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You Can’t Make an Omelette with Only One Egg

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In her book *Egg on Mao*, Denise Chong chronicles the life of Lu Decheng, a seemingly ordinary man who committed the very extraordinary act of vandalizing Mao Zedong’s portrait during the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests. At the heart of the book is an exploration of morality under Communist rule in the Hunanese village of Liuyang, beginning with the lead-up to Lu’s birth in 1963, his formative years, his involvement in the 1989 protests, and his incarceration. Chong draws her narrative both from interviews with Lu, who now lives in Canada, and from interviews she conducted in China in April and May of 2007. Her focus on Lu gives her book a personal perspective which, from a historical point of view, has both benefits and drawbacks.

One of the immediately discernable benefits of this approach is its ability to convey Chinese history at a captivating and visceral level. Instead of showing how policies shaped China on the large scale, reducing people to facts and figures, Chong gives us an emotional understanding of those policies as they affected individuals on a personal level. For example, Chong makes brief mention of how China was recognized by the United Nations for its success with the one-child policy. But she contrasts this with the pressures the underage Lu and his wife, Qiu Ping, were under to have an abortion, and the difficulties Lu had finding treatment for his illegal child. The later death of the child and Qiu Ping’s grief is only one example of how Chong, in adopting this personal perspective, conveys the very real impact the Chinese Communist Party’s policies had on the lives of Chinese people.

Chong’s focus on the personal also leads her to explore how the Party’s pervasive involvement in the day-to-day lives of the Chinese people has perhaps resulted in the development of unique character traits. Lu Decheng’s father, Lu Renqing, is the best example of this. In Lu’s eyes, Renqing has become a man who “believes whatever he is told,” “doesn’t have an original thought in his head,” and is often guilty of “mindless bowing to someone else’s stronger will” (66, 104). Chong later mirrors these traits in the general town folk of Liuyang, noting their inability to critically think about the robbery trial of a local teacher. In this way, Chong subtly asks us to speculate whether this inability to think critically is an inescapable result of authoritarian society.

The character traits of Lu Decheng’s grandmother and his mother are also explored, but they serve another purpose for Chong. In these people, Chong portrays a morality that seems to endure very
much in spite of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). It is also a morality that Lu comes to adopt for himself. Importantly, these people also allow Chong to explore the issue of morality as it pertains to society as a whole. For Lu, Chong writes, his mother’s death “came to delineate a time before, when he knew happiness and believed in goodness, and a time after, when he would see that this virtue had lost currency” (50). This sentence is the most poignant of Chong’s book, and, in many ways, is its central argument: Communist China is a society where morality has no value; “authoritarianism had emptied the Chinese people of their humanity” (185).

This is a very powerful argument, and Chong portrays this in her book aptly. But from a historical perspective it raises questions that Egg on Mao does not address. Chong never asks us to grapple with the moral calculations which the CCP or the student protesters would have had to have made. Why did the CCP institute the policies that it did? Why did the students turn Lu and his friends over to the government after their attack on Mao’s portrait? These questions are given only cursory attention, and we must be satisfied with simplistic answers: communists know “only the language of brutality,” and the students’ “ability to stand on principle” had been “undermined” (219, 214). From a western perspective, which often takes as a given the moral superiority of the democratic system, and views authoritarian government as intrinsically evil, this may not seem to be a problem. But from a historical perspective this treatment does not do justice to the complexity of the situation.

But this is very much a product of the personal approach which Chong took. Involving us so deeply in the mind of Lu Decheng, Chong provides an emotional and intimate perspective of life in Communist Chinese society. In the process however, we become dependent on Lu to inform us of the realities of that society. This means that the treatments we get of groups like the CCP and the student protesters are heavily biased and often lack nuance. Although this does not undermine Chong’s portrayal of the Chinese people as having “lost their moral compass,” it does not properly address the question of why (184).

Egg on Mao is a powerful and captivating tale of an ordinary man’s act of protest. Its portrayal of Chinese society as one where morality has “lost its currency” is convincing, primarily because Chong shows us this society at such a personal level. However, this dependence on the personal perspective also hinders her ability to capture the complexity of the situation, limiting the historical scope of the book. For this reason, Egg on Mao would serve best as a supplementary source that can shine a personal light on what is often impersonal history.

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