

in her role as one of her country's most widely translated intellectuals. Like the patient, the strain she endured resulted in recurrent illnesses. Despite her criticisms of her government, Wolf opposed the reunification of East and West Germany, a stance that informs our understanding of the metaphors in this fiction.

Wolf's political preoccupations are personalized here. The patient is haunted by echoes of a rich culture that seems largely forgotten by the younger doctors and nurses attending her. Snippets of Goethe, Brahms, Brecht, and the Grimms flit through her drugged consciousness, leaving traces of emotion, sentiment, transient patriotism, and a sense of a once shared German heritage. She also remembers songs like "Build Up, Build Up," which voice the optimism of the East German Youth Movement, plus snatches of Nazi propaganda in other songs and bits of *Mein Kampf*. In the patient's brain the various and clashing layers of German history are unearthed in scattered, dreamlike disorder. Her memory and its diffuse—possibly dying—elements become a symbol of the people's past, both public and intimate.

The illness is critical and her recovery represents a turning point in the life of the patient as an individual and as a representative of her society. Wolf suggests the enormous challenge posed by learning self-sufficiency. Even taking in food by mouth and walking alone seem impossible after weeks of reliance on an IV and a wheeled bed. The patient, who has suspected that she may be the victim of some conspiracy to keep her hospitalized and medicated, begins to question her own complicity in her illness. Though Wolf may have felt that East Germany was better off as an independent state, her patient's eventual improvement implies that she feels some kind of radical treatment, even requiring the help of the West—in the form of those imported drugs—was necessary for continued survival.

In the Flesh may sound insufferably pedantic, but Wolf weaves her web so loosely and with such humor that it is pleasantly difficult to discern her broader pattern in the course of reading. Always fascinated by myth, she has mas-

tered the ability of those stories to function both as tale and metaphor. Like the best myths, her import does not overwhelm the pleasures of her narrative.

An Appetizing Absurd

The Noodle Maker

By Ma Jian

Farrar Straus Giroux.

181 pp. \$21.00.

Reviewed by

Tamar Adler

Contributor, "Harper's,"
Bangkok "Post"

FACED DAILY with the traumas of oppression, totalitarian societies often develop a sense that, as a character in Chinese dissident Ma Jian's newly translated *The Noodle Maker* comments, "the Absurd is more real than life itself." The book was written in 1990 in Hong Kong, where Ma had fled in 1986 after his first novel was banned for "spiritual pollution." Here a "professional writer" plies his occasional benefactor, a "professional blood donor," with seven internal narratives. Each story, imagined by the writer over the course of a meal shared with the blood donor, dramatizes the intrinsic hypocrisy of Chinese Communist Party leader Deng Xiaoping's reformist Open Door Policy in a vortex of inversions and embellishments.

To illustrate the alienation produced by the individual's struggle against state control, Franz Kafka devised monstrous farces populated by rational humans robbed of the ability to interpret them. In *The Noodle Maker* Ma similarly erases the boundaries of the plausible, abandoning his characters to a liminal zone. Some sink into perverse and lucrative physicality, selling blood, burning corpses, relishing abusive infidelities. Others pursue philosophical coherence, only to find themselves psychotic and suicidal, lost in a world where Mao's dictates are of decreasing relevance and the visible hand of the state has slipped into the drawing

room for rapprochement with imperialism.

"Farce really does occur in this world, and, sometimes, farce altogether without an element of probability," Nikolai Gogol wrote in "The Nose." His point is that resemblance of the farcical to the probable in the society he satirized gave his work its resonance beyond the bounds of burlesque. Ma's disturbingly entertaining parodies owe their power to the same conflation. The author cautions that cosmetic liberalization in China has not made its institutions any more dependable. In 1978, Deng announced a shift from the exclusive promotion of the Maoist agenda to a policy of opening Chinese markets to foreign trade and encouraging free enterprise. To a baffled citizenry wrought into philosophical uniformity by punitive socioeconomic experiments, Deng announced: "To get rich is glorious." Thus two decades of murderously restrictive Communist dogma were turned on their head.

The loosening of economic restrictions in an attempt to bolster the country's failing economy, though, did little for freedom of expression. Early in the 1980s, urged on by Party hardliners, Deng implemented a crackdown on what was perceived as cultural freedom run amok. In the opening chapter of *The Noodle Maker*, the professional writer has been reprimanded by Party apparatchiks for representing senior members as reactionaries. He complains, "Last year the newspapers reported that the senior cadre were too conservative, and that the Party wanted them to loosen their reins." The apparatchiks reply, "Well, this year it's changed, hasn't it? Now it's the older you are, the more reformist you are."

WHILE THE Party-sponsored writer starves in a government apartment, the professional blood donor has learned, after years in a re-education camp, how to make a fortune. He outsmarts the command economy by selling his own blood and skimming from the earnings of willing recruits. The novel's other entrepreneur trades in equally unglamorous matter. Purchasing a ceramics kiln from a local school, he uses it to create a private crematorium into which he is paid to pipe classical music and forbid-

den ballads while clients “swoon” into ashes.

The book’s most successful chapter echoes Salman Rushdie and Milan Kundera. The “winds brought in by the Open Door Policy” and the dissolution of revolutionary myths deeply disorient an actress who began her career at the “height of the Cultural Revolution.” Although she “tried to keep up with the changing times and relax her moral views . . . she slowly lost her grip on reality and retreated inside herself.” She decides to undertake a performative suicide at a progressive social club, where she will be eaten by a tiger before a live audience. The club manager’s “affection for all things foreign,” we are told, “had turned the hairs of his beard blond; his small blue-black eyes were a harmonious fusion of East and West.”

The actress is eaten before a crowd of thousands, and Ma punishes their complicity by literally diminishing them: “Everyone squeezing out from the ticket booth emerged half their previous thickness.” The actress, for her part, grows horns as she is being eaten. The blood donor’s sociological explanation of the actress’ impulse concedes its legitimacy: “When we’ve no energy left to fight against this brutal world, we turn inwards and start harming ourselves.” Formidable as the brutality of the world is, her horns imply that the solipsism of the alienated is partially accountable for an untenable system’s survival. Suicides never bring down regimes.



MA JIAN

Materialists are not let off the hook either. In a chapter entitled “The Possessor or the Possessed,” Ma caricatures a convinced convert to Mammonism. A female novelist has “bought herself a pair of shoes with kitten heels, and started wearing her hair loose . . . progressed to wearing stilettos, smoking foreign cigarettes, discussing Hemingway, drinking beer, spraying perfume on her neck, and celebrating her birthdays with a cake and candles.” With the perfumed novelist, who is sanguine compared to those who opt to kill themselves rather than be de-

bauched by the availability of nail lacquer, Ma ridicules the absolute greed that has emerged as the only viable alternative to the failed Communist project.

Back and forth the satire swings, between those who reject the social contract entirely—for instance, a painter spends his evenings debating philosophy with a literate, three-legged dog—and those who frantically submit to the transforming world. The two sides uncomfortably coexist, and both, Ma asserts, merit mockery. *The Noodle Maker* persistently suggests that the nascent open-market system may prove as damaging to China’s torn social fabric as the one it is poised to replace.

INDEED, the fates of most of Ma’s characters, warped by their shared experience of political oppression, signal despair for the decrepit society’s recovery. In the book’s final scene, the professional writer considers them: “When he closes his eyes, the characters who have lived inside him so long seem like a lump of dough being pulled by invisible hands into a thousand white threads. He sees the threads pulled tighter and tighter, until suddenly they break into a million pieces and scatter into the night sky.”

Surprisingly, however, a satire so reliant on its archetypal characters—the writer, the painter, the candlestick maker—and their hopeless token destinies, ends with a hopeful reversal. After taking the last puff from his cigarette, the blood donor “flings the stub to the ground, crushes it under the sole of his shoe, then walks next door to the writer’s study, sits down on the chair, and stares at the blank page on the desk.” And his interlocutor hits the streets, apparently to make a buck:

“In the last few minutes before dawn, the writer darts about his room like a maimed, wingless ladybird. Then, without saying a word, he opens his front door, shuts it quietly behind him, and disappears down the dark stairwell.”

If these two men—one stifled in his creative urges and compelled by the government to sublimate his talent into propaganda, the other physically enthralled by the almighty dollar—can trade places, Ma seems to say, maybe China can resolve its intractable realities after all.

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