

Geremie Barmé, *In the Red: On Contemporary Chinese Culture*
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TO GO POP, OR NOT— THAT IS BEYOND QUESTION

In the Red, the largest book to date on contemporary Chinese culture, offers a formidable range of information, with very few errors, mostly of translation or romanization. Barmé, an Australian reporter and researcher with long experience of watching the PRC from Hong Kong, has looked closely at his subject, and his attempt to understand its reconfiguration deserves our admiration and respect. He sensibly takes the crushing of the revolt in Tiananmen in 1989 as a watershed that has marked a decisive turn in Chinese cultural life. The book starts with a discussion of the political purge that followed Tiananmen, and returns to current political developments in its last chapter and long Postscript. Its somewhat delphic title can at a guess be taken two ways—certainly as a reference to the context of cultural production under the greatest remaining Communist regime; but perhaps also to its upshot. Barmé stresses at the outset the sheer volume of print now pouring off the presses in China—at least according to UNESCO statistics, the PRC was one of only two states to publish more than 100,000 titles in 1994, though given the size of its population this is not that impressive a figure. He dubs this ‘publishing furore and writing fever’ a new ‘graphomania’ and ‘logorrhea’. But what of its quality? The title could be read as hinting at an ultimate superfluity of all this sound and fury—a deficit in meaning that no amount of hyperactive output can hide.

Barmé’s focus, as this initial emphasis suggests, is highly selective. For all its larger claims, *In the Red* is essentially devoted to the fate of Chinese literature and ‘literary politics’, rather than culture in general. Readers expecting cover-

age of cinema, music, or architecture, for example, will be disappointed. Apart from one, rather outsize chapter on t-shirts—whose legends lend themselves to his treatment—he confines himself to literary topics, with only side-glances at other fields of culture. In this respect *In The Red* is narrower than Jean Zha's lively, shorter study *China Pop*, which deals with television, town planning and films as well as novels. There is, however, one sense in which a concentration on literature may offer a privileged angle of vision on recent Chinese culture. Most observers agree that modern Chinese culture can be roughly divided into three sectors: that of the dictatorial state, that of the intelligentsia, and that of mass consumption. This triangle is older and more visible in literature, where from the early 20th century onwards constant shifts of power forced them into a complicated set of alliances and oppositions, than in any other field.

It might appear that Barmé does not subscribe to this tripartite division, since he repeatedly argues that any distinction between high and low art is merely 'academic', and that 'mutual cannibalisation' undermines even the distinction between party propaganda and opposition to the regime in matters of culture. Were this really the case, contemporary Chinese culture could more or less be treated as a single undifferentiated bloc. In practice, however, Barmé does not really contest the triangular division, since he devotes separate parts of the book to the three sides, and offers very different evaluations of each. He precedes his discussion of them, however, with a theoretical sketch taken from an essay by the Hungarian writer Miklos Haraszti, who in the eighties described the cultural scene in his country as a 'velvet prison', trapping intellectuals into unwary collusion with the regime, from which there was no escape. The contradiction between this scheme and the tripartite lay-out of the book is evident, since it is clear that the highly commercialized scene on display in China today is a prison-house neither for popular nor for official culture. It looks more like an unprecedented carnival for both.

Barmé begins by depicting State controls over current Chinese cultural production. His portrait of the official grip on the mental life of the nation is not entirely unflattering. He tells us many stories of the remarkable adaptability of the PRC propaganda machine to commercial styles of presentation, however clumsy or grotesque the result might at first seem to be. In a chapter with the cute title 'CCP™ & Adcult PRC' he suggests that the Chinese Communist Party has been impressively successful in turning agitprop into advertising, as a less intrusive and more effective means of domesticating the Chinese masses. 'Party adcult', he writes, 'de-sensitizes the public' to the power wielded over it. A certain ambivalence of tone is detectable in his account of this updating of ideological manipulation. The reason why Barmé should be less than scathing about it becomes clear when he turns to popular culture.

This is where his main interest lies. About two-thirds of the text are devoted to the stunning growth of Chinese popular culture. Barmé dwells with relish on

the power of the new commercial tide of distraction and entertainment. Official propaganda has had to adopt its stratagems and its vocabulary. Intellectuals fall into aphasia before the ingenuity of its forms. Barmé reserves his most enthusiastic treatment for market-oriented popular fiction, whose supreme practitioner is the *Wunderkind* Wang Shuo, and foremost champion the former Minister of Culture Wang Meng. Each enjoys a special chapter of detailed discussion and hundreds of mentions throughout the book. There is, however, a difference in his portrait of the two. Wang Meng's self-assumed role as enlightened advocate of popular culture left him open to objection from other critics, and Barmé shows us how he was embarrassingly attacked by—well, some young intellectuals. Wang Shuo, on the other hand, emerges unambiguously as the central hero of 'contemporary Chinese culture'.

In point of fact, there is no doubt that Wang Shuo could have become an excellent writer—had he not been spoilt by market hype (which he came to manipulate without scruple) and foreign acclaim of the kind we find here. His early works were biting satires with real moral force; *Playing with Thrills* remains one of the best Chinese novels of the past fifteen years. Gradually, however, Wang Shuo started to strike the pose of a complacent school bully, flaunting his brutishness with the proud declaration, via one of his stock characters: 'I'm a hooligan (*liumang*). I'm not scared of anyone'. Barmé renders *liumang* with the euphemistic 'lout', lending the term a jovially populist note it does not have in Chinese, where its meaning is closer to the sociological notion of lumpen, with a strong undertow not just of bad manners, but of criminal violence. It is no surprise that Wang Shuo should have reaped such rewards from this stance in today's China, where uncontrolled corruption and rampant abuse of power for monetary gain have been spreading like a prairie fire. Wang Shuo's glorification of the *liumang* simply feeds—and is fed by—this demoralized culture at large.

Barmé himself notes that 'at times it was difficult to distinguish between Wang's fictional creation and his circle of writer-business partners'. The wider issue, of course, is whether—as his admirers would have it—the effect of Wang Shuo's work is to debunk the hypocrisies of official culture, or to reinforce them. More generally, has the growth of commercial popular culture in the PRC strengthened or weakened the regime's dictatorial control of cultural life? To this crucial question, Barmé returns no consistent answer. On more than one occasion, suggesting that the state has actually benefited from the new commodification of culture, as 'its sign system has been enriched and enhanced', he seems to sense that popular—like any other—culture in China needs some criticism. Yet after pages of excited coverage, he offers virtually none.

When Barmé moves to the third and final part of his topic, intellectual culture, his tone changes. Here he has hardly a kind word to say. Even if we are forewarned by talk of the 'velvet prison' at the outset of the book, what follows is disconcerting. A primary *leitmotif* is that all cultural circles in China, without

exception, have been infected by greed for money. Virtually everyone who figures in his pages is held to have a hidden commercial motive. Barmé revels in such attributions. Thus the series of books fiercely hostile to commercialization, launched in the nineties by Xiao Shailin, is ‘a canny commercial strategy’. The young essayist Yu Jie who has won wide support among students for his uncompromising cultural critique is producing ‘the right stuff hawked for the wrong reason’—his success is due to ‘packaging and marketing’. Intellectuals who take their distance from global marketization are making ‘an annual pilgrimage to the enemy camp.’ Avant-garde artists are ‘now working for the Party on contract’. Counter-cultural film directors Zhang Yuan, Wu Wenguang and others display ‘unswerving entrepreneurship’. Any writer who discusses national or international questions seriously is a ‘memorialist’. This—Barmé sweepingly declares—‘is a way to package a best-seller’.

The purpose of these characterizations is to show us that the explosive marketization of art and culture in China has stripped intellectuals of any moral superiority over hacks. In fact, Barmé tries to tell us, the opposite is true. By comparison with Wang Shuo, who never minces words in his pursuit of wealth and fame, writers who try to offer readers food for thought are little better than whitened sepulchres. In Wang Shuo’s celebrated dictum, there are only two types of writer in China today, ‘relatively deep and meaningful louts’ and ‘laissez-faire louts’ like himself. In these conditions, frank money-chasers are of course more loveable and even more moral than phonies. In much the same spirit, Barmé can scarcely conceal his contempt for the Chinese intellectuals whom he finally gets around to discussing in the last chapters of his book. Describing the TV mini-series *A Beijing Man in New York*, he tells us that the scene in which the hero empties himself into a blonde prostitute and showers her with dollar bills was ‘particularly popular’ with ‘members of the Chinese intelligentsia’. On this gratuitous note, he embarks on a brief tour of the latter. Here he reserves his greatest disdain for those intellectuals who in 1993–94 debated the question ‘why China has lost its humanist spirit’, which in his eyes merely proved that ‘even the basic questions that the Chinese asked about their predicament had to be imported from outside’, let alone the answers. In retrospect, the discussion only served to ‘mark the collapse of the broad consensus among writers on major intellectual topics’.

Since *In the Red* is essentially a survey of literary culture, it is all the more striking that at this juncture Barmé screens out all but completely the ‘serious’ novels of the nineties. He fails even to mention such central works as Han Shaogong’s reworking of Chinese grass-roots culture in *Glossary of Maqiao*, Chen Zhongshi’s lament for the disintegration of the countryside in the civil wars in *Plateau of the White Deer*, Gao Xingjian’s paeon to the forgotten riches of a Chinese subculture in *Soul Mountain*, Li Rui’s interwoven narrative of modern China in *Silver Town*, or Wang Anyi’s moving tale of the downward spiral of a

Shanghai woman in *Song of Eternal Regret*—to cite only a few leading novels of this period. The single exception, to which he devotes a few pages, is Jia Pingwa's salacious exposure of urban decadence *The Abandoned Capital*: typically treated as suspect of 'a commercial ploy'. A better account of this work—a text of considerable significance, which deserves careful discussion—can actually be found in *China Pop*.

Most inexcusable of all is the complete disappearance of the novelist and essayist Wang Xiaobo, whose name is casually cited once and then discarded in a footnote. His brilliant wit, exercised on ironies of power and sex, far outshone the ruses of Wang Shuo. His tricky fiction—for the most part set in the dysfunctional landscape of the Cultural Revolution or a dystopian future China—is more entertaining. His dextrous language, with its overtones of quasi-classical rhetoric, is a pleasure of a different order from Wang Shuo's street argot. One of the few genuine free-lancers of his time, in his short life (he died of a heart attack in 1997) Wang Xiaobo waged such a splendid battle against the obscurantism of both state and market that he earned himself a permanent niche in any history of Chinese culture at the end of the last century.

With omissions like these in mind, we can see what weight to attach to Barmé's opening claim that Chinese intellectuals are 'more compliant' than were their East European counterparts, as the Chinese are generally satisfied with 'slipping a controversial line, sentiment, or point of view into an otherwise prolix and flabby work'. Verdicts like these would suggest that his book, harping on the astuteness of popular culture and the aptitude of party ideologues, is designed to shame Chinese intellectuals lost in the velvet prison of a communist state, with neither the courage to fight the regime nor the wit to go resolutely commercial. But what, it may be asked, should these hapless individuals do to live up to the standard Barmé sets them? If we follow the book, there is little hope for them. Barmé is right to notice that neither commercializers nor intellectuals have been 'willing to confront the authorities directly'. Once again, however, the reluctance of the former is candid and intelligent, since their aim is avowedly only to entertain and make money, but shameful of the latter, since they affirm noble ideals in word while 'helping the state farms of art' in deed.

Elsewhere, however, Barmé empathizes with the tactic of the editor of the journal *Orient*, that there is not much point in turning the magazine 'into a kamikaze vehicle for open dissident views which would result in immediate closure', so the only way forward is to 'negotiate a space for themselves within the ambit of reformist culture'. In other words, within the velvet prison—where else could such a negotiation occur? Barmé ends by handing Chinese intellectuals the same prescription he sarcastically dismisses at the beginning. In fact, both the question—what to do about the velvet prison?—and answer—negotiate a space within it—are 'imported', as Barmé would say. Their function is to furnish him with a specious whipping-boy, taken from Eastern Europe of yes-

teryear rather than China today. His critique is in bad faith. *In the Red* drives home the message that the major trend of Chinese cultural life in the nineties has been anti-intellectualism. But Barmé's account is a participant survey, rejoicing—despite occasional protestations to the contrary—in this great shift. The underlying theme of his book is that we must, for better or worse, understand and accept commercialization, and join it since we can't beat it. The future of Chinese culture lies in all three parties going pop together, and wallowing joyfully in a common mire. Meanwhile Chinese intellectuals should be unmasked, to tear away any foolhardy refusal to submit to the 'historical trend'. But we may ask: could not Barmé himself be suffering from a more serious aphasia than his targets, as one stunned by the powerful onrush of commodity culture and the flexible controls of the dictatorial State? Whose words are more 'in the red'—those of Chinese intellectuals, or his own?

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