

Inscribing the Unspeakable

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"Blood cannot be washed away--whether it is blood at Feishui Bridge or blood on Tiananmen Square.... And bloodstains in the minds of the people are especially indelible." --Zheng Yi

Scarlet Memorial: Tales of Cannibalism in Modern China is an extraordinary book. An abbreviated translation of Zheng Yi's *Hongse jinianbei* by a group of writers using the joint pseudonym of T.P. Sym, the book is in a sense very much the epitome of its author, who is both novelist and journalist, for it combines examples of investigative journalism at its best with the intense subjectivity of an autobiography. In its less than two hundred pages (condensed from the Chinese original of nearly seven hundred pages), *Scarlet Memorial* gives a graphic and highly personalized account of incidents of cannibalism in five counties of Guangxi Province at the height of the Cultural Revolution in 1968, researched between 1986 and 1988 by Zheng Yi and his wife, the poet Bei Ming, and written while in hiding after the suppression of the 1989 pro-democracy movement. While making an effort to relate the specific occurrences of cannibalism to local history and cultural context, Zheng Yi clearly wishes the reader to conclude, with him, that there was only one cause--a perverted yet wholly understandable response to totalitarian dictatorship--and that, though cannibalism was documented only in Guangxi, "Guangxi is not only Guangxi. Guangxi is China! The cannibals were not merely individual cannibals, they were and they are our entire nation!" Although *Scarlet Memorial* in its shortened form does not draw an explicit connection between its writing and the aftermath of the massacre of June 4, 1989, the contemporary reference is inescapable: in crying out against the unleashing of mass slaughter and cannibalism as a political weapon in the 1960s, Zheng Yi is also decrying the incumbent regime's failure, yet again, to take anything but a despotic and adversarial stance vis-a-vis its own people. At the end of a chapter called "Wherein Lies the Blame?" he argues that "the entire totalitarian Han culture is one of cannibalism." Cannibalism is thus transformed from a series of documented horrors into a horrific metaphor for Chinese Communism itself, and Zheng Yi, in effecting this act of transformation, simultaneously shows his own metamorphosis from an ardent leftist who at one time "would have confronted death blurting out the strongest slogans of our generation" into one who is "deeply ashamed of my nation and of the communism in which I used to fervently believe." To the extent that this book purports not only to

present an interpretation of an historical event *qua* history but also to enlarge upon its significance as a literary, cultural and mythic symbol, *Scarlet Memorial* is an ambitious work; to the extent that the author is successful, it is a powerful one.

The first two chapters of *Scarlet Memorial* detail the actual results of Zheng Yi's investigations in Guangxi, pieced together from official documents and interviews both with the families of those who had been cannibalized and with the cannibals themselves. Reproducing in full (with minor editorial modifications) the material on the same in the Chinese text, these chapters constitute two-thirds of the English version and are in many ways the strongest part of the book. Zheng Yi makes no pretense of objectivity: his stated intention from the first is "to collect historical materials on various ruthless incidents during the Cultural Revolution and to analyze the poisonous effects of ultra leftism [extreme radicalism] from a psychological perspective." Cannibalism, as the supreme manifestation of human descent into barbarity, naturally becomes the focus of this research into the psychopathology of mass movements.

Combining the creative imagination of a novelist with his journalistic skills, Zheng Yi records in the first chapter his journey through Nanning and Wuzhou prefectures, slowly building a picture of a countryside caught up in the spasmodic frenzy of government-incited mass slaughter, in which people were beaten to death and, in some places, eaten. The evidence thus amassed yields a pattern. Typically, killing began at the instigation of a revolutionary committee, as in Binyang County, where the "abnormal death" toll was the highest in Guangxi (nearly 4,000) as the result of the propagation of "the July 3 Bulletin," or at Feishui Bridge in Shanglin County, where 167 people were slaughtered on August 16 when the Big Faction bombed its own county revolutionary committee headquarters--and then began "retaliation" for the same incident against the Small Faction. In Mengshan County, where 500 people were killed in a five-day period in mid-June, the revolutionary committee would hold meetings ostensibly to stop the killing, but in fact the rhetoric of these meetings was intended to incite brigades not yet involved to join in. But, though labeled "indiscriminate," the killing was never random, the victims singled out for beating being selected ahead of time, so that the situation was in fact always under control; further, instead of resisting, the victims usually "faced death like lambs." In Shanglin County, some of the victims also had their livers cut out and eaten, and the records of several other counties also show a few cases of cannibalism. From the county archives, Zheng Yi reconstructs a chilling picture of a

typical scene, in which, at night and by lamplight, the body of the victim was cut open and "the liver always popped out with a little squeeze or kick."

Two intimately drawn portraits of self-confessed cannibals, complete with photos, puts an oddly human face on these events. One is Xie Jinwen, a Civil War veteran, who looks to Zheng Yi "just as I would envision a killer to look" and who enjoys bragging about all the class enemies he has eaten. Zheng Yi learns from him that the cannibalism of the Cultural Revolution can be seen as "a continuation of history": if it was all right for the Red Army to eat the livers of KMT soldiers, the same holds for the revolutionary committees and the masses under their command. "Anything was acceptable as long as it was in the name of class struggle and proletarian dictatorship," explains Zheng Yi.

At the other end of the spectrum is the equally unrepentant Yi Wansheng, a poor, elderly peasant who is no better off for having engaged all his life in class struggle, even to the point of turning flesh-eater. Asked about the latter, he comments simply, "Didn't Chairman Mao [Zedong] say 'kill or be killed'?" For him Zheng Yi develops a certain loathsome sympathy, realizing that though people like him ought to be punished, they are in a way themselves victims. Initially seen as something "too evil" to investigate, cannibalism becomes something that any ordinary person can descend into, if driven hard enough. Zheng Yi's journey into the south is thus also a spiritual journey: an observer outraged by crimes that he must expose so that "later generations...will one day put this bloody deed on trial," he gradually becomes involved to the extent that this exposure of cannibalism will be "a portrait of both myself and of my nation."

Zheng Yi's investigations enter a new phase as he passes on to Wuxuan County, the site of the most widespread instances of cannibalism. This is the subject of the second chapter of *Scarlet Memorial*, in which he treats "leftover cases"--that is, unresolved cases. (The first chapter deals mainly with cases in which, though justice may not have been done, the guilt of the instigators of the murders is established.) For this reason, he meets with evasion and obstruction on the part of local officials, which are later discovered to have been ordered from above. Denied access to the written records, he goes out in search of living evidence. What follows is certainly the most moving part of a book distinguished throughout by its power to perturb, as Zheng Yi details the "feasts of human flesh" in which twenty or thirty people at a time killed, cooked and ate their fellow

human beings--students consuming their teachers, children beating other children to death. Even at these orgies, however, the basic pattern holds: the victims were all chosen beforehand and the killing instigated by directives from above. The difference is only in magnitude and intensity: of those killed in Wuxuan, as many as a hundred were cannibalized.

In the cases Zheng Yi chooses to document in these chapters, nearly all the victims suffered cruel and sadistic treatment, the more deplorable for being wholly unmerited. The section subtitled "Children of the Holocaust" reconstructs the case against a headmaster named Huang Jiaping, a veteran in the wars against the Japanese and the KMT and an ardent supporter of the CCP all his life, who was killed and eaten as a "traitor." In fact, as Zheng Yi laboriously establishes through interviews conducted between 1986 and 1988 with the man's children, the only crime of which Huang had been guilty was that of surrendering during a KMT attack, which he had done in order to spare the lives of those fighting under his command. A loyal servant of the state targeted as the state's enemy, Huang's case is representative of the tragic injustice of the Cultural Revolution. To counterbalance the horrors of these episodes, Zheng Yi next tells the story of Wang Zujian, the "unsung hero" whose petition to the central government led to the instant suppression of cannibalism in Wuxuan. Yet even here is embedded a terrible irony: the swiftness of the government's response suggests that, had others also taken action, much of the cannibalism could have been forestalled.

In summing up his findings in Wuxuan, Zheng Yi compares the reign of terror there to Hitler's death camps and the purges under Stalin, thereby at once accentuating the enormity of the Wuxuan incidents and laying the blame squarely on the shoulders of the Chinese Communist leadership. The analogy, though extreme, is frighteningly apt: from the controlled nature of the slaughter to the absence of resistance among those chosen for death, Zheng Yi's descriptions are especially reminiscent of Nazi genocide. The analogy breaks down, he implies with his trademark sarcasm, in the fact that while the Nazis were brought to justice at Nuremberg and Stalin's excesses were exposed by Khrushchev, "a thorough settling of accounts under Communist Party rule...is impossible." Zheng Yi's subtext is clear: so long as those ultimately responsible for the killings are not punished, they will be free to kill again--as they have done in Tiananmen Square.

The remaining third of *Scarlet Memorial* telescopes only selected portions of the original, and the truncated nature of this part of the

book detracts a little from its overall effectiveness. (Chapter 3, "Wherein Lies the Blame?" condenses a chapter with the same title in the original Chinese; chapter 4, "Scarlet Memorials All over China," presents nine of the twenty-five cases in the Chinese version; "Epilogue: A World in Equilibrium" is a radical foreshortening of the last of the twelve chapters in the full text.) In the third chapter, Zheng Yi attempts to assign culpability (*zui* can mean either "guilt" or "sin") for the cannibalism exposed in his investigations. This is his own personal "settling of accounts": with no other court to which he can present the evidence he has found, Zheng Yi tries his case in front of the reader, in hopes that we will sympathize with his verdict. It is the most ambitious part of his project--and for this reason it is also in some ways the weakest, being occasionally marred by a tendentious reading of the evidence.

Zheng Yi draws a direct connection between cannibalism and violent politics--that is, cannibalism is an expression of the violence of politics in an exaggerated form. Expounding his theory of "two Cultural Revolutions," he locates the source of the excesses of the Cultural Revolution in the suppression and then release of popular energies into mass movements. These were initially exploited by Chairman Mao to destroy his political enemies (the first Cultural Revolution, emanating from above); but, in reacting against the tyranny of proletarian dictatorship during the first period of Chinese Communism--the so-called "glorious seventeen years" between 1949 and 1966--the mobilized masses were unaware that the cause of their suffering lay in the totalitarian system itself and so could only direct their anger at middle- and lower-level cadres of the CCP. This is what Zheng Yi calls the second, "democratic" Cultural Revolution. He then attempts to connect the cruelty of the Cultural Revolution with the mass slaughter and cannibalism in Guangxi.

Though killing was widespread throughout the country (as documented in chapter 4), only in Guangxi was it accompanied by acts of cannibalism. Zheng Yi asks if this phenomenon had anything to do with the presence of a large Zhuang ethnic minority (a third of the province's population), who are known to have practiced cannibalism in historical times. After describing numerous Zhuang customs, including a festival that commemorates their transition from "primitivism" (meaning flesh-eating practices) to "civilization" (meaning abstention from flesh-eating), Zheng Yi concludes that Zhuang cannibalism is a thing of the past. Instead, he goes on to trace the thread of cannibalism in the history of the Han Chinese themselves, citing occurrences in dynastic histories and anecdotal

writings throughout the ages, as well as episodes featuring cannibalism in traditional fiction and drama. (Careful readers should note some discrepancies here, however. The *History of the Later Han* was compiled by Fan Yeh in the Liu-Sung [420-477], not the Sung Dynasty [960-1279]; the *Records of the Later Tang* should be the *Old History of the Tang*, as opposed to the revisionist *New History of the Tang*; and instead of "witchcraft" for *wu shu*, perhaps we could substitute the more common anthropological term "shamanism.") Further, he adds, in a society that has always placed relatively little value on lenience and forgiveness, cruelty in punishing criminals or vengeance upon enemies may even be seen as a form of morality. Here Zheng Yi betrays his bias as a Western-influenced thinker: to his mind, disregard for the rights of the individual and the absence of a rule of law are what make possible excessive forms of cruelty, of which cannibalism represents the last extreme. Thus, by exposing the historical process that resulted in cannibalism in Guangxi, he is actually indicting the entire history of Chinese culture with its drive toward totalitarian extremism.

There are those who would disagree with Zheng Yi's theory of "two Cultural Revolutions" (Ross Terrill, for one, in his foreword to the English translation), just as they might not concur with his theories about the origins of the cannibalism that took place in Guangxi at that time. Zheng Yi refuses to see Zhuang atavism as a possible cause, because such a reading, he says, would betray "Han chauvinism." Yet to say that the Zhuang as an ethnic group could not be responsible because they are no longer "primitive" but "civilized" is in itself Sinocentric, because by "civilized," Zheng Yi clearly means assimilated to the non-flesh-eating culture of the Han majority. Further, he is unable to cite any evidence to offset the rather suggestive coincidence that the only recorded cases of cannibalism in this period are to be found in a region with a large number of Zhuang inhabitants. Unless one can document how many of the people who participated in cannibalistic activities were Zhuang and how many were Han, speculations as to the relation--or non-relation--of ethnicity to cannibalism remain academic.

Similarly, Zheng Yi discusses the importance of the vendetta (in which the enemy's liver and heart were often eaten) as part of his anthropology of cannibalism among the Han Chinese. But if it is necessary to find historical and cultural reasons for seeing cannibalism as a Han practice, then perhaps he could also have treated the equally important theme of eating human flesh and organs for their tonic or curative value, which dates back as far as *The Classic of Filial Piety*.

The vivid examples he documents from Cultural Revolution sources--the mother who wanted a piece of liver to reinvigorate her ailing son, the elementary-school teacher who cut out the heart of one of his young female students and ate it in the belief that a "beauty's heart" could cure disease, the old woman collecting eyeballs in a vegetable basket to help restore her failing eyesight, and the unforgettable image of elderly men sucking out a victim's brain through small metal tubes as if they were "sharing a jar of yogurt with straws"--all suggest that, at least in some cases, cannibalism was practiced in part for its perceived medicinal benefits. Here again, speculations as to the actual relation of cannibalism to dietary regimens would in the absence of further information be purely academic. But Zheng Yi suggests that the people who engaged in flesh-eating often felt discomfort, and possibly guilt: for example, human flesh would be cooked together with pieces of pork, so that one could not be sure what one was eating. Seen in this context, consuming various body parts in observance of a time-honored tradition of promoting health and longevity could also be a device to rationalize an otherwise unacceptable behavior. The fact remains that cannibalism in a modern society is bizarre and inexplicable. It invites any number of conflicting interpretations, each of which would be no more right or wrong than any of the others. As an historian of the events in Guangxi, Zheng Yi would have done well to take more of the possibilities into account.

But Zheng Yi's argument is rhetorical rather than logical: he seeks to elevate cannibalism from historical phenomenon to archetypal symbol. In this he is following a hallowed precedent. The schizophrenic I-character in Lu Xun's "Diary of a Madman" sees on every page he reads the words "the moral teaching that eats men": in other words, cultural traditions--the means for socializing the individual-- become for Lu Xun a process of cannibalization in which the individual is deformed, consumed and destroyed. Zheng Yi cleverly co-opts this central metaphor as he weaves allusions to Lu Xun into several passages of his own narrative of actual cannibalism, so that the power and authority of Lu Xun's testimony are assimilated to Zheng Yi's assessment of Chinese culture--the culture of the China he knows--as a whole. In the end, cannibalism and totalitarianism are completely identified. Immediately before his farewell to the reader in the book's epilogue, Zheng Yi renders this last bitter judgment: "Communism itself is the self-destruction of human society."

Scarlet Memorial is a profoundly pessimistic book, the more so because its ending does not include Zheng Yi's original vision, expounded briefly near the close of the original Chinese version, of a

future China in which "individualism and collectivism will find perfect equilibrium." Instead, the epilogue to the English translation stresses the image of the disequilibrium on which Chinese Communist rule is premised and by means of which it continues to thrive.

Notwithstanding, Zheng Yi's book is a great achievement. A writer known for his passionate commitment to humanity and the truth, Zheng Yi at no point allows moral indignation to spill over into self-righteousness. Rather, he involves himself in the condemnation of the political culture that he holds responsible for the barbarity of the Cultural Revolution, so that, in effect, he takes responsibility on behalf of a government that has repeatedly refused to answer to its own people.

In presenting his *de profundis* on contemporary Mainland China, Zheng Yi (like many of the radical dissidents of his generation) looks for inspiration to Western democracy and its foundation in the rule of law; yet the impulse that led him to search out and document these horrors is a deeply Chinese one. It is an impulse rooted in the Confucian belief in the transformative power of writing: that, failing other channels of redress, one can, by writing alone, punish the wicked, vindicate the innocent, and make the sundered whole again.