Red China Blues: My Long March from Mao to Now by Jan Wong

Maren Mangum

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/sigma

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/sigma/vol19/iss1/5
Youth, they say, is wasted on the young. Youthful exuberance, determination, boundless energy, a conquering spirit—all are wrapped up in a fragile yet stubborn idealism that demands to be both proven and challenged. Practicality, realism, and even cynicism come, often painfully, with time. It is this rite of passage, both for herself and the Chinese nation, that journalist Jan Wong chronicles in Red China Blues: My Long March from Mao to Now.

Wong, a Canadian-born ethnic Chinese, traveled to China at the height of the Cultural Revolution. She arrived as a self-proclaimed “Montreal Maoist,” an idealist who sincerely believed Chinese Communist propaganda and became a firsthand witness to the major events that rocked China from the 1970s to the 1990s. In the process she was transformed from an ardent disciple of Chinese Communism to an ardent critic of its failure. Wong successfully debunks many Western beliefs and theories about Communist China and even offers up some theories of her own, but in the final analysis, she fails fully to come to terms with China’s past or future.

Initially a true believer in Maoism, Wong provides an important counterbalance to traditional Western thought, calling into question many long-held beliefs and assumptions. Perhaps the most important doubt she casts is on the long and tenaciously held assumption that capitalism is better than communism. The young, idealistic Wong certainly didn’t think so. She had lived towards the top of a successful capitalistic society but was deeply dissatisfied with it. She saw Western society as “a hopeless mess of racism, exploitation and shopping malls” (12). China, with its proclaimed idealism of social equality and justice seemed instead to provide the example of what the world should be. As she begins to see the reality, however, the idea of China as a shining beacon of Communism begins to fade. Nonetheless, even as Chinese Communism begins another “long march” on the rocky road to pseudo-capitalism, Wong never is fully convinced of capitalism’s success. Indeed, she continues to point out some of its more offensive evils—official corruption and the gap between the rich and the poor, for example—many of which were problems under Mao’s Communism as well.

Wong also attacks the tendency to view the Chinese as the faceless, thoughtless masses. From
the moment stories of China began to find their way into the Western imagination, the East was shrouded in mystery. The West has never truly understood the people or traditions of China, but Wong turns the Chinese people into real live, thinking, breathing, feeling individuals. First, she documents quite clearly their dissatisfaction and unhappiness with Maoism during the Cultural Revolution. For example, she was repeatedly approached by people desperate to get themselves or their loved ones out of China. Moreover, she describes specific instances of unhappiness with the Communist rule, feelings which the cautious Chinese people share with her only after she has already begun to question Communism’s success. Clearly, despite Western stereotypes and explanations of Chinese Communism, the Chinese people are not obedient and unquestioning sheep who lack the ability to think for themselves. Wong illustrates the independence and courage of the Chinese people as she describes the many dissidents she encountered. Most people, she explains, knew and privately acknowledged that the Cultural Revolution was a failure. These people are real. Their stories are real. As Wong describes them, the people of China are no longer faceless or thoughtless. The result is a much more personal connection with a country and a people generally regarded as mysterious and inexplicable. Instead, Wong brings out their universal humanness.

Much more explicitly, Wong questions the suggestion that the Chinese people simply are not yet capable of effectively establishing and implementing democracy. She recognizes that many in the West feel China is “too poor, too vast, too backward for anything but an iron dictatorship” (388). She flatly disagrees. A rural peasant, she contends, may not understand the correct terminology, but he knows which leaders he supports and which he doesn’t. Wong also describes incidents of both open and covert rebellion, of private complaints against the regime, and of silent protests that demonstrate that the Chinese people can and do think for themselves. For this reason, Wong contends, democracy can flourish in China. However, Wong offers no response to the other impediments—size, tradition, poverty, etc.—which in Western eyes continue to make China a questionable candidate for democracy.

Wong goes beyond merely disagreeing with Western theories, however. She offers some of her own. China is not just capable of implementing democracy someday in the future—it’s ready now. With such an assertion, she implicitly suggests that democracy is the best path for China’s millions. Moreover, she continues, it will come from the rising middle class. They are “the strongest proponent of democracy in China today” (388). Wong thus proposes two theories: First, that China has a rising middle class and second, that the middle class is open to democracy. While she acknowledges that many Western experts on China would find such beliefs naïve, she briefly states the basis for her argument. The middle class, she says, are up and coming. She has seen firsthand the evidence of their growing existence and power. They were important supporters of the student protestors in Tiananmen Square in 1989. Moreover, she argues, China has already changed a great deal over the last two decades. Those changes render China capable of implementing democracy and enjoying a bright pluralistic future. Wong’s views seem valid, if perhaps optimistic, although it remains unclear how and in what form China should implement democracy.

At the same time, however, Wong fails to fully come to terms with China’s past or future. First, she fails to acknowledge or explain why Chinese Communism failed. Was it China, the system, the people? For someone who so ardently and passionately supported Communism in China, Wong has very little to say about its lack of success. She implicitly recognizes that even when she first arrived and thought she saw success, it was merely well-concealed failure. The why and how of that failure is never broached. In her youth Wong found Western democracies ineffective and undesirable and Communism a shining beacon of equality. Wong’s description of her discovery of Communism’s failure is clear and moving, but she does not come to terms with why.

Just as Wong fails to fully come to terms with China’s ineffective Communist past, she also fails to fully accept or explain its capitalist future. Though she initially rejected the capitalism of the Western democracies, she now implicitly hails those same democracies as the model for China’s future development. If capitalism was an unprincipled failure in the 1970s, how could it suddenly be a success by the 1990s? A mere two decades later Wong supports the system she once traveled thousands of miles to escape. Indeed, the evils of capitalism do not seem to be much mitigated by the unique communism-capitalism mix in China. Instead it has brought a widening gap between rich and poor, disillusionment, obsession with money and material items, and loss of idealistic pursuits—all reasons why she so disliked capitalism in the first place. Wong simply never explains the apparent paradox. The reader is left wondering whether Wong and China changed or instead both were completely misled in their Communist faith. The future,
Wong hopes, looks bright, but the reasons for such optimism are shadowed. A social critic to the end, it seems unlikely that she accepts capitalism as the answer to all of China’s or the world’s problems, but the reader, like Wong during her early experiences in China, remains in the dark.

Undoubtedly, Wong provides valuable insights into China of the present and China of the past. As one of the few Western observers to many of modern China’s most important events, her experiences provide helpful and important insights that question common Western beliefs and theories on China. Wong herself, however, seems unexpectedly ambivalent. She fully accepts neither communism nor capitalism. For a book that implicitly promises to resolve the idealistic mistakes of youth, *Red China Blues* is stuck somewhere between youthful idealism and adult realism. Neither China’s Communist past nor its capitalist future fully fits into Wong’s experiences or impressions, leaving the Western reader to wonder which holds the answer to China’s problems.