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The Cowshed: Memories Of The Chinese Cultural Revolution



Synopsis

The Chinese Cultural Revolution began in 1966 and led to a ten-year-long reign of Maoist terror throughout China, in which millions died or were sent to labor camps in the country or subjected to other forms of extreme discipline and humiliation. Ji Xianlin was one of them. *The Cowshed* is Jiâ€™s harrowing account of his imprisonment in 1968 on the campus of Peking University and his subsequent disillusionment with the cult of Mao. As the campus spirals into a political frenzy, Ji, a professor of Eastern languages, is persecuted by lecturers and students from his own department. His home is raided, his most treasured possessions are destroyed, and Ji himself must endure hours of humiliation at brutal struggle sessions. He is forced to construct a cowshed (a makeshift prison for intellectuals who were labeled class enemies) in which he is then housed with other former colleagues. His eyewitness account of this excruciating experience is full of sharp irony, empathy, and remarkable insights into a central event in Chinese history. In contemporary China, the Cultural Revolution remains a delicate topic, little discussed, but if a Chinese citizen has read one book on the subject, it is likely to be Jiâ€™s memoir. When *The Cowshed* was published in China in 1998, it quickly became a bestseller. The Cultural Revolution had nearly disappeared from the collective memory. Prominent intellectuals rarely spoke openly about the revolution, and books on the subject were almost nonexistent. By the time of Jiâ€™s death in 2009, little had changed, and despite its popularity, *The Cowshed* remains one of the only testimonies of its kind. As Zha Jianying writes in the introduction, "The book has sold well and stayed in print. But authorities also quietly took steps to restrict public discussion of the memoir, as its subject continues to be treated as sensitive. The present English edition, skillfully translated by Chenxin Jiang, is hence a welcome, valuable addition to the small body of work in this genre. It makes an important contribution to our understanding of that period."

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Customer Reviews

Though I had read accounts of the Cultural Revolution while it was occurring, I really didn't appreciate the disaster it was until the early 1980's. One evening in Washington, DC, a long-time Chinese friend introduced me to a newly arrived Chinese "student," one of the first allowed to study in the U.S. after normalization. This student was probably around sixty years of age and was simply a career academic. Over dinner, I somewhat casually mentioned the Cultural Revolution, but wasn't prepared for the response. He immediately teared up and had difficulty talking, but I did learn that he and his family has suffered terribly, simply because he was a career academic. A couple years later, I had occasion to spend time with the son of a high ranking cadre and mayor of a major Chinese city who related to me how he and his wife had been banished to the countryside to herd sheep and be "reeducated" and how his wife had finally committed suicide by drinking pesticide. Because of those, and other such incidents, I became aware that most in the West never really appreciated the sheer terror of the Cultural Revolution, simply because its so unfathomable to the West. Ji Xianlin's "The Cowshed, Memories of the Chinese Cultural Revolution." vividly brings home the savagery of the ten years between 1966-1976. Ji was a peasant by birth who had been basically "given" to an uncle who ensured he would be educated. While having disdain for Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang government, Ji was essentially apolitical. He was a true intellectual. For ten years he lived in Germany, away from his wife and family, during the period of World War II, where he marveled at the cult that developed around Adolph Hitler, assuming that could never happen in China.

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