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A Museum of the “Cultural Revolution”

Ba Jin

June 15, 1986

Some time ago, in one of my essays in “Record of Random Thoughts,” I recorded a conversation I had had with a friend. I declared that a museum of the “Cultural Revolution” should be established. I did not have anything specific in mind, no formal project, but I was driven by a strong conviction that such a museum should be found, and it was the responsibility of every Chinese.

I had just mentioned this, anticipating that others would add their support. I believe that the many who passed through the crucible of the “Cultural Revolution” could not remain silent. Each individual had a unique experience. But nobody can depict the “cowshed” prison as a paradise, nor depict inhuman massacre as a “Great Proletarian Revolution.” Although our opinions may differ, we all shared the same determination: in no way can we allow another “Cultural Revolution” to occur in our country, because a second calamity of this scale would destroy us as a people.

I am by no means exaggerating these events, which unfolded twenty years ago and still clearly continue to pass before my eyes:

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those days without end, when cruelty left an indelible trace, when humiliation and inhuman tortures were inflicted on our compatriots, that great chaos in which truth and falsehood were reversed, white and black confounded, loyalty and treason mistaken for each other, when only with difficulty could one discern truth from lies, and when all those injustices occurred which will never be fully rectified, and all the accounts which will never be put in order! Must one forget all that and forbid people to speak about it, so that twenty years later a second “Cultural Revolution” would break out as something new sow disorder in China? Some say, “How can it occur? Impossible!” I ask “Why is it impossible?” Is it possible or impossible? This question has been on my mind for many years, and I wish I could respond definitively. If I could, then at night, I would have to fear only nightmares. But who will assure me that the events that occurred twenty years ago will not recur? Who can guarantee me that from now on I will sleep peacefully without ever again waving my arms and falling out of my bed in the middle of a dream?

It is not that I refuse to forget, but shadows of blood-stained demons hold me helpless in their claws and won't let me forget. I am completely disarmed; how can the catastrophe come; how can the tragedy begin; how can I play a role that fills me with horror, proceeding step by step toward the abyss? It all seems as if it were yesterday. They did not break me, but how many were torn apart and broken down? How many bright and gifted talents have been destroyed in front of me! How many dear lives have been lost at my side! “Such things will not be repeated; it would be better to dry your tears and think of the future.” My friend says to reassure me. Cynically I say to myself, we will see. I thus waited until the moment when the campaign for the elimination of spiritual pollution began.

I had just been admitted to the hospital. It was my second hospitalization. With my Parkinson's Disease, and I was a neurological patient. My left leg, fractured in a fall one year earlier, recovered —

although it was now missing three centimeters — and it was long before they removed the pins. With the help of my cane, I was able to move about after a fashion. Reading books or newspapers was painful for me, so I had the habit of listening to news on the radio every morning, and in the evening watching the news broadcast on television in the lounge. After three in the afternoon, my friends came to visit me and often they told me of odd rumors going around. I had been in the hospital only for a few days when the atmosphere worsened. Daily, the radio broadcast speeches of some municipal or provincial officials about the elimination of spiritual pollution. On the television screen, artists and writers appeared one after the other before the audience to affirm their determination to liquidate that pollution.

I heard that in the army soldiers turned in photographs they had put up of themselves in the company of women comrades, whether they happened to be relatives or girlfriends. I heard also that at the entrances to official buildings in the capital, there are piles of rawhide cords, with which women had to bind their long hair into ponytails before being admitted to the building. I pretended to be calm, but each evening as I returned to my room I inevitably thought back on some scenes of the beginning of the “Cultural Revolution” in 1966. I could not help feeling the storm beginning to rage, the return of the catastrophe. As I do not attach any importance to my old bones, I was perplexed: Was it really necessary to repeat a “Cultural Revolution” which would push the Chinese people to the bottom of an abyss from which they would never emerge? Nobody had yet given me a clear answer. The rumors multiplied. It seemed to me that a big broom was sweeping, sweeping. I counted the days and waited: One, then two, then three. How slowly the time passed! And how agonizing the wait! It was dark clouds gathering above my head. All around, the drum roll beat faster and faster. Yet my mind remained lucid, and I could contrast each event that occurred at that time with the beginning phrases of the last “Cultural Revolution.” I did not hear shouts of

“Long live Chairman Mao!” Nobody took a stand, nor did anyone lay down their weapons and capitulate. All continued on their own course. Thunder claps resounded from afar and it began to rain. But less than one month later, people came out and talked, the brooms ceased to sweep away “dust,” the threatening clouds had dispersed, and those who had sounded the trumpets disappeared from the scene. We had escaped the catastrophe this time.

In May, 1984, I was invited to participate in the 47th Congress of the International Pen Club in Tokyo, and I drafted my address in my hospital room. I quietly spent another half year in the hospital. A constant flow of visitors came. The flood of rumors did not dry up, and all I could do was not try to sort out what was true and false in my own mind. In my room I was not disturbed, and I should thank those people who vividly remember the “Cultural Revolution.” Who would not let others use their blood to cultivate the flowers of another “Cultural Revolution.” The flowers that bloom in human blood are bright and beautiful but they are poisoned. If these flowers were still to bloom, even just one, I would have to be dragged out of the hospital, not yet cured.

At the end of six months of reflection and analysis, I understood completely. If we do not have a second “Cultural Revolution,” it is not that the ground is un-fertile or that the climate is unfavorable, quite the contrary. It seems that all the conditions already exist. For example, if the period of “less than one month” that I have just mentioned was prolonged a little — for example, twice or even four times as long, then the situation, could be delicate, began again, because there are many who benefited from the “Cultural Revolution.”

It is pointless to continue the argument. The mass of letters which I receive from my friends and my readers, the articles which come to the press, demonstrate that more thoroughly more completely, and convincingly than I could. The authors had experiences worse than mine, crueler misfortunes. “Let us not

allow under any pretext such a monstrous episode of history to be repeated,” they declared.

To build a museum of the “Cultural Revolution” is not the business of any one person in particular: it is of the responsibility of all to build one so our descendants, generation after generation, will learn the painful lessons of these ten years. “Let history not be repeated” must not be an empty phrase. In order that everyone sees clearly and remembers clearly, it is necessary to build a museum of the “Cultural Revolution,” exhibiting concrete and real objects, and reconstructing striking scenes which will testify to what took place on this Chinese soil twenty years ago! Everyone will recall the march of events there, and each will recall his or her behavior during that decade. Masks will fall, each will search his or her conscience, the true face of each one will be revealed, large and small debts from the past will be paid. If we free ourselves from our selfishness we will no longer fear deception. Let us dare to proclaim the truth, and we will not so easily swallow such lies any longer. It is only by engraving in our memory the events of the “Cultural Revolution” that we will prevent history from repeating itself, that we will prevent another “Cultural Revolution” from recurring.

The construction of this “Cultural Revolution” is absolutely necessary, because only those who do not forget the past will be masters of the future.