

[HARDCOVER: US]

A recovering Maoist's road to redemption

In 1970s China, Jan Wong snitched on her classmate, who was then exiled. Now, haunted by guilt, she seeks to make amends

BY MICHAEL KENNEY
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, BOSTON

In China, by the early 1970s, the worst excesses of the Cultural Revolution were over, the Tiananmen protests and the military crackdown well in the future.

And for Jan Wong (黃明珍), a 19-year-old Canadian college student of Chinese descent, who had come on a summer's visa, had stayed on to study at Beijing University, and had joined student work teams at a machine tool factory and on a dust-blown farm, China was "radical-chic," and "Maoism was mesmerizing."

In her 1996 memoir, *Red China Blues*, Wong described her experiences from those years as like "living inside a real-life propaganda movie."

Buried in the memoir was an incident that had occurred at Beijing University. Another student, Yin Luoyi, had confided to Wong and a Chinese-American classmate that she wanted to go to America, and asked their help. "We decided," Wong wrote, "[that] Yin did need help" and "the Communist Party would save her from herself." So they "snitched," turning her in to the Foreign Students Office. "We actually thought we were doing the right thing," Wong wrote.

But the incident, so matter-of-factly recounted in *Red China Blues* — and, more importantly, what its outcome had been for Yin — haunted Wong for 30 years. In *A Comrade Lost and Found* she returns to that story.

Returning from China in the early 1980s, Wong worked as a journalist, including a stint as a business reporter at the *Boston Globe*. Later, as the *Toronto Globe and Mail's* China correspondent, she covered the Tiananmen protests.

Then, in 2006, with her husband, a Canadian whom she had met and married in Beijing, and their two teenage sons, Wong returned again to China. It was time, she writes, "to find Yin, apologize and try to make amends."

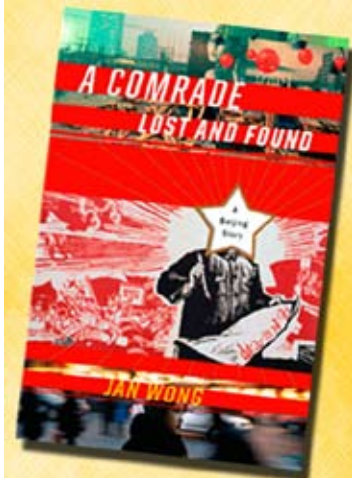
It is a quest, like that in *Red China Blues*, both intensely personal and at the same time one that delves into the conflicted history and culture of China.

The chances of finding Yin in a city and society so changed were not good. For the city, the structure of the ancient capital, especially the narrow, crooked residential hutongs, was fast disappearing.

As for the personal quest, Wong falls back on networking — itself not that easy in a city where a person is likely to change phone numbers seven times in a decade.

She finds an old roommate, and then other classmates, even

Publication Notes



A COMRADE LOST AND FOUND:
A BEIJING STORY

BY JAN WONG

322 PAGES

HOUGHTON MIFFLIN HARCOURT

her long-ago adversaries like the hard-line disciplinarian whom she knew as "Fu the Enforcer." Perhaps, Wong thinks, "the landscape of her memory is littered with bodies," and, after all, "snitching in Chairman Mao's China was routine and easily forgotten."

Then, with time running out before Wong and her family must return home, the connections came through, and Yin called.

There is a happy reunion, and over several days Yin describes her road from exile in the Manchurian oilfields back to a privileged life in Beijing, reinventing herself several times along the way as an officer in the People's Liberation Army, a law school professor, then as a businesswoman, even briefly working in New York. Her life, Wong reflects, "had been one high-stakes gamble."

Yin invites Wong to her high-rise condo — one of five residences that she and her husband own. Tiantongyuan (天通苑) had been the site of a labor camp for class enemies. But its name, then and now, means "straight to heaven," prompting Wong to reflect that Yin herself "has gone straight to heaven."

As for Wong, she wonders "what the revolution was all about." She had judged Yin when she had talked of going to the US, and now was judging her because of her success. "Even at this late date," she writes, "I still need remedial help to recover from Maoism. Come to think of it, writing this book is tantamount to a Maoist self-criticism."

Catherine Johnson is downing an energy drink that promises to provide "energy, stamina, focus and drive." But does she really need any more? The playwright based in Bristol, southwest England, went from being a tearaway teenager, expelled from school after a stand-off with the headmaster over a revealing top, to the author of *Mamma Mia!*, one of the most successful musicals ever. Johnson also wrote the screenplay for the film version, which became the highest-grossing British movie of all time.

It's a career trajectory most writers could only dream of. Yet Johnson, 51, with a glossy, chestnut bob and a warm, open manner, says she still sometimes gets out of bed feeling like a failure. "Every time I start a new work, I feel a complete lack of confidence," she says. "It must be because I've had less years of being a success than I had of being a failure. For a lot of my life, I felt a complete letdown."

Johnson left school with little to sustain her but poor exam results and a love of writing that had been encouraged by weekly visits, with her father, to the Bristol Old Vic theater. For years, it seemed that success as a writer was beyond her grasp. "Writing was the only thing I was good at," she says, "but I also wanted to hang out with the bad boys. I had a good few years when I ran away from things and sometimes life ran away from me." An early marriage ended in divorce; when another relationship broke up, she found herself a single mother in her 30s, barely able to afford nappies.

She was considering training to be a probation officer when another trip to the Bristol Old Vic — to see Jim Cartwright's 1980s play *Road*, about northern English working-class life — changed her life. "I suddenly realized I could write about people like me, living real, messy lives," says Johnson. She rushed home and, within two weeks, had written *Rag Doll*, a play about child abuse in a local family. It won an award and went on to be a success at London's Bush theater. Other successes at the Bush followed. Then, in 1997, the playwright and director Terry Johnson, her sometime mentor, heard about a proposed musical based around the songs of Abba — and recommended Johnson to the show's producer, Judy Craymer. *Mamma Mia!* was born.

Now Johnson's back where it all started — at the Bristol Old Vic's studio space, with a new play, *Suspension*, about a girl who is about to get married wondering if her special day can possibly be complete

Here she goes again

Catherine Johnson wrote 'Mamma Mia!' Now she's back — with another story about a wedding

BY LYN GARDNER
THE GUARDIAN, BRISTOL, ENGLAND



Above from left: Actresses Julie Walters, Meryl Streep and Christine Baranski in a scene from the film *Mamma Mia!*
Top: The creative team behind *Mamma Mia!*, from left, Catherine Johnson, Phyllida Lloyd and Judy Craymer. PHOTOS: REUTERS AND NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE

without the presence of her father, with whom she has never had any contact. The plot will sound familiar to the millions

who've seen *Mamma Mia!*. But *Suspension* is rooted firmly in Bristol, where Johnson has lived all her adult life. Like many there,

she was hit hard by the sudden closure of the Bristol Old Vic in summer 2007 — an act that put the future of the UK's longest

continuously producing theater in jeopardy (the main theater remains closed, awaiting major redevelopment).

"I was really emotional about it," she says, "so when [board chairman] Dick Penny asked if I'd write a play for the theater, I said 'yes.' I was walking back over Clifton suspension bridge after meeting with him, and the play just popped into my head. From the bridge, you can see the Avon Gorge hotel, which is a popular venue for weddings; and I remembered that there had been a protest by aggrieved divorced dads on the bridge. Somehow the two came together. I wrote it quickly — as if I had a rocket up my ass."

The success of *Mamma Mia!* may have brought Johnson financial security, but she still has her feet firmly on the ground. She admits to lying in the bath fantasizing about being whisked away to Los Angeles to be a feted screenwriter, but believes that staying in Bristol and fitting writing in around raising her children has had a beneficial effect on her work. "Of course, it has its downsides," she says. "I'd like to be the one to write the big play about the recession, but the truth is I'm much more interested in everyday life, by the way we all just get by."

Johnson still seems genuinely astonished by her good fortune, as if she had nothing to do with the success of *Mamma Mia!* Even now, she says she would never have been the first choice to write the screenplay if her contract had not demanded that she get a shot at it, and that she would almost certainly have been sacked if producer Judy Craymer hadn't stood by her. Right to the bitter end, it was a fight with the studio to defend her and Craymer's vision of a movie about "real older women who are overworked, over-stressed, drunk and needing each other." She fought hard for the movie's ending, in which all the cast return for one last exuberant number. The studio felt this was "cheesy wotsits with knobs on" that would only be seen by cleaners sweeping up popcorn. How wrong they were.

"Going to the red carpet premiere was fun," she says, "but on those kinds of occasion, you're always thinking your frock is too tight or your shoes pinch. Seeing it in the place where I grew up was much more fun. Everyone fantasizes about returning in a Rolls-Royce to the place that they left in failure. Well, seeing *Mamma Mia!* at a small local cinema was my Rolls-Royce moment."

[PAPERBACK: US]

Who better than Joan Rivers to dish out plastic surgery advice?

The comedienne's hymn to artificial youth may leave a nasty taste in readers' mouths — especially since she mocks other stars who have gone under the knife

BY CAROLE CADWALLADR
THE GUARDIAN, LONDON

Nazi jokes are part of Joan Rivers' stock-in-trade. Last year, for example, she compared Heidi Klum to Hitler (it was something to do with a frock). Hilarious! So here's one for her. Should the worst happen, and the economic downturn lead to the rise of far-right parties across Europe and the re-emergence of the kind of tactics last seen on Kristallnacht, I will personally offer to burn this book.

No, really, Joan, it would be my pleasure. It's not that *Men Are Stupid ... And They Like Big Boobs: A Woman's Guide to Beauty Through Plastic Surgery* is poorly written, desperately unfunny and has a stupid title (though it is all those things). It's that after reading how a micro-cannula is put into the fatty area of the labia majora in order to

perform a vulva lipoplasty, or how you shave a dorsal hump (by scraping the excess cartilage on the septum with a scalpel and then using a chisel and a mallet to hammer away the nasal bone), I found myself having strange and violent thoughts.

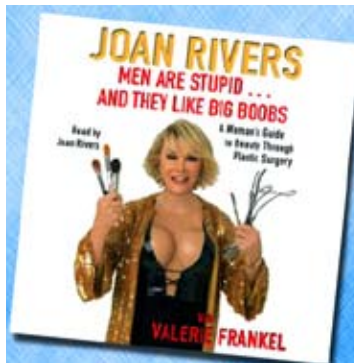
But first things first. A wise man once told me that the worst refuge of the journalistic scoundrel is to criticize someone for the way they look. But there's no point in beating around the bush: there's a conceptual flaw at the heart of this book, namely, do you really want to take plastic surgery advice from Joan Rivers?

Joan feels no such compunction, laying into Melanie Griffith's face, Meg Ryan's lips, Robert Redford's brow and Priscilla Presley's entire body: "Did you see her on *Dancing With the Stars*? More like *Dancing With Madame Tussaud's*

Wax Figure."

She's pleased with her own work, though. She's an entirely wrinkle-free 75 and helpfully runs through her "procedures": she had her nose thinned while still at college, the bags under her eyes done when in her 30s and her first full facelift in 1975, in her early 40s, "a truly major turning point in my life and looks." Next up was liposuction on her thighs, then a breast reduction and a tummy tuck. She's had her under chin "cleaned up three times," an upper eyelid lift and "every six months or so, I go in for my Botox cosmetic shots, collagen in my lips, and if I have something to burn off, a mark or spot, I do it. I've also had a chemical peel ... the only procedure that has ever been painful. Last year, I had my upper arms lipo'ed so they'd look skinny in sweaters."

Publication Notes



MEN ARE STUPID ... AND THEY LIKE BIG BOOBS: A WOMAN'S GUIDE TO BEAUTY THROUGH PLASTIC SURGERY

BY JOAN RIVERS

304 PAGES

POCKET BOOKS

She's evangelical about plastic surgery, a true convert. "I've always said, 'If everyone around the world got a nose job and lost 20 pounds (9kg), there'd be no wars.'"

But there's no mention of the fact that she used to have bulimia, that she's suffered throughout her life from depression and that her overcommitment to plastic surgery might in some way be connected to the fact that she was having liposuction when her husband committed suicide. Nor is there any hint that her rationale for her latest surgery — "What drives me to have both my legs and my arms attended to is the beauty ideal of the long, lean-limbed woman" — would be considered unhealthy in a 13-year-old girl; in a 75-year-old woman, it verges on the obscene. But then, taking Joan Rivers's

advice on plastic surgery is roughly the equivalent of listening to George Best on alcohol. It's the answer to everything. It cures all ills. It's the American Dream made flesh. "Which would you rather have?" she asks rhetorically. "Sagging, scar-free breast or nice, perky breasts with some scars that will fade over time? (Answer? No man will ever try to cop a feel around your ankle.)" Or what about a facelift? "You'll have a feeling of rebirth, of second chances and new beginnings." She will admit there are risks, though — just the small matters of "death, disfigurement, nerve damage, bruising, bleeding, infection, pain, numbness and scarring."

Of course, a zillion people will probably jump down my throat and say: "It's supposed to be funny." It really isn't. But don't

take my word for it. Decide for yourself: "Put a blond wig on a parking meter and some man will offer to buy it a drink." Funny?

The most depressing aspect of all of this is that she's probably right. "Being old is like wearing Harry Potter's cloak of invisibility, all the time. A good way to tear it off is an eyelift." If Joan Rivers looked 75, would she be on TV? Probably not. Is there any woman who looks 75 who appears on TV? If you think the mass mutilation of an entire generation of women is the answer to this particular problem, don't hold back. And why stop with the breasts? David Matlock, a board-certified gynecological surgeon, agrees with Rivers: "Men do like big boobs ... but they also like a tight vagina." Or, as they say in the trade, a vaginal rejuvenation and reduction labioplasty.