Sam Meekings. Under Fishbone Clouds (Polygon, 2009)

To be born in the 1920s might count as a misfortune in many parts of the world, and certainly China is one of those places. Interesting times, indeed. Sam Meekings is fortunate enough not to have lived through the Japanese occupation, the revolution and the crazy extremes of Mao’s regime, having been born in Margate, England, much later in the century. However, he has bridged the trans-national and trans-temporal gap with his first novel, Under Fishbone Clouds, a big family saga and love story set in China in the second half of the century, and based on the story of his wife’s grandparents.

The protagonists are Bian Yuying, the ambitious and intellectual daughter of a Fushun restaurateur, and Hou Jinyi, an illiterate orphan who has drifted into his employ. In 1946, Yuying’s father arranges a marriage between them in a seemingly offhand way, perhaps just for the sake of getting her married before she turns seventeen and becomes an ‘old woman’ no-one would want: no other suitor has been willing to let her continue her studies. Contrary to convention, Jinyi makes no bride-gift and moves into his new wife’s family home. Strangely enough, this marriage works despite the differences in the couple’s background and aspirations, though their lives, like those of everybody else they know, are fragmented and disrupted by famine and hardship, augmented by the horrors and humiliations of the cultural revolution. And then, when things are improving all around them, they must confront their sad but not uncommon final years.

To give it historical and cultural perspective, Meekings has framed his novel as the first-person narrative of a minor deity, the Kitchen God who, though far from omnipotent, has the capacity ‘to dip into people’s thoughts as easily as you might trail your fingers through the lazy flow of a river’ (17). This god has made a bet with the Jade Emperor, the chief god in the Chinese pantheon, that he can ‘fathom the working of even a single human heart’ (74). This busy, intrusive and often didactic narrator gives Meekings an excuse to recount folk tales and explain historical events, reflecting on parallels across the centuries:

When you have lived as long as I have – which is to say, longer than anyone should be asked to remember – it becomes easier and easier to spot similarities in the smallest actions. The push towards dining halls and communal eating, for example, reminds me of something that happened under the first emperor, Qin Shi Huang. Now, you cannot unify a huge country by being diplomatic: Qin Shi Huang was ruthless, bloodthirsty and merciless, but he got the job done. (223)

And off he goes, comparing the actions of Mao with his distant predecessor. This technique gives the narrator plenty of opportunities to philosophise about history and narrative:

If it does not seem possible to see between the myths, the heroes, the propaganda, the hindsight and the tall tales, then do not panic: this is the way the house of history is built, and you are already locked inside. The door has no key, and what you thought windows are simply finely drawn pictures, blurred from the touch of too many fingers. (128)

And further, ‘Some people say that each rainbow is unique and irrefutable; this is true if we accept, as countless magicians have learnt, that each trick relies on the eyes making a fool of the brain’ (370). The narrative frame also allows scope for retelling countless folk tales and linking them into the story. The novel begins with the story of the dancing cranes, a parable of the dangers of abusing power, then segues smoothly into the thoughts of Yuying, musing about the story – ‘how so much can turn upon a single act of kindness, how so much might depend on the whims of history. How nothing is ever as you expect it’ (14) – and about her husband nearing his distressing end in hospital.

Interspersed with the main narrative there is a minor thread dealing with the Kitchen God’s investigations into human love and his negotiations with his boss, the Jade Emperor. He rides on the back of mythical creatures and crosses bridges of bones to visit famous poets for advice which turns out usually to be somewhat gnomic. These sections are short, rarely more than a couple of pages, which is well-judged: their fanciful nature could make them tiresome if they were extended any further. The main narrative is much more earthy, in one sense at least. Bodily secretions (especially spittle and phlegm) are frequently described in careful detail, and domestic dirt is often featured, although sex is treated more demurely. Apparently ‘it would be rude to intrude upon a couple’s wedding night, [so] we must content ourselves to wait outside the closed door’ (36).

I have a few quibbles with Meekings’ language. On the whole his style is lively and engaging, and he orchestrates his many-stranded narrative quite skilfully. However, ‘whole flocks [of cranes] jutting out with the same strange purpose’ (165, my italics) seems just wrong: surely he means ‘setting out’; and ‘the cooling tower haze that had reduced the sky to a cataract’ (363, my italics) is odd – does he mean a waterfall or an eye complaint? Neither quite makes sense. And the dialogue often feels stilted.

Nevertheless, Under Fishbone Clouds is a large achievement: a clever and ironic, but at the same time deeply affecting novel about the way ordinary people bear the brunt of political and ideological movements far beyond their control; about what can, and what cannot, survive the ravages of history.

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