

# Ma Jian: Reading at The Prague Writers' Festival

## Transcription of his text for the reading

### Beijing Coma

*In the Land of the Nobles there is a plant called the xunhua. Its life is very short. It sprouts in the morning and dies the same evening.*

As dawn approached, the air filled with a smell of scorched tyres and khaki uniforms.

A huge convoy of army trucks drove past, packed with soldiers. A crowd of about thirty men in white underwear passed us on the opposite side of the street and gave us the victory sign. Tang Guoxian said they were armed police who had thrown away their uniforms and refused to follow government orders.

Big Chan and Little Chan attached our university banner to some twigs and held it aloft, which made our group seem a little less bedraggled. But I was so exhausted by now I could hardly walk, let alone find the energy to cry out slogans. One restaurant we passed had already hung up a banner that said RESOLUTELY PROTECT THE GREAT LEADERS OF THE PARTY'S CENTRAL COMMITTEE. When Wu Bin saw it, he snatched his cigarette lighter from Tang Guoxian's pocket, rushed over and set it alight.

About two thousand of us had left the Square, but our crowd seemed to dwindle the further we went, like a stream of water flowing into dry land. Yu Jin was carrying Mimi's backpack. Mimi and Bai Ling were walking hand in hand. Xiao Li was traipsing barefoot behind Chen Di. The flags we'd brought with us from the Square were tattered and torn.

Heading north, we reached the Liubukou intersection. We were back on Changan Avenue again, having looped round from the west. We stood still and stared at the red walls of Zhongnanhai, knowing that behind them, the leaders who'd ordered this massacre were relaxing in their luxurious villas. Thousands of soldiers stood triumphantly outside the walls, rifles at the ready. A long line of tanks and armoured carriers had formed a solid blockade, screening off the view to the Square. Behind them, a green sun hovered at the horizon.

Wang Fei switched on his black megaphone and shouted, 'The people will be victorious! Down with Fascism!'

Tang Guoxian waved our university flag in the air, and everyone shouted Wang Fei's slogans, repeating them faster and faster. But as soon as the girls began shouting, they burst into tears.

Bai Ling borrowed Wang Fei's megaphone and cried, 'Don't look at the soldiers. They're trying to intimidate us. Ignore them.' Her voice was hoarse. She was straining so hard to produce a noise, the

tendons on her neck were bulging.

One of the tanks suddenly left the blockade, roared towards us and shot a canister of tear gas which exploded with a great bang in the middle of our crowd. A cloud of yellow smoke engulfed us. My throat burned and my eyes stung. I felt dizzy and couldn't stand straight. Mimi fainted. As I tried to drag her over to the side of the road, I stumbled and fell.

While we were still trying to crawl our way out of the acrid smoke, I heard another tank roar towards us. It paused for a moment in the middle of the road, then rumbled forward again and circled us. As it swerved round, its large central gun swung over my head and knocked down a few students standing beside me. I got up and ran onto the pavement. An armoured personnel carrier drove forward too, and discharged a round of bullets. Everyone searched for cover. I heard Wang Fei scream. I looked back, but the yellow smoke was still too thick to see anything clearly. I waited. I knew the tank must have driven over some people. As the smoke cleared, a scene appeared before me that singed the retinas of my eyes. On the strip of road which the tank had just rolled over, between a few crushed bicycles, lay a mass of silent, flattened bodies. I could see Bai Ling's yellow and white striped T-shirt and red banner drenched in blood. Her face was completely flat. A mess of black hair obscured her elongated mouth. An eyeball was floating in the pool of blood beside her. Wang Fei's flattened black megaphone lay on her chest, next to a coil of steaming intestine. Her right arm and hand were intact. Slowly two of the fingers clenched, testifying that a few moments before, she'd been alive.

Wang Fei was lying next to her. He propped himself up on his elbow, tugged the strap he was holding and dragged his flattened megaphone away from Bai Ling's chest. The bones of his legs were splayed open like flattened sticks of bamboo. His blood-soaked trousers and lumps of his crushed leg were stuck to parts of Bai Ling. I glanced at the stationary tank and saw pieces of Wang Fei's trousers and leg caught in its metal tracks.

Tang Guoxian and I rushed to Wang Fei, lifted him up and shouted, 'Someone get some help!'

As a few local residents ran over, the tank drove away, taking Wang Fei's flesh with it and leaving two trails of blood on the road.

Tang Guoxian took off his shirt and tore it in two, then pulled down Wang Fei's tattered jeans and tied the strips of shirt tightly around the bleeding thighs. Dong Rong flung off his jacket and draped it over Wang Fei's chest. Wang Fei had lost consciousness by now. We dragged him onto the pavement. His trembling mouth stiffened. A red light flashed from the walkie-talkie he was still gripping. A voice cried out through the speaker, 'Down with Fascism! Long live . . .'

Then I spotted Chen Di. He was clutching the metal railings along the side of the road, his left foot crushed to a pulp. The question marks on his T-shirt seemed to be screaming in anguish. Next to him, Qiu Fa was lying motionless in a pool of blood. When Yu Jin and Old Fu pulled him up, they discovered he'd been hit by one of the bullets discharged by the armoured personnel carrier. Blood was pouring from a wound in his back.

Students hugged each other and wept. Mimi knelt on the road and howled with grief. Old Fu pulled off his red headband and used it to wipe his tears.

Big Chan's body had been pulverised. It was now little more than a bloody tank-track mark. A few white teeth lay on the ground where his head had been. When Little Chan caught sight of the body, he dropped the guitar he was holding and ran over. As he drew near, he slipped in a puddle of crushed flesh, and fell to the ground. Blood splattered onto his face. He picked up Big Chan's left hand, which was still intact, pulled off the cotton glove and stared at the digital watch attached to the wrist.

Tang Guoxian yelled, 'Someone help me lift Wang Fei!' I realised suddenly that we might be able to save Wang Fei. I helped Tang Guoxian lift him onto a wooden handcart, then I grabbed the handles and we ran as fast as we could.

'Where's the nearest hospital?' we shouted as we ran. Someone yelled back, 'Go to Fuxing Hospital. Lots of the injured have been taken there already.'

We kept running. I couldn't make out what the bright or dark objects were that flashed before me. My mind was numb. I felt as though I was wading through knee-deep water.

When we reached the hospital entrance, I walked to the front of the cart to pull Wang Fei onto my back, but there was so much blood on the ground, I slipped and fell.

Tang Guoxian and Wu Bin dragged Wang Fei into the entrance hall and screamed for help.

The doctor who came forward looked as though he'd just crawled out of a river of blood. His gloves and face mask were bright red. 'Lie him flat on the stretcher and wait here!' he shouted. 'There's no more room in the wards.'

The bulldozer charges into the building like an army tank, making our walls shake and our floor-beams tremble and crack. It moves back, its tracks screeching over shattered glass and planks of wood. Beside it, a digger is shovelling broken tiles and metal frames into an open-back truck. The bulldozer rams again and our walls shudder. Unable to take the strain any longer, our balcony suddenly gives way and crashes to the ground, taking our outer wall and the sparrow's nest with it. As the bricks and cement hurtle down, I can hear the Bodhisattva figurine shatter into tiny pieces. Petrol fumes from the machines outside pour into the room together with the stench from broken sewer pipes. A heavy-goods vehicle rumbles past in the distance.

My mother roars like an angry tigress. 'This is my home! You fascists! If you come any nearer, I will jump!'

'Go on, jump then, old lady! Then the bulldozer can scoop you up from the ground and take you away. It will save us a lot of trouble!' This labourer's voice is very familiar. It's the drifter. I'm sure it's him. Mao Da mentioned he was working on construction sites now. I wonder why he still hasn't gone back to Sichuan.

'Get back to your work. The sun is almost up. Don't waste your time pestering that madwoman. You two, go and lean that flight of stairs against her front door, so that she'll be able to climb down if she wants to.'

'What does "fascist" mean?'

'Are you stupid? Fa-shz-si: It means "punish-you-with-death".' The drifter hasn't lost any of his Sichuan accent.

A cold, dusty wind sweeps up the pile of receipts and medical records from the chest of drawers, and blows all the calendars off the walls. I hear the pages rustle as they swirl through the air.

'Be careful, there's a strong wind,' a voice shouts up from the ground floor. 'Don't stand by your door. There's no landing left. If you have something to say, climb down tomorrow and speak to the Hong Kong developer.'

'I won't jump,' my mother shouts to a bulldozer's headlamps. 'I want to live!'

'Punish-you-with-death, old lady! If you don't move out, none of us will get our annual bonuses . . .'

The covered balcony and most of the outer walls and windows of the rest of the flat have fallen down. All the flats to our left and right have been demolished, as have the stairwell and landing behind us. Our flat is now no more than a windy corridor. It's like a bird's nest hanging in a tree. I can feel it shaking in the wind.

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