Coda: Ba Jin: Toward an Ethical Relation to History

I have had too many dreams in my life. But it was during the Cultural Revolution that I had most of my nightmares. Now I should include (in this time) the post-Cultural Revolution. It is not that I clutch on to the Cultural Revolution. On the contrary, the Cultural Revolution clutches on to me.

——BA JIN¹

I clearly remember that I once transformed from human to beast. Some people told me it was but a ten-year dream. Will I dream the same dream again? Why not? . . . Only when there is no God is there no beast. We are all humans.

——BA JIN²

Building a Cultural Revolution museum is not a personal matter. We are responsible for letting our future generations remember the horror and lessons of these ten years.

——BA JIN³

This coda is meant to complete the rhythm of this book with a voice from a different generation—that of Chinese senior writers. Ba Jin (1904–2005) certainly was the most unique, persistent, and unyielding voice of his generation. My individual chapters have engaged exclusively with writers and artists who spent their childhood or teenage years during the Cultural Revolution. But it was not a conscious choice to feature the younger generation. Ba Jin’s essays reflecting on the Cultural Revolution are a rare voice. In words of Geremie Barmé, the translator of Ba Jin’s Random Thoughts, Ba Jin’s “short and rambling articles make up to some extent the deafening silence” from senior writers


and the “disheartening paucity of similar material.” Highlighting this voice and pairing it with that of the young, then, seems to be a good ending point for this book.

Born into a big feudal family in 1904, Ba Jin belongs to the May Fourth generation of Chinese intellectuals and is one of China’s most prominent modern writers. His early novels—such as the trilogy of Fog, Rain, and Lightening and the trilogy of Family, Spring, and Autumn—have become part of the canon of Chinese literature. Along with Mao Dun, another towering figure of Chinese modern literature, Ba Jin was nominated for the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1975. During the political nightmare of the Cultural Revolution, Ba Jin was relentlessly persecuted. There even formed a group with the purpose of bringing down Ba Jin, “Struggling-Ba Jin Team” (Pi Ba Zu). In the agonizing and satirical words of Ba Jin:

In the war of Resistance I often claimed that I had “survived a hundred bombings,” now I can congratulate myself on “surviving a hundred struggle meetings” without being killed or killing myself.\textsuperscript{5}

Indeed, Ba Jin narrowly escaped death. He shouldered the sudden death of his beloved wife, Xiao Shan. He witnessed innumerable cruel and un-mourned deaths of his friends. Having survived the Cultural Revolution, Ba Jin continued to be tortured by his endless nightmares.

**Artistic Conscience: An Ethical Relation to History**

From 1978 to the 1990s, Ba Jin, who was bedridden beginning in 1982, produced a series of anthologies consisting of short essays reflecting on the Cultural Revolution. These volumes, Random Thoughts, Seeking, Truthful Words, Words Recounted While Ill, and Words without a Title\textsuperscript{6} however, have been severely criticized, mostly over the quality and depth of Ba Jin’s writing and for being wordy, flaccid, and repetitious. Such criticism has failed to recognize the most basic value of Ba Jin’s writing on the Cultural Revolution—the human value of survivor testimonies. And there is much more: the ethical value. Later, Ba Jin responded to this criticism:

\textsuperscript{5} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{6} Only the first volume is translated into English.