

When East Meets East

Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

In a recent column I suggested that crime fiction can do much more than simply entertain. Through portraying the circumstances of the characters' lives, and the ways that they respond to these circumstances, at the hand of a skilled writer we can gain new insights into ourselves, our society, and the many ways in which we choose to define our lives.

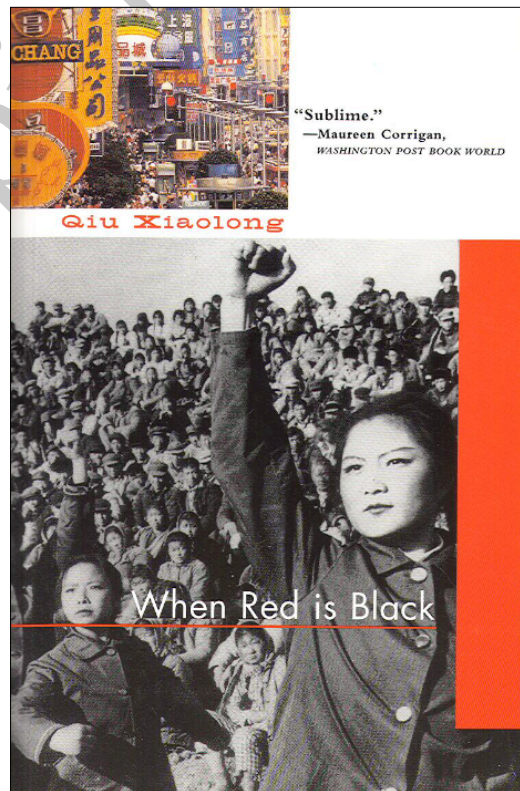
This week's pick achieves each of these goals. On one level it is a classic tale of a murder: who did it, and why. On a second level it is an engrossing study of a period of time and a clash of cultures: China, during the violent years of Mao's Cultural Revolution. And by setting that clash against the backdrop of the rapidly-evolving China of today, the author offers us an opportunity to reflect on the trends, values and choices that, half a world away, will help to shape our own futures as well.

Qui Xiaolong

Shanghai-born Qui Xiaolong came to the United States on a Ford Foundation fellowship in 1988, and stayed on after the pro-democracy demonstrations culminated in the tragedy of Tiananmen Square. Currently a lecturer in Chinese history at University College, St. Louis, *When Red is Black* is Qui's third novel. The others are his debut novel (and Anthony Award winner for Best First Mystery) *Death of a Red Heroine* and *A Loyal Character Dancer*. All are published by Soho Press.

When Red is Black (Soho Press, New York, 2004)

Yin Lige has been murdered. Her body has been found, suffocated, in her tiny room on a landing in the *shikumen* in which she lived. The two-story building, home to a single family in pre-revolutionary times, now houses more than a dozen families, all of whom, it seems, are suspects in her death.



Party Secretary Li has handed the case to Detective Yu Guangming of the Shanghai Police Bureau. Li is anxious to have the case solved quickly; for Yin is a former Red Guard who had an illicit love affair with poet Yang Bing during

the Cultural Revolution. For their sins both had been punished, Yang dying of benign neglect, later to be discreetly resurrected as a hero of the state. Yin, however, emerged a dissident, and published the story of Yang's life; and despite being banned the book had attracted much attention, both within China and abroad. Recently, however, Yin had been writing another book, and preparing to travel to the U.S. Did the new manuscript—conveniently missing—threaten to rekindle the flames of the old controversy? And if so, how far would those anxious to avoid embarrassment to the Party go to stifle her voice?

Yu's superior officer, Chief Inspector Chen would normally be put in charge of such an important case, but he is on personal leave, translating a business proposal for a huge new building complex. He has been hired by a local property developer, Mr. Gu, who is an emerging capitalist with both triad and Party connections in the New China. The terms of the translation contract are themselves curious, for Chen is receiving a much higher fee than would be normal, and the businessman has assigned to Chen a *xiaomi*, or "little secretary," to assist him in his work. The title is itself ambiguous, and carries with it the nuance of mistress. Chen wonders about his special treatment, and whether his *xiaomi* has been assigned

simply to help him in his work, or to report back to Mr. Gu. Despite such distractions, Chen is resolved not to neglect his police duties, and struggles to assist Yu in solving the puzzle of Yin's death. They are aided by Yu's wife, Peiqin, whose literary education helps to fill in some of the blanks, and by Old Liang, a neighborhood policeman who has his own views about the murderer.

More than a tale well told

When Red is Black is more than a crime novel. It is a captivating tale of love and intrigue, of greed and envy, of imagined slights and grievances long nurtured. It is also a story about a society in transition, vividly portrayed. The author reveals the complex tensions that persist between duty to family, to the Party, and to society. He sets lofty political rhetoric against harsh social reality, and the reader comes away with a better understanding of the tumultuous era of the Cultural Revolution and, as well, with a heightened appreciation for the complex dynamics that drive the New China. *When Red is Black* vividly demonstrates how a novel can be so much more than merely a tale well told.

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