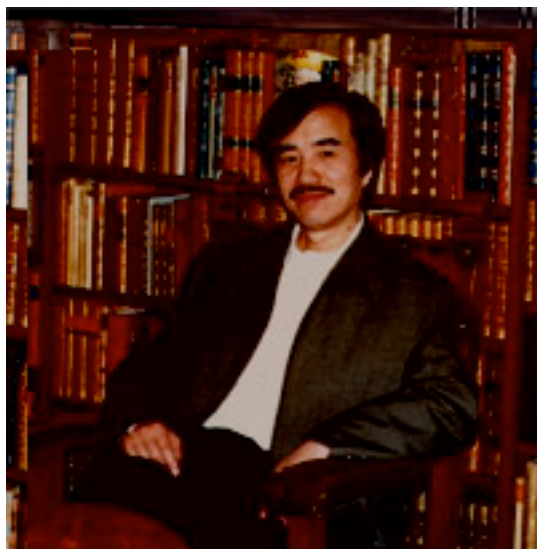


Salt of the earth

*The impact of the Cultural Revolution still resonates for author Li Rui, whose family of writers reveal much about the changing face of China, writes **Yenni Kwok**.*



This year marks the 40th anniversary of the Cultural Revolution's beginning and the 30th of its end. There will be no major observances on the mainland, but the period left an indelible mark on contemporary Chinese writing, with authors largely distinguished between those born before the Cultural Revolution and those born after it, and between rural writers and urban writers.

Li Rui belongs to the former camp, on both counts. The 56-year-old, who is in Hong Kong for three months as writer-in-residence at Baptist University, is one of the most accomplished authors to emerge from rural China and the rubble of the Cultural Revolution. He has published five novels, several novellas and a volume of short stories, most set in humble places far from the cities.

His award-winning collection of short stories, *Thick Earth (Houtu)*, includes one titled *Sham Marriage* - a harrowing tale of poverty, matrimony and sexual exploitation among peasants, based on his own observations.

His forthcoming book, *The Scenery of Peace (Taiping Fengwu)*, describes the centuries-old farming tools that are fast disappearing. Li says the vanishing of traditional tools reflects the fate of rural people caught between tradition and modernisation.

Born in 1950 in Beijing, Li enjoyed a privileged early life as the son of a high-ranking Communist Party cadre. This came to an end when the Cultural Revolution began and he was sent to an impoverished village in the north-western Shanxi province in 1968. He spent his early youth doing back-breaking work on farms and in a steel mill. "It was very difficult," he says about his time among the peasants. "The village was extremely poor and backward."

The Cultural Revolution broke Li's family apart - his parents and their nine children scattered to different corners of the mainland. His mother died in 1969, and his father two years later. Yet, hardship aside, Li considers the period the most important of his life.

"The six years I spent in the mountain was a turning point," he says. "It was very critical and vital as it changed the way I saw the world. Most of my stories were based on my experience there." How does he reflect on that difficult time? "It happened to every youth in the city. We had to be re-educated in the rural areas, no matter what we did."

Silver City, perhaps Li's most ambitious work, is the epic saga of an influential family in decline, set against the changing course of history. It charts the waning fortunes of a wealthy clan of salt merchants and those of a competing *nouveau riche* family over three generations and seven decades of political turmoil, from the 1910s to the 1980s.

It's no coincidence that the fictional clan shares the same family name as the author, or that the fictitious town of Silver City bears a resemblance to his ancestral town. "I wrote the book as a tribute to my family," he says.

Li's father hailed from a Sichuanese salt-mining town and his family controlled the lucrative trade. "My paternal family was very big and well-known," he says. "Some of the streets in the town were named after the family members. Although many parts in the book were my imagination, it bears some traces of my own family."

The novel's protagonist, Li Naizhi, is modelled on Li's father, who turned his back on his traditional house, became a communist and climbed the ranks before he was eventually sent to the countryside.

Li, who lives in the town of Taiyuan, began publishing fiction in the 1970s. When the Cultural Revolution was over, he decided not to return

to the capital - partly, he says, because he was offered a position as a writer in Shanxi. In China, state-approved writers receive a salary from the government. "But the most important reason was that I met and married my wife," he says, smiling at Jiang Yun, his partner of 25 years.

Jiang, four years Li's junior, is a native of Shanxi and also a writer. They met after a classmate of Jiang sent one of her short stories to Li, an editor of *Shanxi Literature*, with a note that read: "Her story is better than the ones you published."

Li says that for a time after the Cultural Revolution, "many writers wrote about their sufferings. Yun's story, *My Two Daughters*, belonged to the 'scar literature' genre, but it was the best. It would have won a literature award, but unfortunately, it was too late to be submitted."

However, the story brought the two writers together. They married in 1981, as soon as Jiang completed her university degree. "At that time, students couldn't marry, so I had to wait - very impatiently," Li says, with a smile.

Li and Jiang's only daughter, Li Dian, also has displayed a talent for writing. But the literary interests of their daughter, who studies at Sorbonne University in Paris, underline the divergence between the younger and older generation of Chinese writers. "She writes about the middle-class, the city life," says Li.

He's quick to point out that, despite the generational gap, he regards her work as no less valid than his own. "Every generation has their own way of living, their own style," he says. "My generation has its own way to be happy and sad, but the feeling is the same.

"We're not living in the Tang dynasty, but we're still impressed with their poems. We're not living during the time of Shakespeare, but we're still moved by his writing. The style and topic of literature may change, but not the emotions it evokes."

The interview was published in the South China Morning Post daily (www.scmp.com), 14 May 2006.