

Writing Drama Today

Tang Ying

Since the door of my country opened in 1980, my city Shanghai has been pulled by a high tide of desire to go abroad. It was called “the great escape.” This “great escape” was a huge shock for all society and influenced every class. So many families were broken apart by the tide. Run, run, run! Escape. It was the long ending of the Cultural Revolution. The great escape reflected the strong shadow left by totalitarian times. It was a fresh scar still bloody for many Chinese people, who had no faith in their future. So they began to think that their future was on the other shore. The stories about escaping were so long, dramatic and soul-stirring that they could compare with the stories about the Cultural Revolution. Since there was no choice in totalitarian times, these stories also showed the situation of existentialism, the predicament of choice. The great escape was different. There was no outside force motivating the decision to go abroad, unlike during the Cultural Revolution when the government was the force that compelled many families to be broken apart. But the great escape was more sorrowful. One spirit did not feel at ease in the motherland; our nation was a people always ready to leave, that was our spiritual predicament after the Cultural Revolution.

My first novel, “No Love in Shanghai,” is a story about a divorced couple caught in the tide to go abroad. In China, they were a good couple. Then the wife goes to America to follow her dream and the husband is left in Shanghai. Neither of them wants to change their choice. Eventually, the wife goes back Shanghai to divorce her husband. She realizes that the city is strange, now filled with desire and corruption. The wife felt so lost. Now her husband was the only person who could talk with her. She felt as though her husband was now her bosom friend in the unfamiliar city. But the wife and the husband became immediately strangers to one another as they discussed their future. Zhang Xian adapted this story for the stage. The production had a high box office value and performed for a full house for three months. (This was the first theatre for civilians. At the beginning of 1990, other theatres were only forms of propaganda for the Communist Party, although some avant-garde theaters such as Zhang Xian’s existed underground.)

In 2000, I lived in New York for half a year. I met my ex-classmates and old friends and neighbors whom I had known for over twenty years. As I spent time with them, the past events from under the sea of my memory surged forward. The past had followed my friends as a nightmare. Even if they had lived a rich and peaceful life, even if they had traveled far away, they never escaped from their past. I comprehended suddenly that all we had experienced must influence our present lives and change our fates. The Cultural Revolution didn’t end easily. It would affect us over a long period of time. I seized the impulse to create the novel “The Girls in A-Fei Street.” I had always worried that young readers would be too impatient to read the story about the Cultural Revolution. I wished to take them into the past space through the present space. The present space was New York, an outsider’s New York, a deep, fearful, mysterious, and seductive city. It was also the free world which we had imagined for a long time and given so many rays of light. Recalling past events in this space made for a strong, strange and surrealistic feeling, full of the dramatic tension of the huge difference between these two worlds. In the novel, five women who were classmates in primary school have met in New York after being separated from each other for over twenty years.

They tell a common story about what happened during the Cultural Revolution according to each one's recollection. This recollecting included their regret and introspection. They discovered that the Cultural Revolution was not the responsibility of a few bad people. In fact, nearly everyone was involved in the movement. Everyone's conscience had to make his or her own choices at every moment in time. I also portrayed a red guard in the novel who had experienced two escapes. First, he had escaped to Capitalist Hong Kong from a Communist farm in the mainland. Then he escaped to death from Hong Kong. He lived for the sacred ideal and he committed suicide when the ideal was destroyed.

I went to live in New York again for nearly one year from 2003 to 2004. I understand the situation of Chinese people who are overseas much more. Their special experiences are the best stories since the Cultural Revolution, which the people on the mainland desire to understand. The plots are so winding and the details are so plentiful that I want to write a nonfiction book and make a documentary film. The title will be "Another China." I wish to show how the Chinese who were overseas established a Chinese society away from home and to express the nationality of the separated group who struggled very hard for their existence in foreign countries.