

## Asian 204

### Unit 06: The King of Trees

#### Basic Information

Ah Cheng 阿城, pen name of Zhong Acheng 鍾阿城 (1949- )

*The King of Trees* (Shuwang 樹王), published 1985

#### Historical Background

The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, 1966-1976

##### 1. Origins

- a. Power struggles within the Party
- b. Mao's vision of unending revolution

##### 2. Stages of the Cultural Revolution

- a. 1966: Formation of Red Guards, attacks on Party and other forms of authority
- b. 1967: Factional warfare between Red Guard factions
- c. 1968: People's Liberation Army (PLA) called in to restore order
- d. 1968 on: Urban youth sent to countryside for re-education
- e. 1968-1976: Conformity, repression, the cult of Mao, power in the hands of "Gang of Four" (Mao's wife Jiang Qing and associates)
- f. 1976: Death of Mao, overthrow of Gang of Four
- g. 1978: Deng Xiaoping emerges as new leader, beginning of New Era (Reform Era)

##### 3. "Educated youth" (also known as "sent-down youth")

- a. Urban youth (secondary school students) sent to countryside from 1968 on
- b. Ostensible purpose: "reeducation" through work alongside peasants

- i. Policy also intended to control former Red Guards
  - c. Heavy physical labor in remote regions of China
    - i. Massive engineering and agricultural projects
    - ii. "The Power of Man Can Overcome Nature"
  - d. Millions of young people relocated
    - i. Many unable to return home to cities until mid or late 1970s

### **Ah Cheng**

1. Born 1949
2. Father: academic, film critic, Party member
3. Privileged upbringing and education in Beijing
4. Sent to countryside in 1968
  - a. Mostly in Yunnan, mountainous jungle region of SW
5. Returns to Beijing 1979, begins writing down stories
6. "Three Kings" trilogy:
  - a. King of Chess 1984
  - b. King of Trees 1985
  - c. King of Children 1985
7. Leading writer of "roots-seeking" school

### **Literature (Fiction) in the Post-Mao Years**

1. Restriction of literary activity during the Cultural Revolution
  - a. Schools, periodicals, literary organizations shut down
  - b. Persecution of intellectuals, including writers
  - c. Many works, Chinese and foreign, branded "counter-revolutionary"
  - d. Dominance of Revolutionary Model Dramas

2. Easing of Restrictions in early 70s
  - a. Literary activity still limited and timid
3. Scar Literature, 1977-1978
  - a. Named for story "The Scar," 1978
  - b. Recounts physical and emotional sufferings of Cultural Revolution
  - c. Blames Gang of Four, proclaims continuing faith in Party and its ideals
  - d. Literarily simple
  - e. Cathartic effect for readers
  - f. Deflects criticism from Party and current regime
4. Roots-Seeking Literature, mid-1980s
  - a. Fiction by members of the "sent-down" generation
  - b. Represents educated youth's experience in the countryside
  - c. Traumatic physical and emotional experiences
  - d. Contact with nature, rural life, and pre-modern traditions
  - e. Disillusionment with Party
5. Scar Literature and Roots-Seeking Literature compared
  - a. Critical view of Cultural Revolution experience
    - i. Scar lit: faith in Party ideals
    - ii. Root-seeking lit: disillusionment, disinterest in politics
      1. Looking for natural, spiritual, and cultural (pre-Communist) "roots"
  - b. Mode of expression
    - i. Maoist era: didacticism, avoidance of ambiguity
    - ii. Scar lit: continues didactic purpose and unambiguous expression
    - iii. Roots lit: embrace of ambiguity

1. Open-ended symbolism
2. Refusal to state explicit moral
3. Imagery of darkness, silence
4. Privileging "seeking," the quest for meaning, over the result