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BOOK REVIEW

DEATH OF A RED HEROINE

By QIU XIAOLONG

New York: Soho Press, 2000. 464 pages, \$25

Andrea Kempf

China has enjoyed a long tradition of crime fiction, dating back to at least the Tang dynasty, when tales of jurists who often solved their mysteries with the aid of ghosts rather than detection or common sense were popular. However, almost none of the genre has been available in the West, with the exception of *The Celebrated Cases of Judge Dee*, an eighteenth-century novel based on the exploits of a seventh-century judge, which was translated into English by the Dutch scholar and diplomat Robert van Gulik. Better known than his translation is the series of popular novels that van Gulik went on to write in English based on the character of Judge Dee. The twentieth-century detective novels set in China available to Western readers have been written either by visitors to the country or by Western authors inventing an imaginary China. Finally, with *Death of a Red Heroine*, English-language readers have a genuine Chinese novel of detection, written by Shanghai-born Qui Xiaolong, who came to the United States on a Ford Foundation fellowship in 1988 and stayed on after the pro-democracy debacle in Tiananmen Square.

Qui's protagonist, Chief Inspector Chen Cao, is-like the author-a native of Shanghai, an expert on T. S. Eliot, and a published poet; and from its opening pages, this novel has an authenticity no tourist can create. Set in Shanghai in the 1990s, *Death of a Red Heroine* is replete with the smells, the sights, and the sounds of this great Chinese city: a former brothel quarter has been converted to work-unit dormitories where none of the residents will take responsibility for cleaning the bathrooms; on the overcrowded buses, people's tempers are short; little neighborhood restaurants serve delicious fried buns; and as they practice tai chi along the city's elegant Bund, local residents ignore the crowds of tourists and financiers passing by.

When the reader first meets Chen, he is celebrating his having been assigned a private apartment. The apartment has no kitchen, just two gas burners and a small cabinet in the corridor. The bathroom is tiny and is furnished with only a toilet and shower head but no hot water. Chen, however, recognizes that occupancy of a private apartment is an indication of his privileged status. Like the inspector, the murder victim,



Guan Hongying, was a privileged individual, but she eschewed tangible rewards and lived in her work unit's dormitory. It is this issue of privilege in Communist society that is the focal point of the novel. During her life, Guan Hongying was a designated national model worker, and photographs of her with party leaders such as Deng Xiaoping often appeared in magazines and newspapers. When her corpse is discovered by fishermen, it is naturally assumed that her murder was politically motivated. Yet as Chen and his assistant, Detective Yu, investigate the crime, they discover that the exemplary young woman had a secret personal life of which neither her co-workers nor her neighbors were aware. Then, when the investigation leads to the most privileged group in the country, the HCC (High Cadre Children), the case does indeed become political.

What raises the novel well above a typical police procedural is the quirky, erudite inspector. Chen is able to quote a Tang-dynasty poem appropriate to every situation; and when Chinese poetry fails, he quotes T. S. Eliot or Matthew Arnold. He delights in eating a good meal, and the many that he consumes are described along the way to the murder's solution. He is an earnestly good man, picking his way through the political minefield represented by the case, trying to see that justice is served, and that the demands of the state are met. The supporting characters are equally engaging: Detective Yu, a career policeman whose early resentment of Chen fades as he recognizes his chief's innate honesty; Wang Feng, a tough woman journalist with whom Chen engages in a flirtation; Xie Rong, the daughter of a college professor, who finds prostitution more lucrative than academics; Ouyang, the rich businessman who befriends Chen not because he is a policeman, but because he is a published poet; Commissar Zhang, an old Bolshevik, who will go to great lengths to protect his High Cadre friends. All of these very real people, moving through a very real Shanghai, trying to decide what is appropriate behavior for China in the 1990s, are part of a mosaic that creates an authentic picture of the country as it charges into the twenty-first century with a new economy but an old political structure. *Death of a Red Heroine* is much more than a detective story. It is an elegant, true-to-life portrait of China today.

Andrea Kempf is a professor and librarian at Johnson County Community College in Overland Park, Kansas. In 1993, she participated in a teaching exchange at the Northwestern Polytechnical University in Xian, China. She is a regular reviewer of fiction for *Library Journal* and was recently named *Library Journal Fiction Reviewer of the Year 2000*.

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