

On Ba Jin's Death

When I heard the news of Ba Jin's death (October 17, 2005), I had no reaction. For most people, this is anticipated for a 100-years-old sick man (born on November 25, 1904). The official Xinhua reported that he died after suffering malignant mesothelium cell tumours and other diseases. Ba Jin had been struggling with ill health since suffering a high fever caused by influenza six years ago, and earlier reports said he had been suffering from Parkinson's disease for more than 20 years.

However, for people who have a little knowledge of the short-lived Chinese Anarchism, Ba Jin was spiritually dead when he openly denied his anarchist tendency in the 1950s. Born as Li Yaotang, he still used his pen name Ba (for Bakunin) Jin (for Kropotkin), he could not but feel that nothing of significance had come from his pen since 1949. His stories were flat and he did not publish a single new novel--a literary genre in which he formerly excelled. "It is difficult to describe one's heroes in the imposed style," he said to the French writer Simone de Beauvoir in 1956. [1]

The PRC regime knew that in spite of his past criticism of the Russian and Chinese Communists Ba Jin helped to create among the intellectuals an emotional climate which induced them to accept the Communist revolution. The revolutionists in his novels and short stories attacked not only Old China but also modern capitalism as "the systems obstructing the development of society and of human personality," as "the forces destroying love." Many of the moral values which Ba Jin inculcated into his readers were in keeping with Communist ideas: to sacrifice oneself for the cause, to live for others, to enjoy group living, to practice self-criticism. During the time of the Russian-Chinese honeymoon in the 1950s, Ba Jin also benefited by the friendly attitude toward him in the Soviet Union. His anti-Soviet articles and remarks published in the obscure anarchist journals were almost forgiven though not completely forgotten. [2]

Ba Jin had to pay heavily for this acceptance, however. He was often criticised and many concessions were demanded of him. The new editions of his works were published only after thorough revision. He began by removing from his stories everything that revealed his characters' anarchist identities and even sympathies: the titles of the books they read, pictures on their walls, quotations from anarchist authors, mention of their names. Then he removed all traces of his own adherence to anarchism from his purely autobiographical works. Finally in 1958 he had to make an open break with his past, attributing his adherence to anarchism and admiration of Kropotkin to his "petty bourgeois feelings" and "lack of power of judgment." [1] Poor Ba Jin, who said the following statement? "Loving truth and living honestly is my attitude to life. Be true to yourself and be true to others, thus you can be the judge of your behavior."

Let's quote Ba Jin's dedication to Emma Goldman: "Only you know, when I was fifteen years old, you woke me up and I escaped disaster at the last moment. Then in 1927, in Boston, when two innocent workers (Sacco and Vanzetti) were taken to the electric chair by law and the voice of the working class was suffocated, I poured out my anguish as well as sincerity to you and entreated your help. You have consoled me many times

with your friendship and encouragement and taught me many times from your rich experience. Your beautiful letters have been a great comfort to me, when I have an opportunity of reading them. E.G., my spiritual mother (you have permitted me to call you in this way) you are a daughter of dreams.“ “Today I read your autobiography in two volumes, Living My Life. These two books full of life, shocked me greatly. Your roaring of forty years like spring thunder, knocked at the door of my living grave throughout the whole book. At this time, silence lost its effect, the fire of my life was lit, I want to come to life and go through great anguish, immeasurable joy, dark despair and enthusiastic hope, throughout the peak and the abyss of life. I will calmly go on living with an attitude you taught me until I spend my whole life.” [3]

How could a groom abandoned his bride to embrace a corpse! How could Ba Jin abandoned Anarchism in his heart?! In 1996, when an exiling Chinese anarchist found Ba Jin’s Chinese translation of Kropotkin’s “An Autobiography of a Revolutionary” in University of Wisconsin’s library, I refused to accept the fact that the brilliant translator in the 1930s was the Chairman of Chinese Cultural & Arts Professional Association under the political brutality of one-party dictatorship. The poor Ba Jin never knew that his spirit bride, the beautiful Anarchism, was reborn from the heroic Tiananmen Democratic Movement in 1989 under the persecution of the Chinese and Japanese governments. [4]

When the Chinese people regain the political freedom to understand Anarchism, Ba Jin will be rediscovered. He will be memorized as one of the few public figures in the 20 century history of China who lived truth and lived honestly to face the judgment.

[Notes]

[1] Olga Lang, New York, 1972. Quoted from <http://plawiuk.blogspot.com/2005/10/chinese-anarchist-author-ba-jin-rip.html>

[2] During the Cultural Revolution period, Shanghai’s Wenhui on February 26, 1968 denounced Ba Jin as "the oldest, most notorious anarchist in China." "In 1930," the newspaper said, "he had vigorously attacked the Soviet Union and the Bolshevik Party led by Stalin but his real target was the Chinese Communist Party ... he actually dared to point the spearhead of his attack on our most revered and beloved leader Chairman Mao. He really deserves to die ten thousand deaths for his crime."

[3] quoted from <http://plawiuk.blogspot.com/2005/10/chinese-anarchist-author-ba-jin-rip.html>

[4] Jing Zhao, A Dialog with Bakunin, published by Democratic China monthly in Tokyo, 1992 April, is the first Chinese anarchist article after the half-century long break in China’s Anarchist history. See <http://cpri.tripod.com/until1995/bakunin.html> .

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