



Gang of One

Fan Shen

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Where some might say, "If you can't win, why fight?" the author would ask, "If you don't fight, how can you win?"

Condemned by the Chinese Communist regime to live all his life as a cave-dwelling peasant, Shen-with an ambition nearing a species of madness-used misery as his ladder to climb out of a poverty and oppression almost unfathomable to the Western mind.

Shen's China was a dog-eat-dog world where families would disavow a beloved son in order to save their own skins.

Of his mother, Shen says, "She was a revolutionary first and a mother second. And she's proud of that."

"Every minute of my life," he explains, "from the moment I was awakened in the morning to the moment I was put into bed, was carefully planned by my parents and teachers."

Yet, something went wrong during his indoctrination. Joyful participation in book burnings and mass rallies took a sudden turn during a public beating when Shen saw his first bloody body. At the age of twelve, he recognized the dark side of the revolution.

Troubled by the death, Shen began to feel afraid: "Like dripping water on sandstone, that doubt eroded everything I had been taught to believe in."

Shen developed a burning hatred for the Communist Party and, as a gang of one, he began to fight a system in which "people were no more than bugs." A penchant for reading forbidden books and befriending the wrong people landed him in sinister and dangerous places.

From the village where people ate leaves from the trees and the aircraft factory where suicides were commonplace, to a teaching position in a city of poisoned water that "no one ever leaves," Shen liberated himself through self-education, subterfuge, and outright lies.

Like the man in Jack London's short story, "Love of Life," Shen survived even when the wolf was at his ear. Now a professor of English at Rochester Community and Technical College, Shen admits that this book places his family and friends who still live in China in potential danger, yet he insists that his is a personal story and not a commentary on the country today. His use of nicknames as a descriptive device, both pejorative and complimentary, also serves to disguise those he would protect.

While it does expose the grimness of life under Communism, Shen's story is loaded with moments of high humor. In a few passages, the writing verges on minutiae-meltdown, but Shen has such exuberance that he is forgiven, for here is a happy man.

Anyone wishing to be the architect of his or her own fortune would do well to study this amazing memoir, a testament to the human spirit.

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