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Ba Jin¹, one of the main figures of twentieth century Chinese literature, died in Shanghai on the 17th of October 2005. He was also a survivor of the Chinese anarchist movement which disappeared with the victory of the Communists. While he was required to ‘repent’, and purged and humiliated during the Cultural Revolution, he never embraced any other ideal.

Ba Jin was born in 1904 in Chengdu, Sichuan province, into a wealthy family. Economically comfortable but personally stifling, he described his patriarchal family home as a despotic kingdom. His first escape came in 1919 when, under the influence of Kropotkin’s *Appeal to the Young* and the writings of Emma Goldman, he joined the local anarchist group, the Equality Society. ‘He became the group’s most active member, taking part in the students’ demonstrations against the local war lords, distributing revolutionary leaflets, and organizing a reading room on the premises of the local anarchist journal, to which he began to contribute articles.’² He was also inspired by the stories of nineteenth-century Russian radicals who went ‘to the people’ as recounted by writers like Turgenev, whose works he would later translate.



His second escape came in 1923 when he was finally able to leave Chengdu to study, moving to Nanking and then Shanghai. There he continued his anarchist activism and writing, producing a pamphlet on the Chicago Haymarket Affair of 1886-7.³ From 1927 to 1928 Ba Jin lived in France, meeting many anarchists including Alexander Berkman, whose *Now and After: an ABC of Communist Anarchism* (AKA *What is Anarchism?*) he later translated and adapted as *From Capitalism to Anarchism*. In France he also wrote to Bartolomeo Vanzetti awaiting execution in Massachusetts. He was deeply affected by the case and later wrote a pamphlet, *On the Scaffold*, about it.

In France Ba Jin completed *Destruction*, the first of his novels based on the struggles of young Chinese revolutionaries. In 1931 he wrote *Family*, recognised as his greatest work, and from this point he was established as a writer. In 1931 came the first Japanese invasion of China which preceded the full-scale war of 1937-45. Ba Jin wrote extensively for the anti-Japanese resistance, though without abandoning anarchism.

After the Communist victory in 1949, Ba Jin was forced to rewrite his works. ‘In the first editions the protagonists acted with anarchist ideas and in a clearly anarchist ambience, and they often quoted the well-known texts of anarchism... In the “revised” edition... Emma Goldman is not only no longer his spiritual mother; she doesn’t exist.’⁴ From this point on, he abandoned fiction, and only wrote a small amount of reportage. In 1958 he renounced Anarchism and in 1961 stated ‘I am not satisfied either by the quantity or quality of my works.’

However, whenever the regime allowed it, Ba Jin was prepared to speak out. ‘In 1962, when the party seemed to tolerate and even promote a more creative and spontaneous style in literature, [Ba Jin] came out with a speech under the title “Courage and Sense of Responsibility of Writers.” It was a strong protest against the literary bureaucrats and an admonition to writers to be fighters, to uphold the truth and their own vision of reality.’⁵

Payback came during the Cultural Revolution (1966-76). Mao unleashed the Red Guards on his ‘bureaucrat’ enemies. They also persecuted writers, including Ba Jin – making a great deal of his anarchist past. ‘To the people’, instead of being an optimistic plan to spark social change as it had been

for the nineteenth-century Russian *narodniks* became a punishment for independent thinking or 'disloyalty.'

'Finally, on June 20, 1968, [Ba Jin] was dragged to the People's Stadium of Shanghai. Those present and those who watched the scene on television saw him kneeling on broken glass and heard the shouts accusing him of being a traitor and enemy of Mao. They also heard him break his silence at the end and shout at the top of his voice, 'You have your thoughts and I have mine. This is the fact and you can't change it even if you kill me.'"⁶

Worse came in 1972 when his wife Xian Shan died of cancer, after being denied adequate medical care. During these years Ba Jin gave himself strength by reading Dante's *Inferno*. In 1977 Ba Jin was rehabilitated and returned to his position as a respected writer of an earlier generation. Soon after his return, he produced a series of essays entitled *Random Thoughts* dealing largely with the Cultural Revolution.

Unlike the rest of his anarchist comrades we're able to sketch out the life of Ba Jin: in many ways he was protected by his fame as a writer. Facing a totalitarian regime, he could have surrendered and endorsed every new slogan demanded by the powers that be, but didn't. Beyond that it is difficult to discuss the exact political attitudes he held, since censorship and self-censorship take us into a foggy world of codes and meaningful silences.

But his words show that the spirit of freedom endured:

'When Ba Jin was a guest speaker at a lecture series in Kyoto in 1980, he declared: "I do not write to earn a living or to build a reputation. I write to battle enemies.

"Who are they? Every outdated traditional notion, every irrational system that stands in the way of social progress and human development, and every instance of cruelty in the face of love. These are my great enemies.

"My pen is alight and my body aflame. Until both burn down to ash, my love and my hate will remain here in the world."⁷

Notes

- 1, a note on names: Born Li Yaotang and later named Li Feigan (Li Pei Kan) by his family, Ba Jin (previously transliterated as Pa Chin or Pa Kin) took this pen name (which he used only for his fiction) from the first syllable of Bakunin and the last of Kropotkin to show his anarchist politics.
- 2, from the introduction by Olga Lang to *Family*, Anchor Books edition: 1972 posted at <http://plawiuk.blogspot.com/>
- 3, *The Chicago Tragedy* (published 1926). See 'Ba Jin's *Blood of Freedom*' by Diane Scherer in *Haymarket Scrapbook*, edited by Dave Roediger and Franklin Rosemont (Charles H. Kerr, 1986).
- 4, Giuseppe Galzerano, 'The Anarchist writer Pa Kin', *Le Monde Libertaire*, N° 470, January 13, 1983. Trans. Paul Sharkey.
- 5, Olga Lang, introduction to *Family*.
- 6, Olga Lang, introduction to *Family*.
- 7, 'Warrior of the Pen – Ba Jin' by Daisaku Ikeda (President, Soka Gakkai International). Posted at <http://plawiuk.blogspot.com/>

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