

the sequences. If, as suggested by Macé, the process of structural homeomeria that molded the myths dates back to the very first composition of the *Kojiki*, how does one explain that one part consists of one sentence (II.4), while another part encompasses the period of a complete reign (IV.4)? And why not bestow on IV.a the distinction of a "full sequence," since it has four episodes that correspond to Tenson kōrin in its entirety?

Along the same line of thinking, faced with the thematic wealth of the Jinmu reign, I find it difficult to look at it simply as an appendix to Tenson kōrin. Macé is right, I believe, when he refuses to make a radical cut between Book I and Book II, but then why not take into account the fact that the *Jinmu-ki* is a recapitulation of the "age of the gods"?

These few objections do not weigh much when we consider the originality displayed in Macé's analysis. Beyond any doubt it is the most systematic and the most stimulating study of the *Kojiki* that I have read during the last ten years. From now on nobody is justified in writing, as Philippi did in earlier days, that the *Kojiki* is a mere patchwork of heterogeneous traditions unskillfully woven together. At a time when post-moderns find it fashionable to castigate Lévi-Strauss without having read his "Mythologiques," Macé has demonstrated that structuralism can still inspire some seminal works. I have no doubt that, if the first two books of the *Nihonshoki* were also submitted to the same analysis, our understanding would be greatly enriched by the exercise.

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#### CHINA

CAN XUE. *Dialogues in Paradise*. Translated by Ronald R. Janssen and Jian Zhang. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1989. x+173 pages. Cloth US\$17.95; ISBN 0-8101-0830-5. Paper US\$8.95.

Can Xue mixes bizarre fantasies with a steady stream of recollections of life in China during the Cultural Revolution because, she writes, "I believe that I have something to say about these ten years, and about the future." Readers who expect the usual Chinese fictional fare in support of a struggling but unified political vision will be surprised, however. "What I have to say," remarks the author, "is something beyond ordinary consciousness, beyond ordinary talk." Such is the genesis of *Dialogues in Paradise*, a collection of thirteen short stories, written and published in the period 1985-88 in a variety of Chinese journals, and gathered and translated here by Ronald R. Janssen and Jian Zhang.

*Dialogues in Paradise* is sure to be of interest for both the general and scholarly reader of contemporary Chinese fiction, but this particular sampling of the author's work runs the risk of promising more than it can deliver. Somewhere between the overtly Kafkaesque styling of the pieces and their unrelenting agony over the standstill of current China, the reader is likely to come up feeling empty-handed.

The use of the term "paradise" in the title, presumably in reference to Mao's vision of the 1950s, places this work squarely in the tradition of satiric voices exemplified in writers like Lu Xun (魯迅), Mao Dun (茅盾) of the May 4th era of Chinese intelligentsia, and Quian Chong Shu (錢鍾書) of the post-World-War-II period. The

first term of the title, "dialogues," is ironic, since nearly all of the thirteen stories express themselves in varying forms of monologue. What's more, these are grief-stricken pieces rich with memorable, if scattered, images that shout in the darkness.

This collection is striking for its play with the grotesque. Characters are routinely pictured as writhing in bone-crushing discomfort, of both the physical and mental variety, dripping blood and gasping for breath in the midst of suffocating oppression. A sizeable portion of this flair for the grotesque is thrown at the reader in the form of animal images. Readers are likely to feel bombarded by this zoolike array, which includes ground moles, butterflies, wolves, rabbits, cats, snails, beetles, hawks, frogs, lizards, owls, white mice, scorpions, sharks, marching termites, and such ambiguous oddities as "tree toads" and "carnivorous night birds." Although such a "paradise" began to grate this reviewer early on, there are occasional touches of the poetic worth noting. "In the ice-sealed graveyard red squirrels dance with their scarlet candles . . ." In one scene a son keeps vigil beside his mother's coffin (shades of Camus's *The Stranger*?), and the reader is given a glimpse of filial piety. "I sat . . . in the pitch-dark mourning room, in fear that the dead woman would jump up to settle accounts. The oil lamp flickered, and a cold draft was sneaking under our feet like a snake. The coffin seemed to float in the air, cracking."

This fiction suffers in part because its author pushes images to their farthest possible limits, but with little or no inner logic or theme. In one scene a mother decomposes while taking a bath, for example. Her body simply dissolves beneath a layer of soap suds. In the case of the filial mourner referred to above, a corpse bursts into flames in its coffin, spewing "a sharp smell" into the air that sends onlookers choking. As with Kafka, characters in the world of Can Xue are usually doomed to lives of isolation. Suffering is ultimately inexpressible. Communication is often impossible. Some moments in the narration take on the cloak of a self-reflexive text with marked political allusions. In "Dream of the Yellow Chrysanthemum," we find this depiction: "'It's funny', he said in a loud voice . . . 'I have a goal.' He stared at me for a long time before he spoke the vitally important thing in his heart. Holding my breath, I was ready to listen, but he dropped the subject and never raised it again. It might have been something extremely profound." The words haunt us, and for several reasons. These are stories which gesture toward truths they cannot hold, and cannot quite articulate.

In its combining of elements common to traditional Chinese ghost stories of the Song and Tang dynasties, and with its preoccupation with the illness of today's China, this text is less a triumph than a grand experiment. Still, it is a fascinating attempt at expressing some of the madness and feelings of futility that seem to be life in China at the present time. One must believe that *Dialogues in Paradise* is only the beginning work of an important representative voice on the stage of contemporary Chinese writers.

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