

Ryan Holmberg

Li Kunwu: A Chinese Life

It was bound to happen. Surprisingly, it did not happen earlier—the arrival in North America of the Chinese graphic novel. It is not surprising, though, that its debut should belong to that lucrative genre of non-fiction publishing: the individual or family memoir as personalized history of the grand narrative of modern China. It was no leap from prose to comics; the bridge was built long ago with the success of works like Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* (1980–91) or Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis* (2000), the first about the author’s grandfather’s youth as a Polish Jew under the Nazis, the second about Satrapi’s childhood and family’s difficulties during and after the Iranian Revolution. The Chinese graphic novel, when it arrived into English-language publishing last year, was thus born into a highly primed market.

There have been a couple of English-language graphic novels about modern China, They are not by Chinese nationals, and it shows. One of the earliest in North America was Belle Yang’s *Forget Sorrow: An Ancestral Tale*, published in 2010. Born in Taiwan to landed gentry parents who fled the continent in 1948, Yang, like her parents, is predictably and entirely unsympathetic to the Communists. The conceit is autobiographical: in refuge from an abusive ex-boyfriend, Belle Yang has returned home to her parents in California and her father’s stories of their family’s past in old China. Though organized as vignettes, *Forget Sorrow* presents an unbroken story of one wealthy landowning Chinese family’s trials in the 1930s and 40s suffering under the Japanese invasion (the setting is Manchuria) and the Communist takeover, but most of all under the smallness of traditional Chinese social values. The novel is illustrated in a flat, naïve, semi-folkish mode so common in literary comics memoirs since the success of French artists Satrapi and David B. As a product of an artist who left Asia at the age of seven, returning only for a stint as an art student in Beijing in the late 1980s and leaving again after the Tian’anmen crackdown, as a book about China it is symptomatically a book without a present tense.

More recently there is a children’s book, *Little White Duck* (2012), written by professional oncologist Na Liu and illustrated by her husband, Andrés Vera Martinez. It is about the former’s childhood in the countryside near Wuhan, in the years around Mao’s death. The Chairman’s face and sayings still decorate village walls, and Revolutionary hero Lei Feng is still emulated by children. The campaign against pests, active since at least the Great Leap Forward, has dropped the sparrow from its list, but the rat remains an enemy. One of the artist’s earliest memories is the sad day when her mother



Top: Page from graphic novel by Belle Yang, *Forget Sorrow: An Ancestral Tale*, published by W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., New York, 2010, 250 pp.

Bottom: Page from graphic novel by Na Liu and Andrés Vera Martínez, *Little White Duck*, published by Graphic Universe, Minneapolis, 2012, 108 pp.

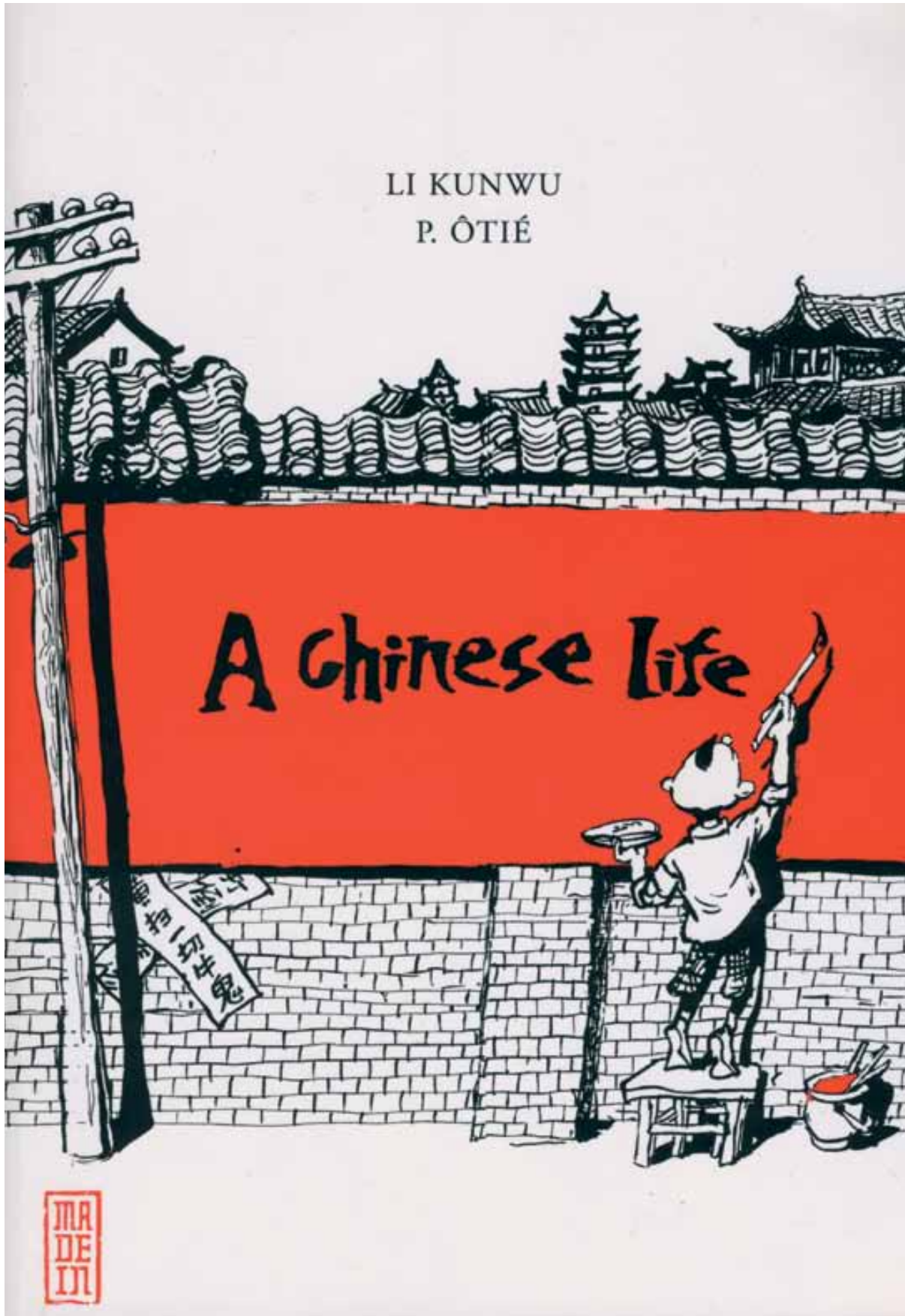
took her to the town square to listen to and publicly mourn the news of the death of “Grandpa Mao.” Communism is not the main theme, however, and *Little White Duck* is primarily a book designed to sensitize American children today to the poverty a distant, now-wealthy country experienced only a generation ago.

If those books indicate the first steps towards the coupling of the graphic novel and the history of modern China, they have been outstripped completely by the appearance of Li Kunwu’s autobiographical *A Chinese Life* (2012), a nearly seven-hundred-page tome co-written with French writer and diplomat Philippe Ôtié and originally serialized in France between 2009 and 2011 as *Une Vie Chinoise*. For its accomplished artistry and monumental scale, it will likely become the standard against which future Chinese graphic novels are measured. For its politics, on the other hand, it should probably be damned by the liberal literati—for here is a book that, despite its sensitive handling of personal hardship at the hand of the state during the Mao era, seems ready to accept the continuing authoritarianism of the Chinese government in the name of economic growth and global prestige. The established markets of the Chinese prose memoir and the emigrant graphic novel will benefit *A Chinese Life*, even though Li Kunwu does not share those authors’ generally liberal priorities in the relationship between the individual, society, and the state.

The artist Li Kunwu has serious credibility. Born in Kunming in 1955, he began life as he would live it: very close to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). His father was a Communist Chinese Party Secretary who fought against the Japanese and the Guomindang. His mother was also a member. Accordingly, in *A Chinese Life* the earliest signs of trouble in the new republic appear at home, as his father strains to reconcile the disheartening facts about the Great Leap Forward to which he is privy with his faith in Mao and the Party. The blow of the Cultural Revolution is swift and hard: there are incorrect class traits in his father’s family history. Yet, even after ten years in a reeducation camp, emerging grey and weary, his father retains his faith in the state. “Even if the times have changed, follow my example,” he tells his son after release. “Give your life to the Party. It is China’s only future!”¹

Ideology runs strong in the family. Despite the pain exile has caused, young Li Kunwu decides to follow in his father’s footsteps and commit his life to the “revolution.” He joins the People’s Liberation Army in the early 1970s and endeavours hard to be recognized by the Party, going out of his way to be a model soldier, waking earlier, working harder, helping more, propounding louder, and even volunteering for assignment to an “army agricultural production unit.” The job is pure hell. Basically he becomes a farmer, living alone in a ramshackle hut in the countryside, shouldering backbreaking labour. He befriends the daughter of a country doctor, a pretty girl. The livestock, however, are his only regular companions. But what gets him through army life is not belief in the cause. A pretty girl, the village doctor’s daughter, offers some distraction. What propels him mainly, however, is hope for the day when he can proudly tell his parents that he, too, has gained Party membership. The last chapters of the book conclude

LI KUNWU
P. ÔTIÉ



Li Kunwu, *A Chinese Life*, cover.



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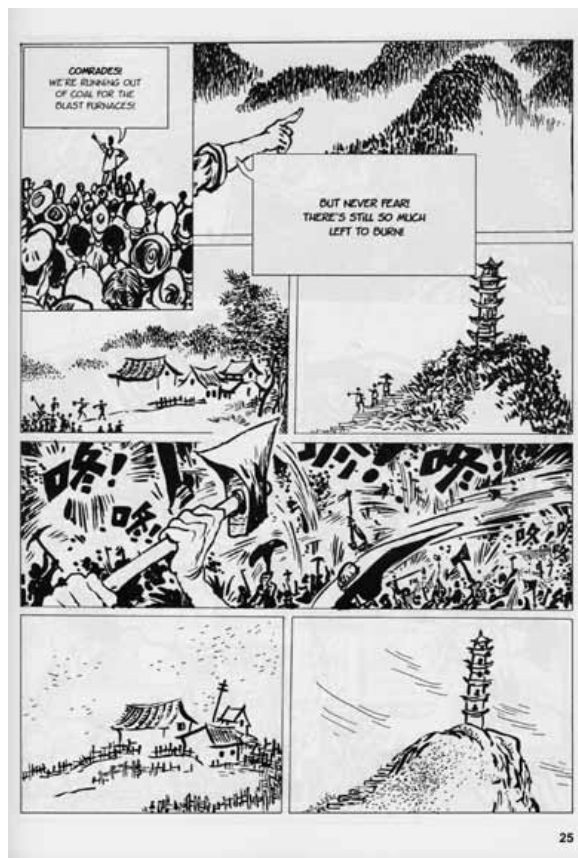
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Top left: Li Kunwu, *A Chinese Life*, p. 160.

Top right: Li Kunwu, *A Chinese Life*, p. 274.

Bottom left: Li Kunwu, *A Chinese Life*, p. 188.

Bottom right: Li Kunwu, *A Chinese Life*, p. 439.



with a stunningly forgiving view of contemporary China, and I wonder if at the root of this is the extended filial piety the author learned in his youth, reaching from father to state.

Early on in *A Chinese Life*, we get a glimpse of the artist-to-be. Inevitably, given the time and place and the author's family, Li Kunwu's first real artistic inspiration comes from propaganda: one of the little study books, in this case from 1960, the government put out to instruct in proper pictorial form and sloganeering. Soon after, while still a young brat, he's out leading

Top left: Li Kunwu, *A Chinese Life*, p. 302.

Top right: Li Kunwu, *A Chinese Life*, p. 25.

Bottom left: Li Kunwu, *A Chinese Life*, p. 464.

Bottom right: Li Kunwu, *A Chinese Life*, p. 686.

the revolutionary youth charge by painting caricatures of evil landowners on village walls. When the schools close following Red Guard hysteria, Li Kunwu is apprenticed to a local painter specializing in Mao pictures. “For an artist,” his teacher explains, “drawing Chairman Mao is an honour. But it’s also a formidable test of skill . . . What counts the most is the depth of your feeling for the chairman.” But when young Li Kunwu is left alone in the studio, he finds that his teacher has even greater “depth of feeling” for something else: the nudes hidden behind the radiant portraits of the leader. The episode does not feel so much like a statement of hypocrisy as a demonstration that even the slogan-shouters were human. All in all, despite its many pages of persecuting the “Four Olds”—Old Customs, Old Culture, Old Habits, Old Ideas—and the “ox devil” bourgeoisie, *A Chinese Life* is fairly forgiving of the Cultural Revolution, with many having suffered but no one really to blame.

The motif of sex as a foil to dogma reappears when the novel turns to the Deng Xiaoping era of *gaige kaifeng* (liberalized “reform and openness”). Art schools are reformed as well, opening their doors to the same Western classical training that the Red Guard had attacked just ten years before. In 1966, casts of Michelangelo’s *David* and the *Venus de Milo* are labeled obscene. (126) Now, in 1980: “Ahem! Young comrades,” says a teacher with a beret, “know that you are witnessing an historic occasion: the first nude drawing class in Yunnan province,” reportedly also the first in China since the 1930s in Shanghai. The event is largely comedy. Students’ eyes boggle as the model undresses. The teacher instructs her to spread her legs a little bit wider. The school’s principal president keeps finding reasons to return to the classroom to make sure that everything is going okay. As for Li Kunwu, the sessions seem to have served him well over the long term, for the young women of *A Chinese Life*—and there are more than a few—are palpably sensuous without being forcibly sexualized.

His day job required art of a different sort. Li Kunwu’s first formal employment as an artist is for the Department of Propaganda during the early Deng Xiaoping years, where he makes paintings of young men as ideal Communist youth. Now they are cooking meals and reading maps in contrast to the raised fists of the Cultural Revolution. It was the success of this softened propaganda work that finally got Li Kunwu into the Party. Some years later (the exact chronology of events in the book’s second half is sometimes hard to determine), he joins the local newspaper, the *Yunnan Ribao*, as an “artist-reporter.” *A Chinese Life* unfortunately does not make wholly clear what this involved. But in one case he threatens to expose a security guard for trying to extort junk collectors who rely on factory scrap for a living—for once Li Kunwu used his pen for the people rather than his own private fantasies or the state. Otherwise, Li Kunwu shows himself doing rather conservative work: first there were best-selling humour books about local Yunnan customs, followed by advertisements for the big Dashan beverage company, then onward to Paris and an exhibition of ink renderings of Yunnan’s ethnic minorities.

The length and diversity of Li Kunwu’s career equipped him well for his switch to the format of the graphic novel. It takes serious skill and commitment

to take on a project of this scale. Decades of working within institutions in which time and clarity are of the essence no doubt helped prepare him for the task. Stylistically, Li Kunwu's artwork strikes a balance between classical ink painting, the bombast of Mao-era propaganda, the caricatures of his newspaper days, and an attention to local detail likely mastered while creating exhibition-oriented ethnographic and landscape drawings. The forms of the human figures often rise and stretch in El Greco-esque fashion. Probably the closest stylistic comparison in the field of comics is the work of Matsumoto Taiji, in Japan, who likewise likes to pack his backgrounds with details composed of wonky line work—as if the world itself was perpetually giggling—and create a general atmosphere of humour through figurative caricature just on the edge of the grotesque. Li Kunwu likes to tell jokes in *A Chinese Life*, and at a formal level, his drawing style is often even funny.

Like so many contemporary Chinese artists, Li Kunwu plays the national art history card. Fortunately, overt references in *A Chinese Life* are cloying only sometimes, like in the sudden appearance of a wrinkled peasant face that is all-too-like Luo Zhongli's famous "rusticated" *Father* (1980), or the return again and again of the Yunnan landscape in a literati "Southern style." But even then Li Kunwu comes out with a number of interesting moments, like when the peasants clear the hills of trees to fuel the backyard furnaces of the Great Leap Forward, graphically razing a Ni Zan landscape—an eerie if unintended premonition of the destruction of artifacts in the decade to come. Alas, what would otherwise be a beautiful compendium of drawings is marred by bad production values. *A Chinese Life* is printed on a cheap laminated stock that makes the images seem like they are going to slip off the page. Off-white matte would have given the drawings body. Even worse, a few dozen or so pages in the first third of the book are pixelated, presumably the result of poor scans of the original artwork. The artwork deserves better.

A Chinese Life sails along smoothly for its first five hundred or so pages, which is to say until liberalization takes command. As a personal memoir of the transformation of the People's Republic, it is adept and entertaining but largely conventional, hitting the same high points and low points that most any timeline does. The main surprises arise from the newness of the presentation: drawing versus prose. That the Mao and early Deng years should be the most coherent is not surprising. Li Kunwu and Philippe Ôtié themselves provide the reason, concluding their introductory chapter to the post-Mao era as follows: "I didn't know it yet. But my life, like most of my fellow citizens', would now be less epic. Gone were the great utopian flights of fancy with their tragic ends. . . . Gone, too, the uniformity of fate—something we were all prepared for, to greater or lesser degrees." The "uniformity of fate" spoken of here is a function of having lived under an authoritarian and highly centralized socialist state. Had Li Kunwu not been Han Chinese, perhaps his experience would have been less typical. As member of a Party family, his life was instead only more wedded to mainstream history. Tellingly, once the story crosses into the 1980s, the writing begins to unravel – episodic as it was before, but now oftentimes without a central thread. Still, the focalizing power of the Chinese state remains strong, even for Li Kunwu's personal identity.

The leitmotif of the last two hundred pages of *A Chinese Life* is so-called “development,” as in economic development under post-Mao liberalization and its ramifications in the workplace, private life, and the physical environment. One of the more memorable moments in the book occurs in 1980, a few pages from Yunnan’s first nude studio session. On a lunch break in a factory canteen, workers are talking exuberantly about the new “clay rice bowl” and the end of the guarantees of lifetime employment, housing, and healthcare of the “iron rice bowl.” Younger men speak excitedly about the potential opportunities the changes will bring. After mention of the prospect of foreign capital, an older worker loses his temper. Smashing his lunch bowl on the floor in anger, he cries, “I don’t want to hear talk about bosses and especially not foreigners! Foreigners, Japanese, capitalists, landowners, rightists, bosses, and all the rest—we got rid of them, right? Don’t tell me we did all that to wind up licking their boot heels now! My only boss is the state! And they can keep their clay bowl!”

While the last chapters show Li Kunwu enjoying life and making the most of opportunities in this new China, clearly he identifies with this aging throwback of a worker, particularly with his nationalism and his faith in the state. Take, for example, the book’s ending. Li Kunwu presents a series of television broadcasts that seem designed to respond directly to the old worker’s anxieties. First is the Being Olympics. Declares the announcer, “China has at last realized its dream, more than a century old, of proving itself a great nation before the eyes of the entire world.” Li Kunwu recommends the “good show” to his mother. Next is the sixtieth anniversary of the founding of the republic, with its pageantry of military vehicles and soldiers in Tian’anmen Square. The masses cheer and wave their national flags. A child screams, “Long live China!” A broadcaster proclaims, “Today’s modern socialist China, open to the all the world, turned towards the future, is rising majestically in the East!” Li Kunwu looks on, smiling.

On its own, such national pride means little. The problem is how it shields post-Mao China from criticism. *A Chinese Life* closes with Li Kunwu appealing to the idea of what he calls “a simple Chinese life,” based on the hard work and social commitments of an earlier era, which is to say, the Mao and early Deng eras. The rise of China, he suggests, is founded on this honest and plebian ethic. He muses at length: “So yes, of course we’re proud of what we’ve made, even if it’s not perfect yet. Especially since it does not come from the profits of armed conquest, however legitimate, or from the exploitation of a rich subsoil, or from inherited capital skillfully managed to bear fruit. No, none of these things. You will find nothing but sweat here. From our brows and our children, to whom we bequeath lives that will also be made of hard work and sacrifice, for we still have a long way to go down to the road that will lead us from poverty, the road to development.” Of all the slogans that have washed through his life, he upholds a Deng Xiaoping one as his favourite: “Development is our first priority.”

Where to begin? It’s not that Li Kunwu is blind. The last chapters of *A Chinese Life* depict many of the issues that, with his paean to “development,” he sweeps under the carpet. He shows, for example, the cramped living quarters and endless hours of a girl working for a massage parlour in the



Top: Li Kunwu,
A Chinese Life, p. 592.
Bottom : Li Kunwu,
A Chinese Life, p. 488.

city, far away from home. He shows the teary face of a mother whose house is slated for destruction in the name of urban renewal. He narrates episodes of the greed and callousness of the *nouveaux riche*. He juxtaposes Dashan Drink's joint venture with a Swiss "world food industry leader" with the closing of an old *danwei*-based factory. But why not just say Nestlé? In addition to the *danwei* worker who has secured a loan for a new high rise apartment, why not show what happens to the family that has lost its home? In addition to the scrap collectors who have risen to restaurant owners, why not spell out the fate of the security guard of the closed factory? One can appreciate the improvements economic growth has brought to life for most in China, yet there is a palpable reluctance in *A Chinese Life* to engage with its downsides. He touches on the negative fallout of "development," but never does he dwell. There's always an upside.

How to explain this bias? I suspect it's not just optimism or national pride, but, rather, his lifelong proximity to the Party. Consider especially the avoidance in *A Chinese Life* of questions of civil liberties, which of course directly implicate the Chinese state. It is an omission that is particularly glaring after the long chapters treating the terror of the Mao years. There is specifically no mention of the continuing legacy of authoritarianism and cronyism that contemporary China has inherited from that era. The only time bad government is broached, it is quickly excused, and that is on the subject of the June Fourth Incident, that is, the Tian'anmen Square Massacre of 1989. Pages upon pages of the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, yet none on the Democracy Movement or the subsequent crackdown. Instead the matter is consigned to graphically inconsequential text boxes scattered amongst people enjoying themselves in the park. Again the artist is verbose: "I know quite well that, internationally, there is a very dark view of 6/4 . . . I also know that here in China those events caused great suffering. Lives were shattered. Some even lost. I know all that. But the truth is, like almost all my countrymen, my mind is occupied with so many other things I find even more important . . . partly because I'm convinced that, above all, China needs order and stability to develop. The rest is secondary, in my view." Not everyone would agree.

Notes

¹ All quotes are from Li Kunwu, *A Chinese Life* (London: SelfMadeHero, 2012).