

Like wildfire

Yan Geling is a well-acclaimed and widely read Chinese writer and scenarist, especially in mainland China. Some of her short stories and novels have been made into films and translated into several languages. Yan Geling's stories mostly take place during the recent past in China, some based on her own experiences. She is now living in Germany with her husband and daughter, after having lived in the US, China and Nigeria since 1989. I had the opportunity to speak with Yan Geling in her Berlin home, in between her busy writing schedule and daily family life.

Ronald Bos

The Great Leap Forward

I only tasted the result of the Great Leap Forward, because when I was very little and in kindergarten there was famine in China and, as I remember, we had too much onion and cabbage. My parents did not tell me much and I have no other experiences. This movement was parallel with the political campaign, who was against it became a rightist. My father wrote stories about it, he saw people starving. He almost got beaten up, he was very lucky because many of his friends were condemned as rightists when they saw what was going on in the country. They sympathised with the people that suffered, and criticised the Great Leap Forward and were condemned. My mother was more passive. As an actress she had to perform state plays about this movement. Mid-sixties, before the Cultural Revolution, they were still performing these kind of plays.

Cultural Revolution

In the later part of the revolution, after the young intellectuals moved to the countryside to be re-education by the peasants, all the members of my family were talking about my elder brother and me who had to go; my brother was four years older and he was more likely to go. Back then Chinese opera was performed and all kids liked to be in these performances. If you were lucky to be selected by the army you were excused from going to the countryside. Then I tried very hard to get through all the tests and I was lucky to be selected by the army at twelve years. I was selected as a dancer and I was shipped out to Chengdu; it was 3000 kilometres away from my home and it took four years before my next home visit. All the young people came together and were given rifles as new soldiers and many new regulations. It was fascinating. PLA soldiers were heroes in China back then, so we wanted to follow their model. The life was very hard. We had to get up in the middle of the night for a rapid march and there were many military manoeuvres for the new soldiers during three months. Afterwards we got into the dance training, which was also very hard. The first excitement soon passed and then we had to face the reality. Compared with the normal Chinese civilians our life was good. Two times a year we all got new uniforms and we had meat; back then meat and sugar was rationed severely. Because we danced we got big rations. The army took good care of us. Just a hard life from six o'clock in the morning, when you got up to run, till ten o'clock in the evening to turn off your light.

Hatred

We always think of the Red Guards as villains. The destruction power came from the hormones. Girls too. In China there was always such a repression on sexuality, they had no outlet for the hormones. So they turned it into a force, which destructed people's homes and many nice things. It was a blind sexual force from the youth, they didn't know what to do with it. They destroyed many famous sites of Chinese antiquity, many famous temples. I was very young, eleven, twelve, these years I was mixed up, I didn't know what to think. Where did this hatred come from?

Above:
Yan Geling.

First people need a reason to hate, a purpose, when it goes out of control and it becomes black, you don't need anything. Like poor people hated rich people in China during the first and second national revolution. They have an ideal and they went out of control. As Freud said, these are forms of human regression. They can't help it to be regressed sometimes, violence and hatred for anything that they don't want to reason with. I don't remember all this blank, blind and abstract hatred. It spreads like wildfire that destroys everything. Anything that goes on and on becomes abstract.

Sino Vietnamese War in 1979

It was a border conflict and it happened very sudden. Five army regiments were sent to the front and there were not enough correspondents to cover it. Back then I was nineteen and I thought it was time for me to be a real soldier, a real military and a real hero. A soldier who never goes to war is not real. I went there as the only girl and they didn't want me to go to the front, so they had me stay in the field hospital. I visited all these wounded soldiers and interviewed them. After that my heroism was gone and it never came back again. Life is worth much more than any heroism, nationalism or patriotism. All these soldiers were just as old as I was. I saw them die, I saw the wounded. The air smelled like blood, it was very sickening. Then I started to write, I found so much to write. I jumped overnight from a dancer to a writer. All the reading experiences, all this classic literature quietly, without me knowing, had built a very solid foundation. So then I started to write and my works got published easily. That was very encouraging. I went back to the front, to the field hospital again. I visited more soldiers who were carried off from the front. I travelled between the front and the city where I was living, maybe three times. I wrote many short stories, short reportages and poems. Most of them got published. I wrote fictional stories and they never found there was a undertone against the war. Now I realise from that time I was a peacemaker, I never wanted war again because I saw what casualties it makes. Whenever there is a war, I am against it. What problem you want to solve with war? I think there are other ways to solve problems.

Green blood (1985)

The novel *Green Blood* was my first book. It is a story about a group of performers who were sent to the front. It was basically my own story. It was called Green Blood because the army was circulating the country and we were green. Green blood is cold, meant to kill. Cold blood. The book is about my self discovery in the army. The first four years we danced a ballet, later on we changed to Chinese classic dance, folkdance and minority dances. We had to learn many kind of dances. After that I became a writer. I was in a writing group for the railroad construction soldiers. In China the soldiers do all the hard work for the country, railroad and highway construction and military experiment sites. All this construction work is done by soldiers. We had a group of artists, painters, sculpturists, playwrights. In 1985 I left the army when they had a reduction. That was the end of my army career.

USA

I got an invitation from the United States Information Agency in 1987 to visit the US the next year. So I went to the US in 1988. I think they invited me because I had published three novels and some movie scripts. One movie was made and I became known as a young writer. My most important interview was in China Daily, they gave me a big profile and not long after that I received the invitation from the *International Visitor Leadership Program* (IVLP). I stayed in the US for six months and I started to learn English.

During my visit I saw many young writers. They were so free, they were never concerned about what could be published and what would be banned. I liked that challenge. The political oppression, the censorship is first coming from outside and later becomes self censorship. Subconsciously you wonder: can I write this? And that's very poisonous to a writer's mind. You become a victim. Why should I think about this? That's not a writer's concern. All the editors in China said: "Ah, this is harsh, be careful. Maybe we have to leave this out." Back then I was young and the editor's opinion was important to me. So, there I was in the US and it was very good for a young creative person like me. But they have different poison. Commercialism. The US is producing a lot of reading junk. I think they give you freedom to write, but if you don't follow the commercial formula you can't get published. So it's the problem on the other end. That's what I realised later when I was in school in the US.

13 Flowers of Nanjing (2012)

The massacre of Nanjing in 1937 is a big story for Chinese. In six weeks 300.000 people were killed. This is something we must keep telling the world, which we didn't do. That's why I choose the narrator as a contemporary person, the voice is contemporary. I didn't want to make it a story that happened in the past. I wanted the storyteller to be someone who is aware of the past and wants to carry this legacy. It was a holocaust too, because of the race and the systematic killing. Also Chinese people were not fully aware of this. This story has a contemporary voice. In the English translation they cut it off for the story to flow more. But I didn't want to have it flow more. I wanted alienation, you stop and then you think, before going into the story again. I always like this alienation, I don't want you to read and cry and be carried away. I don't think this is necessary.

What's next?

Yan Geling is currently writing a new television series and a novel. Once again, one of her novels has recently been made into a movie: *Coming Home* by director Zhang Yimou. It had a special out-of-competition screening at the Cannes film festival, and received rave reviews. See: www.film.biz.asia/reviews/coming-home

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The Writer

