

## BOOK REVIEWS

**Claudia Devaux and George Bernard Wong, S.J., *Bamboo Swaying in the Wind: A Survivor's Story of Faith and Imprisonment in Communist China*. Chicago: Loyola Press 2000.**

**Reviewed by Joseph Tse-Hei Lee**

Individuals who find themselves trapped in dramatic events often tell compelling stories about their personal experiences. Their stories can provide a lens through which to view important events in history. Filled with tears, heartbreak, and drama, *Bamboo Swaying in the Wind* is an extraordinary and revealing account of how a Jesuit priest, Father George Bernard Wong, has survived through political chaos in Mao's China. It tells the story of a Chinese Catholic who joined the Society of Jesus in 1939, and after the Communist Revolution of 1949, spent many years in jail because of his religious faith and commitment to the Church. His faith sustained him through the darkest hours of his life as he confronted the hostile Communist officials in endless interrogation sessions, and then as he struggled to survive through the long period of labor re-education (*laogai*). As a Jesuit living in China through the turbulent decades of political and social upheavals, Father Wong's story throws light on the Church-state relations in all its complexities, both good and bad.

Drawing on Father Wong's own words, Claudia Devaux tells the story in first person. In each chapter, she begins with a brief overview of major historical events in China and sets the stage for the narrative. This approach effectively places the story within the wider contexts of domestic and international politics, as well as the development of Catholicism in China. She writes clearly and fluently, giving those unfamiliar with the Chinese Catholic Church a sense of its shape, dynamics, and change throughout the twentieth century. Amply illustrated with black and white photos, she succinctly captures changes at different stages of Father Wong's life. We follow Father Wong as he grew up in a traditional Chinese family, received a Catholic education in Shanghai, and entered the Society of Jesus. After seven years of training in the United States, Father Wong returned home to serve as an assistant pastor in Shanghai. We become more engaged in the story as he was imprisoned from 1955 to 1960, and then transferred to a labor camp in Anhui Province for political education in 1960, joining dozens of Catholic priests and lay people there. His religious faith, commitment to the Church, and the support from fellow

Catholic prisoners gave him much strength through the years of imprisonment. Through Wong's eyes, we see the challenges facing Catholic communities in the early decades of the People's Republic, and gain insight into the hardships of those faithful clergymen and believers. We certainly admire their courage to adhere to the Catholic faith in the most unbearable circumstances, and strongly feel that the Chinese government owes them an apology.

Father Wong's account of the Legion of Mary during the early years of Communist rule, and his assessment of the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association provide new insights into the Church-state relations in China. Prior to the creation of the Legion of Mary in 1948, there was a dynamic indigenous Catholic Action Movement that mobilized large numbers of catechists to evangelize among non-Christians and to assist priests in administering local churches. Here, an extensive, reliable, and mobile network of faith communities emerged at the grassroots level, and provided much support among Catholic believers, especially when most of the priests were imprisoned and no religious services could be held in public.

After his release from the labor camp in the 1980s, Father Wong maintained a subtle relationship with the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association, a lay organization under the control of the State Religious Bureau. While he was closely associated with the underground church leaders, he taught English at the Catholic seminary run by the state and was in contact with pro-government Bishop Jin Luxian. In view of mutual distrust between the public and underground church hierarchies, Father Wong's decision appeared to be beneficial to the Chinese Catholic community as a whole. Father Wong called for more sympathetic assessment of Bishop Jin. Rather than judging him as a traitor who assumed leadership in the Patriotic Association, Father Wong urged Catholics inside and outside China to take into account Bishop Jin's contributions in the public church and at the seminary. His remark challenges us to resolve ongoing tensions between the public and underground churches in China.

On the whole, *Bamboo Swaying in the Wind* is among those moving biographies about Catholic priests and lay people who were persecuted by the Communist state during the Maoist era, such as John W. Clifford, S.J., Dominic Tang, S.J., and Margaret Chu.<sup>1</sup> A major strength in

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<sup>1</sup> John W. Clifford, S.J. *In the Presence of My Enemies*. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1963. Dominic Tang, S.J. *How Inscrutable His Ways! Memoirs*. Third Edition. Hong Kong: Condor Production Ltd., 1994. Margaret Chu, "A Catholic Girl in Prison in China." In James T. Myers. *Enemies without Guns: The Catholic Church in China*. New York: Paragon House, 1991.

this work is a unique personal perspective that enables us to see the chain of events unfold from the beginning and follows their impact on Father Wong's life until his eventual departure for California in 1991. To acquire a thorough understanding of the Catholic experience in post-1949 China, we still need more biographies written by Chinese priests from the public and underground churches, and government officials in charge of religious affairs.

Reading this biography, a main theme we see in it is the irony of history. The circumstances surrounding the persecution of Father Wong were totally beyond his control, and the choices he made had considerable consequences on him, his relatives and friends. We see also the strength of family ties and Christian solidarity that, although strained, were very strong under political pressures. It is heartening to see that Father Wong, his relatives, and many Catholics, have survived through the turbulent times of political turmoil in Mao's China. Like the bamboo, they have swayed in the wind, but remain unbroken.

**Annie R. Wang: *Lili: A Novel of Tiananmen*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2001**

**Reviewed by Constance Fletcher Smith**

Chinese writers abroad are just beginning to tell the story of Tiananmen Square in literature. Only three works to date address those historic events, and all three come from outside China. One is *Summer of Betrayal* (1997) by Hong Ying, a Beijing native living in London. The most recent, *Sons of Heaven* (2002), is by Terrence Cheng, born in Taiwan but living most of his life in New York. The third and most impressive is Annie Wang's novel *Lili: A Novel of Tiananmen* (Pantheon Books) published in 2001.

Annie Wang herself witnessed the events of Tiananmen Square in 1989 when she was a student at a high school located two blocks away. When she visited Mary Washington College recently, she admitted that it was "her summer of love," that she went to the square mostly to "meet cool guys." The fervor of the atmosphere was a "turn on;" everybody was talking or

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performing, with an immediate audience. At the same time, she knew that the events had historic significance, and she had to explore her “exquisite pain, the urge to scream” and to tell the story of the death of idealism in China. She took ten years to complete the novel, her first in English.

Born in 1972 in the ancient Chinese capital Xi’an, Wang graduated from the University of California at Berkeley in 1996. She has worked for the Beijing bureau of *The Washington Post* and works now as an interpreter for the U. S. State Department. She has studied English since she was thirteen and helped, as a radio talk show hostess, to introduce many western works, including *Catcher in the Rye*, *The Diary of Anne Frank*, and *On the Road* to her contemporaries in China. She is currently working on a second novel about “the cynical, urban Americanization of China.”

Wang’s background as a writer is extensive. She has published widely in Chinese from the age of fourteen; in fact, she has written more than 1,000 pieces in China, including feature articles and prose essays. She chose to write *Lili* in English because she finds English free of some of the taboos and constraints of Chinese; she calls it “sexy.” She did not want to offend or hurt her parents, but she says of the novel that it was her “cry of rebellion, her manifesto,” and she has been criticized for “biting the hand that feeds her” since her father is an official in the Chinese government. She couldn’t help adding, with a little affected fear, that her parents are now learning English.

Over the ten years she devoted to her writing (while her friends were working in Napa Valley, getting MBAs and making lots of money), she created a nuanced portrait of the awakening of her heroine as well as of her country. *Lili*, a common name in China, is symbolic. The flower, important as a symbol of purity in English, is also the lotus so significant in Buddhism. Almost inexpressibly beautiful, it has its roots in the mud, the ugliness of *Lili*’s past and the Proletarian Cultural Revolution itself.

In *Lili: a Novel of Tiananmen*, Wang tells the raw story of a young, disillusioned heroine growing up in a turbulent modern China. Her parents, both accomplished professional musicians, suffer during the Cultural Revolution. The family is sent away for “re-education” to rural Monkey Village, where a minor official rapes *Lili* when she is twelve years old. The village is called “Monkey,” Wang says, because in order for people to live as human beings, they need to

have dignity; here, the villagers live like animals. The rape is of course symbolic of the crime against China of the Cultural Revolution.

As Lili escapes and makes her way back to become a “comfort woman” for a street gang in Beijing, she loses more and more of her ability to be truly emotionally invested in life or to have any self-esteem. When the novel opens, she is in prison for hooliganism and “a corrupt lifestyle,” and she encrusts herself with a “don’t give a shit” attitude, expressed in sometimes ugly slang, that distances her at first from the reader’s sympathies but rings very true to life.

Wang tells Lili’s story in a style made up of simple, uncomplex sentences that contain deceptively powerful metaphors and images. The poetic soul of the main character thoroughly captivates even the most jaded and cynical reader through her exquisite command of language, especially simile. For example, Lili decides to play music for money at a hotel for rich patrons. (Her parents could hardly be more shocked if she prostituted herself.) In preparation for her job, she dusts off her erhu (a Chinese violin), and plucks a sound. “The sound is the cry of an ancient concubine, abandoned by her king for ages. I am the king who has dumped my erhu concubine. But she has waited patiently for my return.”

The images of her poetic sensibility make her prose redolent with pure beauty. The notes of her erhu when she visits Mongolia “penetrate the open air, flying boundless, like nightingales.” A memory departs “like a whiff of fading fragrance, something you can never grab or see again but that still stimulates your senses.” A couple strolls “hand in hand, like a pair of lost school children. Only our shadows follow us, loyal, speechless” A room looks dull and pale; “I feel like a sad bird in the wrong climate.”

Wang’s genius follows Lili as she reluctantly comes to love an ex-hippie Jewish American journalist – and herself. She struggles with Roy’s preconceptions of China (though he is fluent in Chinese), his western linear and dualistic thinking, his idealism and what she calls his naiveté. As he pursues his “research” relentlessly, she drifts intellectually, claiming not to know what the word ‘love’ means, let alone the word ‘democracy.’

One brilliant vignette from the novel that captures cultural clash is their visit to Lili’s mother’s mother, an old woman with an involved and colorful past who is now a devout Buddhist and a recluse. The novel tells her story briefly. When she was young, nicknamed Party Queen, her first love was an officer. Her parents married her to a wealthy opium addict she did not love. The rest of her story unfolds with similar tragedy until she is struggled against

during the Cultural Revolution and denounced, even slapped and spat upon by her own daughter and granddaughter.

Roy, curious about everything, wants to learn something about Buddhism, so he and Lili go to visit this extraordinary woman. When he meets her, he asks in the Western way of questioning:

Grandma, I want to know what ‘Om mani padme hum’ means to a Buddhist like you. Are the syllables energy-based sounds? When you chant the mantra, it produces an actual physical vibration. Does the vibration match the level of your energy? How about your mental intention when you chant? Are you very focused when chanting? Do the six syllables bring you peace and connect you with the deity?

Grandma calmly continues fanning herself, then takes a sip of her tea and responds, “Truth, without words.”

Throughout the novel, Wang presents Lili as a young woman who would rather not think deeply or be drawn into life in any profound or rigorous way that demands effort. Once when Roy is absent, she decides she will learn some English while he is gone. She pulls a volume of *The Birth of Tragedy* off his shelf and starts reading it, with a Chinese-English dictionary. “But knowing little of English grammar, I can’t tell whether the title means that giving birth is tragic or that a tragedy is being born.”

This kind of assumed shallowness and ignorance on Lili’s part permeates the novel. She remains reluctant to engage fully in life. She claims not to know what the word ‘democracy’ means, or what it means to be caught up in something larger than oneself. But as the inexorable outcome of Tiananmen Square juggernauts on, she spends every day at the Square, participating in the events that Roy is documenting. She takes notes like a journalist herself, and she serves as a nurse until she is exhausted. She makes us feel that we are right there with her, involved in events of profound importance on the stage of the modern world.

The ending of the novel is deliberately ambiguous. Resisting cliché, Wang prefers the Chinese way, “vague, ambiguous, and beautiful. It’s not a multiple choice question with only one right answer.” Yet by the time readers come to this ending, they have come to know Beijing hooligans, rural Chinese peasants, creative artists, frustrated parents, Communist Chinese officials, and many more. All appear with the vividness and clarity of truth; it is a surprise to realize one is reading fiction. This novel filters everything through the viewpoint and words of

the title character, a tough young woman who tells a story of modern China with surprising depth, power, and poetry.

**Anchee Min, *Wild Ginger: A Novel*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2002.**

**Reviewed by Daniel A. Metraux**

Anchee Min's recent popular novels graphically depict the horrors of life in China during the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s and 1970s. The author writes from firsthand experience. Born in Shanghai, she joined the Red Guards as a young teenager. Her first two novels, *Red Azalea* and *Becoming Madame Mao*, present a very lively view of the Cultural Revolution. The author, who was born in Shanghai and joined the Red Guards the vanguard of the revolution writes from firsthand experience. Min provides a very vivid glimpse into the daily lives of Chinese and the suffering and tragedies that so many of them experienced at the height of the horrors of the Maoist regime. Min in her clear lively prose recounts the lives of young Chinese who become victims of the unpredictable behavior of Mao and his cohorts.

The reader gets a very clear view of the philosophy and activities of Red Guard leaders. They shout their support for Mao and endeavor to carry out his demands for endless revolution, but we also meet sympathetic characters who, while not necessarily opposed to Mao, do adopt a more reflective view of life. They find it difficult to adopt the puritanical zeal of Mao's revolution which, according to Min, condemned sexual and more traditional marital relationships. In *Red Azalea* the heroine engages in a lesbian affair with a fellow farm laborer because she has no one else to get close to. The character Wild Ginger is an avid Maoist propagandist, but she also finds that she is attracted to a young male acquaintance. Her puritanical views clash with her normal human emotions, creating an intense conflict of values that encapsulates the contradictions of the Maoist revolution: Mao was so desperate to cast out the old, but his replacement, the female communist zealot, is not permitted to express herself and think as a normal human.

I have used three of Min's novels (*Red Azalea*, *Becoming Madame Mao*, *Wild Ginger*) in a number of my classes at Mary Baldwin College. My students enjoyed *Red Azalea*, found *Madame Mao* informative, but truly loved *Wild Ginger*, which, they felt, gave them the best feeling for the mood of the Cultural Revolution.