

JAN MICHALSKI PRIZE FOR LITERATURE

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Chan Koonchung

The Fat Years

It gives me great pleasure to bring this novel, *The Fat Years*, by Chan Koonchung, to your attention. As fellow jurors may recall from discussions last year, I am interested in questions of history and memory, particularly in China. These are themes that are increasingly emerging in Chinese fiction, as novelists contest the suppression of large parts of particularly 20th century history by the Communist Party, as it pursues its own construction of the national story.

The author, Chan Koonchung is an interesting figure: Born in Shanghai, he divides his time between Hong Kong and Beijing and has variously made a living as a screenwriter, environmental activist and political campaigner. *The Fat Years*, which I believe was his first novel, was first published in Hong Kong in 2009. It was subsequently banned in China, though it circulates fairly widely and has enjoyed considerable success, despite official disapproval.

When published, the novel was set in the near future – the year 2013 in fact, but its theme of collective national amnesia remains highly relevant to the question that hangs over China's future : can a booming, semi-market economy, with growing individual freedoms, coexist with all encompassing political authoritarianism.

The novel conceit of the novel is that in the year 2011, as Western capitalism went into profound crisis following the financial crash of 2008, China entered its "*age of ascendancy*." Everyone is happy, except for the novel's protagonist, Old Chen, a Taiwanese exile, who feels uneasy, and a few others whom he encounters who notice what their fellow countryman have failed to notice – that in February 2011, an entire month disappears from the calendar, along with all the events that might have taken place within that month.

Nobody can remember what happened and most remain incurious. In March that year, China emerged, triumphant, as the world's dominant power. The small circle of people who can remember the month, suspect that something terrible happened, but the regime has managed to bring about a state of national forgetfulness.

Old Chen, sets out to find what happened and to understand why everybody is so extraordinarily happy. He himself begins the novel contentedly living in Happiness Village Number Two. Eventually the group kidnaps a senior official to force him to tell them the secret.

China's continuing refusal to confront the terrible events of the last half of the 20th century is the sub text of the novel. Others have written about this painful and disabling question at the heart of China's search for a modern form.

It has been touched on by several contemporary Chinese writers, most notably the novelist Lian Yanke, author of *Lenin's Kisses* and *Dream of Ding Village*, amongst other works. In *Lenin's Kisses*, every second chapter is missing, a reference to what cannot be said in today's China. Lian also wrote a novel about the government induced famine of the late 'fifties and early 'sixties, a catastrophe still referred to in the official record as the three years of "natural disaster", which he has not been able to publish in China.

Earlier this year, Lian published an article that was reprinted in the New York Times under the title *On China's State Sponsored Amnesia*, in which he discusses the effects of China's censored history, from the violence of land reform to the Tiananmen massacre of 1989. Younger generations in China know almost nothing about this history, he explained. I have quoted extensively from this essay below because I think it explains very clearly the importance of the question of historical memory and what is happening in today's China. The full essay, in English, can be accessed on the New York Times' website. A longer version, in German, was published by Lettre International, the German literary magazine.

"The amnesia I'm talking about is the act of deleting memories rather than merely a natural process of forgetting. Forgetting can result from the passage of time. The act of deleting memories, however, is about actively winnowing out people's memories of the present and the past," wrote Lian Yanke.

In China, memory deletion is turning the younger generation into selective-memory automatons. Memories of history and the present, yesterday and today are all going through this uniform process of deletion and are being lost without trace.

... In today's China, amnesia trumps memory. Lies are surpassing the truth. Fabrications have become the logical link to fill historical gaps. Even memories of events that have only just taken place are being discarded at a dazzling pace, with barely intelligible fragments all that remain for people to hold on to.

People's memories and administered memories, people's forgetfulness and administered forgetfulness are all determined by the state, transformed by a revolutionary tactic that has been systematically implemented.

...

Anything negative about the country or the regime will be rapidly erased from the collective memory. This memory deletion is being carried out by censoring newspapers, magazines, television news, the Internet and anything that preserves memories.

It doesn't matter whether you are a writer, a historian or social scientist. You will be awarded power, fame and money as long as you are willing to see what is allowed to be seen, and look away from what is not allowed to be looked at; as long as you are willing to sing the praises of what needs to be praised and ignore what needs to be blanked out. In other words, our amnesia is a state-sponsored sport.

Consequently, truth is buried, conscience is castrated and our language is raped by money and power. Lies, meaningless words and pretentious-sounding blather become the official language used by the government, taught by our teachers and adopted by the world of art and literature.

Gradually we become accustomed to amnesia and we question people who ask questions. Gradually we lose our memories of what happened to our nation in the past, then we lose the sense of what's happening in our nation at present, and, finally, we run the risk of losing memories about ourselves, about our childhood, our love, our happiness and pain.

Yet, just as in any kindergarten, there are always a few naughty children who don't like to be told what to do. There are always some people who refuse to be administered amnesia. They are always trying to speak in their own words, always spreading their creative wings to fly beyond the boundaries of official memory. Following their conscience, they are willing to fly anywhere, into the past, the present or the future, in order to produce works that can pass our memories onto younger generations.

Chan Koonchung is a writer who not only, in the words of Lian Yanke, "refuses amnesia," but who, in *The Fat Years*, confronts and exposes the amnesia the state promotes. He does it with wit, courage and imagination. I hope that you will find this book as interesting and important as I believe it to be.

Isabel Hilton

Member of the jury



Chan Koonchung

The Fat Years

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