughter of his child and, after signing a form saying he willingly con-

sented to the termination of the pregnancy, they are allowed to leave.

The couple eventually seek refuge among mountains of European and American e-waste in a place where there are more dead babies than fish. It is called Heaven Township and we soon learn that in just “one decade Heaven has transformed from a quiet backwater into a prosperous, waste-choked town.” It is a Special Economic Zone near Foshan in the Pearl River Delta, just an hour from Guangzhou and Meili was told of its existence early on in the novel. The exchange has a darkly comic radical feminist feel to it:

‘The machines are brought in by the truckload. You work sitting by the lake, watching television, and get paid eight hundred yuan a week, with free food and lodging. There are children scampering about everywhere. No one comes to check your birth permits, or to drag you off to a clinic for an IUD insertion.’

‘But you said it’s impossible to fall pregnant there, so how come there are so many children?’ Meili asks, tucking her hair inside the hood of her down jacket and wiping the snot from Nannan’s nose.

‘You have to inhale a lot of those chemicals before they can take effect. They’re called dioxins, apparently. The family planning officers there are very relaxed, because they know that however hard a man tries, he’s unlikely to get his wife pregnant.’

‘What a wonderful place it sounds!’ Meili feels wide-awake now. She imagines herself sitting on a stool beside a lake, scrubbing vegetables, watching her children paddle in the shallow water, and seeing Kongzi return from teaching at the local school, wearing a suit and tie and gold-rimmed glasses.

Though no romance is permitted and love is a circumscribed tentative affection, Meili remains fully human until her final metamorphosis. She of course has gone from a girlish naivety to a fierce enlightenment about her status as girl and a woman:

When she met him at seventeen, she believed marriage was forever, that the government protects and cares for the people, and that husbands protect and care for their wives. But as soon as she got married, these naïve beliefs were shattered. She discovered that women don’t own their bodies: their wombs and genitals are battle zones over which their husbands and the state fight for control—territories their husbands invade for sexual gratification and to produce male heirs, and which the state probes,

monitors, guards and scrapes so as to assert its power and spread fear. It has been said of Ma Jian's writing that subtlety and subtext are absent because they would be a form of collusion, and that the Chinese State's propaganda juggernaut can only be met with an equally fierce propaganda. This kind of reading underestimates the artistic force of Ma Jian's writing: the use of the Infant Spirit (with his/her own separate bold face font throughout the text); the refusal of Meili's last child to be born - to come out into the world - until it is 5 years old; the story of the 90 year old woman who was pregnant for 30 years and then gave birth to a stone baby, all bring the novel out of the hell of high realism and into the realm of myth and legend without aestheticizing or betraying the suffering of those living the struggle. The myths and legends let us celebrate and remember another China, a Middle Kingdom beyond the millionaires and the middle-class, the money and the cell phones, the cat walks, the Olympics, Alibaba and Tencent.

As I write this, the paper of record, *The New York Times*, for the empire and the country that helped educate Xi Jinping, publishes a long feature length article on China entitled: "The Land That Failed to Fail". It is a wide-eyed essay of longing and envy that includes links to "How China became a superpower" which intern links us to other opened-mouthed articles such as "The American Dream is Alive. In China;" "How China Took Over Your TV;" "How China is Rewriting Its Own Script" and "The World Built By China." It may not be fake news but it is certainly stupid news with little or no critique of the endgame of the consumerism it lauds. No amount of solar panels can keep us from the end times or the despair of the latest UN climate change report. But we may at least turn to one of China's greatest exiled sons and thank him for the sanity of his indignation and the recording of his vision of the suffering that so many of his country women, children and men had to endure during the long nightmare of history. A nightmare from which we have yet to awaken.