

Nicholas Jose, *Avenue of Eternal Peace* (Wakefield Press, 2008)

In 1989 Nicholas Jose's novel, *Avenue of Eternal Peace*, was published with a robustly worded, condemnatory afterword ('The Peking Massacre') when this fictional tale of a society on the brink of up-rising became fact in the brutal suppressions of Tienanmen Square. In this edition, Jose re-contextualises events via a new postscript. The narrator, now retired Emeritus Professor Wally Frith, delivers an address to Peking Union Medical College in Beijing, 2008, celebrating an award to ex-colleagues for medical advancement. As China's prospects, as a more open society anticipating the Olympic Games and international co-operation are heralded (the society's mood is gauged as 'stark optimism', typified by a taxi-driver's claim that 'things just keep on getting better and better') the fates of other characters are revealed in parenthesis (278). Reading the novel again, post Olympics and the first Chinese astronaut's walk in space, Jose's review is apt, and the novel's focus on East/West relations and incipient misunderstandings arising from schisms in perceptions of each other's cultures remains prophetic.

Wally Frith, an Australian visiting oncologist at Peking Union Medical College, arrives in China grieving for his wife (who died of cancer) unsure of Chinese colleagues' expectations of him. Laden with western knowledge and attendant cultural baggage he anticipates an exchange of ideas with specialists in his field, but his foreign-affairs guide disconcertingly makes it plain that what is wanted is advice and an opportunity 'to study you' (2). He is not a raw tourist or crass Australian-abroad-in-Asia, but in an alien environment, confronting language difficulties and an 'inscrutable' guide, the foundations of his knowledge are undermined. He feels trapped in Chinese society 'in a situation of infinite deferral' until he recognises that the withholding of information also represents power (18).

Wally has more than a professional interest in China, as he is retracing the path of a loved grandfather (echoing Jose's own experience) who lived and worked in Peking. He is initially unaware that Jin Juan (whom the new postscript reveals will become his wife) is Professor Hsu's grand-daughter and her grandmother features in his grandparents' lives. Though divided by age, race, gender and custom, they find some harmony. Their attempt to find a common language is paralleled by the professor's definition of the relationship between Eastern and Western medical science: dissimilar branches of knowledge, highly cultivated and valued by both western and Chinese societies but radically dissimilar:

The tragedy, he said, was that, after Liberation, Chinese medicine and Western medicine were severed from each other. What passed for Chinese medicine, though allegedly the great pride of the people, became an ignorant travesty; and what passed for Western medicine was often crude and behind the times, an application of technique without understanding. ... His complaints were not against medicine in China. In many areas skill and progress were great; it was the larger failure, of the creative vision required

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to understand the wisdom that already was there in the culture and the people that grieved Hsu. (211)

Wally's earnest engagement with medical ethics and cross-cultural proprieties is offset by chapter headings that subvert seriousness. ('Crackers' illuminate Chinese New Year but the experience of alienation defined in the initial chapter implies a more colloquial understanding. Following chapters promise revelation but when further chaos ensues reassuring titles like, 'Thorough Democracy', become satiric.) Jose arranges, and his narrator deconstructs, composite truths. Desperate for company and armed to the teeth with 'thermal underwear and a map', Wally experiences the warmth of Chinese hospitality as an uninvited guest at a wedding banquet and meets Ying/Eagle, a significant friend. But his outsider status is evident as he drunkenly speculates about China's place in the world, finds solace among expatriates in the 'New age' bar in Beijing or is openly abused. After 'profligate speechifying' at a welcoming banquet fails to generate any warmth Wally decides that 'to talk in riddles was easier than to talk straight' (12) as he dutifully repeats after his minder/instructress: 'there is no Professor Hsu' – despite the evidence of his eloquent and learned articles. His quest for Professor Hsu paradoxically ends in a denial of 'truth' as Hsu is retired and unmoved by Wally's revelations of Kang's plagiarism. Hsu has no interest in Wally's western demand for retribution as his Daoist wisdom sees power as less of an achievement than self-knowledge. Having suffered for it he now claims he is liberated by his 'lack of imagination'; (214) that 'If the work is true, others will discover it for themselves' (213).

Conversely, others remain driven by their imaginations, their obsession with possibilities, and their stories depict the fabric of life in China over an extended time: Wally retrieves Bet's story, reads Peg's narrative and listens to the hopes, aspirations, desires and fears of Clarence, Autumn, Dulcia and Jumbo and the dangers of chosen paths are indicated in the stories of David, Eagle and Philosopher Horse. A boy named because he is born in the season of Autumn offers love to a dying western photographer and an opportunist young man uses an ageing western woman to escape a regime stifling his creativity. Temporary ties unwind like Wally's jammed camera when their significant moment has passed and characters, like Peking opera players, are masked and unmasked by their actions. The hierarchy of *personae* includes caricatures like party-greenhorn, Bi-the-bartender, Mr foreign-trader, and Build-the-country. In the chapter entitled 'Extraterritorial' the expatriates are depicted as insular but Clarence voices a shrewd assessment of cultural relations: 'Liberate the Chinese? Change China? That's the oldest con in the book. Merchants, diplomats, missionaries, generals. They've all tried, all been gobbled up. Now from their citadels of enlightenment come the kids of the 1980s' (22). Wally's sense of being 'extraterritorial' occurs when leaving them he passes a man keeping guard over a pile of cabbages:

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China this, China that. Ralph the Rino was right. Settle his heart. Put his mind to rest. He could no more understand China than he could understand himself. Journalists, diplomats, photographers, China was too big for their lenses. (110)

The title of *Avenue of Eternal Peace* indicates that even the naming of a street can be read variously (by society, history or individual reading): compare the idealistic semiotics of the original Chinese nomenclature and this narrator's re-reading of perceived actuality in what he calls 'the megalomania thoroughfare of Changan, the Avenue of Eternal Peace' (7). Jose notes that:

The Chinese may challenge the notion of individual autonomy, finding selfhood constituted by the groups to which they belong: family, locality, workplace, class, race. The kind of stories they live out may have a different teleology.¹

Jose has argued that 'fiction is a kind of licensed lie' that also reveals the expectations and practices of viewer.² This fine prose stylist astutely evokes diverse nuances of language to demonstrate the complexities of seeing ourselves and others. Wally asks:

Why do we always end up talking of them as 'the Chinese', 'they', 'them' as if they're a different species? As individuals they're as different as chalk and cheese. But it's the larger organism, that fascinates us, the group thing, the nation, the race. ... They slide past us, round us, through us ... but afterwards you feel there's been no contact at all. Wally was thinking of Jin Juan. (109)

Jose's novel engages with linguistic and cultural phenomena as an imperative. Through his oncologist's eyes the 'larger organism' of Chinese society is capable of exerting influence by joining together 'like cells metastasising, a concentration of force' (265). There is no underestimation of the collective people's will post Tiananmen and the postscript calls for a new generation to imagine a better future. The novel negotiates sites of difference to share finds (like principles or things of beauty) with tact and discrimination. In an era where the people of the world are struggling to overcome the bonds of economic rationalism and political suspicion, this is significant fiction.

Lyn Jacobs

¹ Nicholas Jose, 'Non Chinese Characters: Translating China', *Southerly* (52: 2 June 1992) 8.

² Jose 3.

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