Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress, by Dai Sijie

reviewed by Ben McDonald Coltvet in the January 2, 2002 issue

Vladamir Nabokov once noted that "life not unfrequently imitates the French novelists." Dai Sijie applies this dictum to the unlikeliest of settings: 1970s China. His first novel tells the tale of two Chinese teens who discover the forbidden pleasures of reading (and retelling) French novels deep in the Chinese countryside during Mao's Cultural Revolution.

Dai's novel received a warm reception in France last year, earning awards and widespread praise. Yet the book's value lies not in its homage to Balzac or the triumph of "Frenchness" in a foreign setting; rather, it demonstrates the power that individual readers wield when they take stories to heart and pass them on, even (or especially) when this is done covertly.

Dai renders into fiction the story of his "reeducation"--a Cultural Revolution code word for the process by which high school graduates were conscripted to labor in the Chinese countryside among peasants. The novel's narrator and his friend Luo are the sons of medical professionals who have been branded enemies of the state; ironically, the boys have had hardly any more schooling than the peasants with whom they must work.

As the book opens, the narrator has brought the collective scrutiny of the mountain villagers upon himself: he has a violin. Suspicion of Western society has been cultivated by years of communist censorship, which has reduced "culture" to a collection of Maoist sayings and revolutionary songs. The village headman is about to smash the "bourgeois toy" when Luo suggests that his companion play a Mozart sonata for the villagers--one which Luo cleverly titles "Mozart Is Thinking of Chairman Mao." The ruse works, and the belligerent crowd "soften[s] under the influence of Mozart's limpid music like parched earth under a shower." The first lesson the boys learn about culture in this topsy-turvy era is that names are often more dangerous than the things they stand for.

When the two friends suspect that a fellow reeducated boy, "Four Eyes," has forbidden novels secreted in his trunk, they relentlessly badger him until he shares one with them--Balzac's *Ursule Mirouët*. They are entranced with everything about the book, from the author's name (rendered in their Chinese translation in four syllables, "Ba-er-zar-ke") to the novel's frank treatment of all the official taboos: money, fame, sex and individualism. The narrator is so taken with the "slim little volume" that he surprises himself by copying out his favorite sections on the inside of his sheepskin jacket.

Through an elaborate heist, they secure the other novels in Four Eyes' collection. These stories become currency in an impoverished setting--not only are the books themselves valuable (and dangerous), but the pair's ability to retell the stories literally saves them on a handful of occasions. Predictably, Luo's storytelling ability also makes him the darling of the book's title character, the little seamstress. A love story ensues, and French plotlines become intertwined with the budding romance between Luo and the seamstress. The narrator, who is also taken with the seamstress's carefree smile and wild laugh, becomes a go-between for the two lovers.

Right up to the end, nostalgia pervades the novel. Dai uses vivid storytelling techniques to bring extraordinary moments and characters to life, but he pays little attention to the drudgery of everyday life. The two friends' adventures--especially their foray deep into the woods to record folk songs as sung by an old hermit--are genuinely funny.

When the author approaches more serious topics--life, faith, family and betrayal--the novel lacks weight. In weaving his story, Dai's narrator touches on moments of great pain, but too often quickly passes over them and escapes to linger on secret pleasures and lyrical scenes that defy the grit and muck of actual life. The narrator recounts events as they slip by, but fails to engage the roots of his frustration.

Dai's style lacks the emotional force and raw energy of the fictions of another contemporary Chinese émigré, Ha Jin. Like Dai, Jin has wrestled with the paradoxes of life in Communist China. But Jin's short stories (collected in *The Bridegroom* and *Under the Red Flag*) and novels (*Waiting* and *In the Pond*) are wrenching narratives in which any person who stands out from the norm--deliberately or not--is knocked down to size by brute force and social pressure. In contrast to Jin's stories, Dai's narrative seems flighty and slightly out of focus.

Ultimately, Dai presents vignettes that shimmer, but they do not yield sufficient light. Given the tumult and complexity of this unsettling period of Chinese history, it is not surprising that the book does not attempt to explain the underlying social conditions that bring about the plight of the narrator and his comrades. Instead, Dai spins a tale that draws readers' eyes away from hard realities by fixing their gaze on the moments of hidden beauty that infuse and animate life.