



Culture Notes

Bronze and Sunflower

By Cao Wenxuan

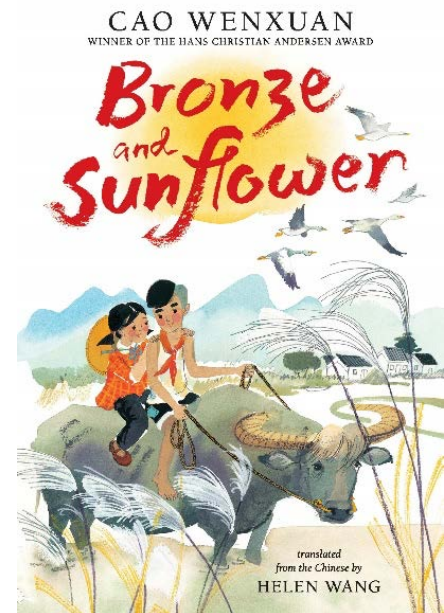
Translated by Helen Wang

Illustrated by Meilo So
Candlewick Press, 2017

Fiction, Set in China

2017 Winner, Freeman Book Award for Young Adult/High School Literature

Author: Cao Wenxuan (pronounced: “Tsao Wen-shwan”; Cao is his family name, and Wenxuan is his personal name) was born in the village of Longgang 龙港村 near the town of Yancheng 盐城, in Jiangsu province 江苏, in central east China in 1954. His father was a school principal. Cao Wenxuan is now a professor of literature at Beijing University, where he studied literature. He says the idea for the story of *Bronze and Sunflower* came from a friend whose family had been sent to the countryside during China’s Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). During this turbulent time in Chinese history, schools were closed, including Cao’s, and he traveled throughout the countryside as part of the *Dachuanlian* 大串联 (big exchange; pronounced: “dah-CHWAN-lee-ehn”), a movement in which young activists were encouraged to spread the message of the Communist revolution. He was only twelve or thirteen at the time.



Geography: Jiangsu province is just north of the major financial city of Shanghai and is bordered by the Yellow Sea on its east. Its capital is Nanjing, and the province also includes the major cities of Suzhou and Wuxi. Famous for its salt marshes and wetlands, Jiangsu is flat, with plains covering 68 percent of its total area. Water covers another 18 percent, including many major rivers (the Yangtze, the Huai, the Yellow River, and the Grand Canal) and lakes (Lake Tai, Lake Hongze, Lake Gaoyou, Lake Luoma, and Lake Yangcheng). The novel is set in the wetlands of northern Jiangsu province.

Setting: The novel takes place in the late 1960s and early 1970s, during the Cultural Revolution. The Cultural Revolution had roots in the Great Leap Forward (1958–1961), the collectivization of agriculture and industry that precipitated a famine that left as many as forty-five million dead. Mao Zedong, the founder of the People’s Republic of



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China and chairman of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), was blamed for his extremism and was partly sidelined by Communist Party leaders, who pulled back some of the most extreme collectivization efforts. Mao tried to reassert control by setting radicalized young people against the Communist Party hierarchy and what he called the "Four Olds": Old Customs, Old Culture, Old Habits, and Old Ideas. While the Great Leap Forward was considered a restructuring along socialist lines of the rural areas, the Cultural Revolution was an attempt by Mao to reform urban culture and institutions and ultimately regain control of political power. When the violence in attacking the "Four Olds" in the cities became too disruptive, the urban radicalized young people were sent (sometimes voluntarily and sometimes coerced) to the countryside to "learn from the peasants." They were known as "sent-down youth."

At the same time, Mao attacked the urban political elite, called "cadres," more directly. The term "*cadre*" (*ganbu*) refers to any public official in China. In 1968, the May Seventh Cadre Schools were started, in accordance with Mao Zedong's May Seventh Directive, released to the public on May 7, 1966. In this directive, Mao suggested setting up farms, later called cadre schools, where cadres "sent down" from the cities would perform manual labor and undergo ideological re-education. Cadres would take turns going to the rural villages to gain first-hand experience in productive work, an idea called "education through labor." Most of the cadres had grown up in the cities and knew very little about life in rural areas or farm work. Children might be left with grandparents in the cities or go with their parents to the country. In addition to work in the fields, the "sent-down cadre" spent much of their time in long "re-education" meetings to rid themselves of "Old Ideas" and "Old Habits." Artists, like Sunflower's father, were considered cadre and were usually restricted to producing government propaganda posters.

Authenticity and Historical Specificity Issues: Cao Wenxuan had a deep knowledge of the rural area of Jiangsu province and its country people, and the book reflects their conditions with accuracy and empathy. Life in China, though, has changed dramatically since the Cultural Revolution. The rate of urbanization has increased, and 55 percent of China's population are now urban dwellers. While rural populations still



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suffer from natural disasters such as locusts and flooding, their standard of living has improved dramatically. Schooling has become more expensive, though. Special education for students with special needs, like Bronze, is still underdeveloped, and there are differences in quality between rural and urban schools.

Resources and Additional Background Material:

<http://www.theclassroombookshelf.com/2017/05/bronze-and-sunflower/>
<https://www.britannica.com/place/China/Social-changes#ref590802>

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