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New Literature from China

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The Fat Years by Chan Koonchung (alternative spelling Chen Guanzhong)

London: Doubleday, 2011 trans.by Michael Duke

Winter Sun Poems by Shi Zhi

Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2012 trans. by Jonathan Stalling

In his fascinating novel which was officially banned in China, journalist Chan Koonchung describes a not too distant future when China has entered the “Age of Ascendancy.” At the same time, the economy has tanked in the West, and former economic powerhouses like the United States, France and Germany are struggling to stay afloat. Furthermore, almost everyone in China is happy, not necessarily euphoric, but certainly satisfied with life. Those few who are not always smiling, remember a month before the announcement of China’s economic ascendancy that was filled with chaos and bloodshed – a month that seems to have disappeared from the memories of the Chinese citizenry.

The mystery of the missing month is what is driving certain people on a mission. They want to know the truth. This disparate group includes an itinerate world traveler named Fang Caodi; Little Xi, a failed lawyer who posts anti-government screeds on the internet as she hides in various places throughout China; and Zhang Dou, a young man who was a child slave-laborer and now plays guitar in small restaurants. They converge on a noted Taiwanese author Old Chen who has moved to Beijing because life has become so pleasant in China.

At first, Old Chen doesn’t want to get involved with these people. However, he has a long-standing crush on Little Xi, so his romantic interest gets the better of his desire to continue his pleasant existence. Then Fang Caodi begins to present his evidence to Old Chen. It seems that old publications and journals are no longer available in print – only online; however, the online versions have airbrushed out occurrences like the Tiananmen Square uprising and similar unpleasant events of the past sixty plus years. More important, there are no magazines or newspapers from the missing month. Fang Caodi has collected small bits of evidence like a few pages of a publication from the missing month that he found in a trash can, a scrap of paper mentioning the crackdown of that month. The mystery builds. It leads Old Chen to an underground Protestant Church in Henan Province where Little Xi has found refuge, but not religion. It takes him to the home Zhang Dou shares with his girlfriend Miaomiao on the edge of Beijing. There Miaomiao, a former journalist, is now somewhat out of her mind and spends her days feeding stray cats.

The answers come when the group kidnap a high-ranking party official and learn what happened to the missing month, why everyone is so content with life, and what the Politburo's plans are for the people of China. This book is being compared to George Orwell's **1984**. However, China's future in **The Fat Years** is neither as oppressive as Orwell's vision nor as frightening; it is almost a logical outcome of a somewhat reasonable dictatorship whose only desire is to maintain control and stay in power. Revealing any more about the plot or the characters would spoil the novel for readers. Anyone interested in China and the future will find this book a fascinating read.

A very different look at China is found in **Winter Sun**, a collection of poems by Shi Zhi. In 1968,, at the age of twenty some of his poems were being circulated among the youth of China at the height of the Cultural Revolution. Unfortunately, the poetry brought him to the attention of authorities for which he was harassed, beaten, and sent for re-education to a peasant village, temporarily placed in the army, and eventually sent to a mental institution where he was diagnosed with schizophrenia. Throughout his hardships, Shi Zhi continued to write poetry. His poems are moving and immediate, whether he is writing about having to leave his home for re-education in a village as in "This is Beijing at 4:08" or describing his experiences in a mental institution as in the poem "Eight Years in a Psychiatric Ward." Now in his late middle age, Shi Zhi lives at home with a wife who loves and cares for him and his poetry. Finally he is being recognized for the cultural treasure that he is. Reading his poetry is a moving experience that brings to life China in the twentieth century.

Winter Sun is the first volume in The University of Oklahoma's *Chinese Literature Today Book Series*. The second volume which was recently published is Nobel Laureate Mo Yan's novel **Sandalwood Death**. In addition, University of Oklahoma publishes a magazine offshoot of their longtime journal **World Literature Today** focused specifically on Chinese literature entitled **Chinese Literature Today**. There are no longer excuses for ignorance about contemporary Chinese literature.

Andrea Kempf is a Professor/Librarian Emeritus at Johnson County Community College in Overland Park, KS. She was named Fiction Book Reviewer of the Year 2000 by the *Library Journal*. She is also an alumna of the Asian Studies Development Program at the East-West Center, University of Hawaii