

In one scene in his travel memoir *Red Dust*, Ma Jian - who has fled Beijing to escape arrest in the Campaign against Spiritual Pollution - describes dining with a doctor and his friends on an owl that they had stolen that afternoon from the dissection lab in the local hospital. "It reeked of formalin," he wrote, "but after braising it in ginger and soy sauce, the taste was quite bearable." Later, after a visit to the maternity ward, his doctor friend brings home some placenta to stuff dumplings with for supper.

It's worth mentioning these episodes because, without the Tibetan context in which *Stick Out Your Tongue* was written, the stories can seem stark, even brutal. Relations between Han Chinese and Tibetans are not generally warm. For Tibetans, Han Chinese are the occupiers of their land and destroyers of their culture. For most Han Chinese, Tibetans are the dirty, backward and ignorant people of Beijing's propaganda, lucky to be "liberated" by the Red Army from their feudal serfdom. For those Han Chinese who find Beijing's propaganda less appealing, Tibet can seem like the romantic locus of a profound spirituality and a place of exhilarating, if dangerous, beauty.

In the 1980s and 90s, it was fashionable for Chinese artists and writers to head for Tibet to demonstrate their own unconventionality, their interest in the life of the spirit and their courage in being willing to endure the hardships of the exotic barbarian world. The result can be read in many novels and short stories, and seen in kitsch paintings such as those of Chen Yifei, in which grubby Tibetan faces are illuminated by celestial light. It is a trap Ma Jian avoids.

In 1983, Ma Jian was living in Beijing as a photographer and painter in a circle of dissident friends - young men and women who snatched moments of sexual licence, exchanged precious copies of foreign books, and discussed each other's work in tiny gatherings that were reported by the neighbours and raided by the police. They were seen as socially deviant - and so dangerous - elements and therefore vulnerable to persecution in the now quaint-sounding Campaign against Spiritual Pollution. It sounds less quaint when the figures are tallied: more than a million arrests and 24,000 executed. Ma Jian embarked on his journey to evade arrest himself and on publication of *Stick Out Your Tongue* he was held up as an example of both "spiritual pollution" and "bourgeois liberalism". He has lived in exile ever since.

The three-year journey that inspired first *Stick Out Your Tongue* and then *Red Dust* was taken 20 years ago, and the book itself was banned in China in 1987. In Lhasa, when he arrived, the Chinese were celebrating the 20th anniversary of the "liberation" of Tibet, a miserable

festival of flags and blaring loudspeakers imposed on a sullen, conquered people. Ma Jian escaped to the high plateau to wander among nomads and monks in search of spiritual truth, but discovered instead poverty and the degradation of a spiritual tradition all but destroyed by political persecution. Tibet since has been subject to waves of Han migration. The Tibetan city of Lhasa has largely been destroyed and prostitution flourishes amid the Chinese-imposed concrete blocks and karaoke kitsch. Today Han Chinese visit Tibet as tourists, buying up Buddhist images that they hope will help them in their businesses; for them Tibet has been tamed as a spiritual Disneyland, not unlike the Tibet of many western imaginations.

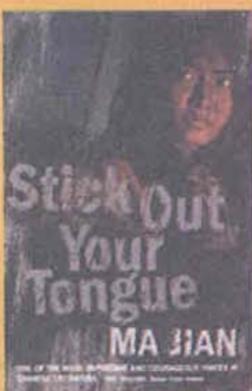
The stories are meditations on death, spirituality, sexuality, the overwhelming power and indifference of nature and the fragility and alienation of human existence. Some read as literary travelogue, written in the voice of the narrator that was later to find extended expression in *Red Dust*. In "The Eight Fanged Road", a Han photographer encounters an old man who offers him a meal of yak blood, drained from a living yak and served in a hat. The old man is both looking for his daughter, who has run away with a passing visitor who later abandoned her, and doing penance for his own sins of incest with the same daughter. In "The Woman and the Blue Sky", a brutally lyrical piece about the sky burial of a young woman who has died in childbirth, Ma Jian plays the role of the passing photographer, unapologetically curious to watch the dismemberment of a young woman whose tragic life and death continues to torment one of her lovers.

Others are short stories: in "The Smile of Lake Drolma", a young Tibetan struggles to find his nomadic family during his short summer holiday, bringing them gifts from the city, eager to share what he has learned at school; in "The Golden Crown", the narrator - a Chinese drifter with a forged letter of introduction - hears from an old silversmith the story of Kula, a young woman who in the silversmith's youth had inspired both the master craftsman and his then young apprentice as they worked to create the golden top of the bronze dome of a stupa at Gar monastery. In "The Final Initiation" a reincarnate female bodhisattva dies in the aftermath of a Tantric ritual.

It is hard to disagree with the official verdict that "Ma Jian fails to depict the great strides the Tibetan people have made in building a united, prosperous and civilised socialist Tibet". But then, that version of the Tibet fantasy demanded a greater effort of the imagination even than Ma Jian's. The difference between them is that at the heart of Ma Jian's stories, there is both humanity and a piercing, if painful, literary truth.

Beneath the roof of the world

ISABEL HILTON



Stick Out Your Tongue
Ma Jian
translated by
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