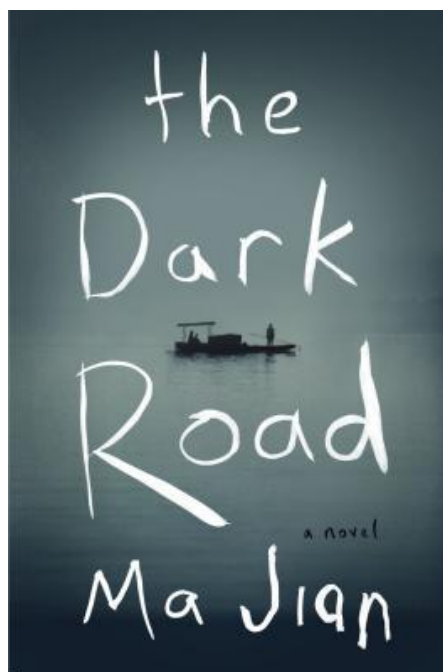




The Dark Road

Ma Jian , Flora Drew (Translator)

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Meili, a young peasant woman born in the remote heart of China, is married to Kongzi, a village school teacher, and a distant descendant of Confucius. They have a daughter, but desperate for a son to carry on his illustrious family line, Kongzi gets Meili pregnant again without waiting for official permission. When family planning officers storm the village to arrest violators of the population control policy, mother, father and daughter escape to the Yangtze River and begin a fugitive life.

For years they drift south through the poisoned waterways and ruined landscapes of China, picking up work as they go along, scavenging for necessities and flying from police detection. As Meili's body continues to be invaded by her husband and assaulted by the state, she fights to regain control of her fate and that of her unborn child.

The Dark Road Details

Date : Published June 13th 2013 by Penguin Press HC (first published 2013)

ISBN : 9781594205026

Author : Ma Jian , Flora Drew (Translator)

Format : Hardcover 384 pages

Genre : Fiction, Cultural, China, Historical, Historical Fiction, Contemporary, Asia

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From Reader Review The Dark Road for online ebook

Marla says

The Dark Road is indeed dark, the topic being the one child policy in China and the Family Planning Committee. I gave it two stars because it educated me. Let me save you the horrific visual images and give you the message. In China, women are hunted, kidnapped, forcibly have IUD's inserted, forcibly sterilized, and have late trimester abortions performed on them against their will by having disinfectant injected into them (and the baby's head). And, if that's not enough, if the baby is expelled alive, they are often murdered. Then, even though the husbands witness their wives being brutalized, they often insist to keep trying for a son. Jian does a superb job at describing these things. The writing is good. The alternate voice of Meili's unborn child seems almost fairytale-like and magical. From all the 5 star ratings, it's probable that the book eventually weaves a good story. I don't deny it's well written. I like books with a message, books that educate me about other cultures and our differences. I got the message from this book in 83 pages. I could go no more. To read further felt like brutalizing myself, also.

Žuržica Novak says

Šokantni roman u kojem na kraju glavna junakinja postaje alegorijski lik u borbi pojedinca protiv bezdušne vlasti.

Iako je fikcija, temelji se na stvarnim pri?ama iz Kine (politika jednog djeteta, prava ljudi, prostitucija, radni logori, otmice i prodaja djece- posebno ženske, krivotvorena roba, prljave igre prehrambene industrije, podru?ja s e-otpadom koji se dovozi u Kinu iz Europe i život u njima).

Negdje, na korici knjige, jedna se epizoda uspoređuje s Orwellom, ali Orwell je „mala beba“ u usporedbi s opisanim.

Joseph says

The Dark Road, by Ma Jian is a novel about Kongzi, Meili, and their daughter Nannan. Kongzi is a direct relation to Confucius and a school teacher. Things are well for the family until Meili becomes pregnant with a second child. The one child family policy is in full effect and the family does not have state permission to have a second child. The Family Planning Commission enforcers are ruthless. Reminders of the one child policy are all around including a sign “ Severe the fallopian tubes of poverty; insert the IUDs of prosperity.”

There are several themes in the book most notably the Confucian idea of a male heir played out by Kongzi. He also shows the primitive side of the male sex. The dual role of independent and free thinking woman rising in China and a mother who values motherhood and the spirit of her unborn child. Nannan, the daughter, whose name sounds like a boys name deals with the confusion of her sex and her role in society.

Perhaps the most disturbing role is played by the government and its minions. The brutality of the Family Planning Commission's forced abortions to out right murder and forced sterilizations and IUD insertions are described in shocking detail. To make matters worse for all of the above the women are expect to pay for the services. Corruption and fraud exist in every aspect life including migrant permits, “tolls”, and fines. The same corruption allows for environmental devastation, work camps, and brothels.

What ever glimmer of hope we in the West see in China are totally and thoroughly destroyed by this book. **The Dark Road** ing said it is also extremely disturbing. Jian does little to candy coat his views and at the same time the read feels he is not embellishing them either, yet the message is extremely powerful.

Schuyler Wallace says

Ma Jian has written a shocking novel, **THE DARK ROAD**, that chronicles the inhumane policies of China's one-child policy. It's chilling, infuriating, and almost unbearable to read with its dark detail. Perhaps the most disturbing feature of Ma's story is the knowledge that you, the reader, can do nothing about it.

The policy of one child for each normal family is enforced by governmental agencies using forced abortion and sterilization. Brutality and inhumanity force women of China to flee and hide from secretive agents of the Chinese government's family planning agency to either conceal their pregnancy or protect children already born in violation of the law. To be discovered means to be subjected to unbelievable abortion tactics, beatings, rape, and a lifetime of supervised sanction.

A young peasant woman, Meili, lives a life of poverty under the rule of an arrogant husband, Kongzi, who believes his legacy as a lineal descendant of Confucious requires that they produce a son. Already the parents of a girl, Nannan, and with Meili again pregnant with an illegal child, their life is in continuous turmoil as they eke out a meager living while trying to evade governmental agents. In desperation, they try to find better conditions by traveling down the foul Xi River in a tiny, decrepit houseboat.

They are eventually discovered and Meili is subjected to a brutal abortion. In heartbroken disarray, she returns to a husband who continues to attempt to impregnate her at every opportunity without regard to the suffering she has already experienced, her physical condition, or the possibility of more heartless pain for her should another pregnancy occur. Kongzi is adamant and incredibly goatish. They must produce a son.

Ma is a dissident writer who was born in China, whose work is banned there, and who continues to travel the country in an effort to expose the cruelty of the one-child rule. Critics complain that his writing is heavily biased against the policies of the Chinese government and that he unfairly criticizes the attempts to control the runaway population. His writing is morose and filled with details about abortion and childbirth in filthy conditions. There are instances in the book when the reader experiences near disbelief at his portrayals of inhumanity. But he is unapologetic and maintains that his depictions are factual based on personal observations. Through the gloom, Ma actually presents some luminous and humorous moments.

As China continues its relentless rise to world power with proclamations of being a great society, Ma Jian, and others who echo his relentless disapproval, will continue to produce stains on the official view of Chinese life. The one-child policy he depicts is but one serious transgression that spoils China's image on the world stage. Corruption, fraudulent economic policies, poor quality export products, intellectual property piracy, unsafe food products, and severe human rights violations are other smears on China's policies. I have no reason to doubt the accuracy of his story. I abhor it. I shudder at it. But I am thankful that a writer of his talent has the courage to share his observations. We are free to make our own decisions about the veracity.

This is an incredible book. Ma Jian's ability at portraying a life with all its depressions and high points has to be recognized. The storyline is wonderfully presented. His characters are to be both embraced and reviled.

I recommend this book for the non-squeamish who are interested in the workings of a government obsessed with control. It's not light entertainment but will provide mesmerizing reading about a current situation under much discussion.

Lori says

The Dark Road by Ma Jian was the 14th book I've read this year. As some of you who are Facebook and/or Goodreads friends you know I keep track of my reading each year and include a short review or reflection. I read this book about three weeks ago and I am far enough removed from it to write the reflection. It will be lengthy.

This was, hands down, the most heart-wrenching and brutal book I have ever read in my life. And, I recommend it to everyone. In fact, it should be required reading for every adult.

The book is a fictional account of how China's one child policy affects the rural Chinese and one family in particular. The author, Ma Jian, is a Chinese dissident who spent a year with these families who are on the run from the family planning authorities. So, while the story is fiction he based it on the true stories he both heard and witnessed. As an English teacher, I always talk to my students about how literature is a window into the human experience. This story truly is an example of the human experience expressed through literature.

The father in the book, Kongzi, and the mother, Meili, have one child - a young daughter named Nannan. They live in a village in rural China during the mid 2000s. Kongzi is a proud 76th descendent of Confucius and feels it is his spiritual duty to produce a male heir. With the family planning police about to discover Meili's pregnancy, the family leaves the village and takes to rivers on a makeshift boat. As is common practice in rural China, the family planning police invade villages to enforce the one child policy. Women are forced to get implanted with IUDs if they already have one child. If they happen to be pregnant with an additional, unapproved child they are given a forced abortion, regardless of how close to term the pregnancy is. If a family refuses, speaks out, or rebels in any way their homes are leveled with bulldozers and they are locked up for an undetermined amount of time by corrupt government officials.

Taking to the rivers is a common practice in China to avoid the reaches of the authorities. Without telling too much of Kongzi and Meili's life on the rivers and attempts to scrape by, what I do want to discuss is how horrified I was at the brutality that is leveled against Chinese citizens by their own government. I consider myself an educated citizen of the world, and as much as I read about China, this was not something I could wrap my head around. Rural citizens, especially, have no civil rights. For example, if they don't have the correct paper work (which is impossible to get) they can be arrested for just entering a city. Women who have the bad luck of getting picked up in a city are arrested and often sold into prostitution without families ever knowing what happens to them. Girls too, are victims of kidnapping and forced child prostitution.

Baby trafficking is also commonly practiced in rural China. Where families barely get by on what they can make running a booth in a market, teaching school, or farming a small plot of land they are often faced with the dilemma of selling a baby girl, escaping the authorities since they can't pay the fine for another child, or killing the newborn. In fact, all three options are illustrated in the book many times. Often the best option for these families is to gain something from the birth of an additional child and sell the child to a baby trafficker who then sells the child to an orphanage.

I chose this book originally because of a review on NPR and because of my Chinese daughter. I want to be as armed as possible when, and if, she does start asking questions as to why her Chinese parents didn't want her. This story was so brutal that most of the time I was unable to connect what was happening in the book to what her parents' life in China might be like. In fact, one particularly awful part of the book takes place in Changsha, the province capital of Hunan and the place where we first became a family. I think, for me, it was hard to reconcile what might have been her parents' life with the story we were told about her.

abandonment, which was quite benign.

I am glad that I was unable to consciously connect what was going on in the book to my own child's beginnings or what could have happened to her had she not been given the chance at a completely different life. But, the fact remains that I can't shake what families in China face on a daily basis. I am sure being a parent doesn't help and, on some level, being the parent of a Chinese daughter plays a part in my response to the story. I just cannot shake this book. Even after three weeks. You really should read it. It is a hard book to swallow but it will open your eyes to a world we can't really comprehend.

Tanja Berg says

Rating 3* out of 5. I was highly inclined to give it only a two-star rating, but it gets another one for the importance of the subject. This book is about Meili and her husband Kongzi who are on the run from the family planning department in China. They've committed the crime of conceiving a new baby. Their first child, Nannan, was a daughter and Kongzi desperately wants a son. The book describes many of the horrors facing parents in strictest family planning regions of China. It's stomach turning, to say the least.

The author somehow makes a bad situation worse. The descriptions of intercourse between Meili and Kongzi are down-right lewd and I'm not a person who takes offence easily. It just didn't feel appropriate given the context and just left me with an itchy unclean feeling. I pretty much hated this book from one end to another. Yet it is important subject.

Food for thought: there are thousands, if not millions of Chinese women being forced to have abortions of wished-for babies. Not just in very early stages of pregnancy but basically right up until full term. It's not been a year since I actually saw on the news this poor Chinese woman who had been forced to abort her seven-month old fetus. So this does happen and it is cruel beyond measure and against all sorts of human rights. So yes, it's not difficult to imagine that parents would rather try to flee than to be forced to such a fate.

Larry says

Jung Chang, author of *Wild Swans* said: "My motto about message in a book is: flowers in honey, salt in water. The messages have disappeared, but the flavors are everywhere."

Ma Jian might say: poison in honey, industrial waste in water. The multiple messages in this polemical novel coat every page like the Styrofoam and electronic waste that covers every waterway and landscape in his version of contemporary China. And that's the author's point: to raise a hue and cry against the horrors of China's one-child policy. And, while he's at it, illustrate the corruption, pollution, poisoned air, water and food that are so endemic in today's China.

The story follows Meili and her husband Kongzi on their travels around the countryside as refugees in their own land, trying to avoid the population control authorities, as Kongzi knocks her up repeatedly in the quest for a son, with abortion, infanticide, forced sterilization, kidnap, prostitution, slavery and venal, thieving officials, as well as garbage, garbage and more garbage, at every turn. No gorgeous, lyrical description of a landscape of breathtaking beauty is complete without a piece of factory rubbish or an infant corpse floating past. The novel ends with a soaring, operatic scene of such jaw-dropping ugliness that it's nearly beautiful.

Ma Jian did extensive first-hand research into the lives of birth policy refugees, prior to his being banished forever from China. Whatever your feelings about the population-control goals of the one-child policy, its actual implementation and effect on ordinary people is a human rights nightmare, even if this novel might (I said, *might*, not probably) exaggerate it for effect. My trouble with the book's message is that the author eloquently condemns every aspect of the one-child policy, *except* one of the many reasons for its existence and for its horrors: Chinese men's pathological insistence on producing sons. Before the policy came into effect, men forced their wives to pump out baby after baby (if the first were girls) until a boy was produced. Since the policy came into effect, those girl babies are aborted or murdered, or the family is forced into becoming birth policy refugees. This issue actually threads throughout the book, as Meili argues with her husband about his insistence on producing a son. Yet she gives in every time. For a novel which so strongly condemns the government over its policies and human rights abuses, it's surprising how lightly he treats the shocking misogyny of Chinese men (and, hey, I'm allowed to say this, having lived among them for 25 years).

Ma Jian is an excellent writer, and the translation is artfully done, which is the saving grace of this novel. *The Dark Road* is an important and worthwhile book for tackling such a unique subject, but it falls short of being a great one.

Gordana says

preporu?am ?

Zareek says

If you glimpse through most of the reviews, you'll find the word 'disturbing' being used time and again. And it's true - this book really is disturbing. And graphic. And eye-opening.

It's about a husband and wife who are desperate for a son to carry on a philosophical family line. Already having a daughter, they face brutality from government officers who are trying to uphold one-child policy, and thus their effort for a second children requires them to live a nomadic, depressing, inhumane, even bloody life.

This is the second book I read written by Ma Jian, and I must say Red Dust is more personal (well it's his very own memoir). But this book, really shook me with the grotesque hardship of living under a brutal government, that at times I can't help but wonder why there's really a part of this world that is THAT cruel, frightening and depressing.

I'm not even sure if pregnant mothers should be allowed to read it.

You can't find a better author to write about life in China other than Ma Jian; he's both an insider and outsider of that country.

J.S. Dunn says

a rare 5 stars

Shattering. For those who think, with typical western naivete, that all is rosy in the New China, dig into this novel. More likely, it will dig into you. A vivid and painful perspective on the pollution in rural areas, personal outrages like forced abortions, general civil unrest, and other detriments to ordinary Chinese citizens in the Pearl River area. The horrors are so finely woven into the story, one becomes afraid to read the next page.

Yes, that is the region where the new 34-mile bridge has been built so that the elite can travel from Hong Kong in 30 minutes versus three hours, whizzing past millions of peasants who are still enslaved and deprived of basics and denied access to the new economy. Perhaps this should be mandatory in high school and freshman college years, rather than the self-indulgent view of socialism spewed by white, bourgeois professors who think themselves radical but have never gone anywhere, never been hungry, never worked with his/her hands, and don't know anything in fact.

Vuk Trifkovic says

Very dark. But a bit patchy. In fact, it's all a bit, I don't know, Victorian? There is welcome twist of weirdness towards the end, but for a large chunks of it it just reads like a 19th century novel. I also don't know if it is translation or not, but lot of prose is pedestrian and there is much that is unfeasible about how the main character is portrayed. Having said that, it's a gripping read, 360 pages flew by...

Jeff Scott says

A woman's womb is a battleground between Old China and New China in Ma Jian's dark new work. Meili and Kongzi are family planning fugitives. Kongzi is intent on bringing a male heir into the world and continue the Confucius line. Meili is intent on not having her baby killed by the Chinese government. She is constantly pulled by both forces, but never given a choice of her own. After violating the One Child Policy in China, they go on the run with their daughter Nannan. They choose to buy a boat and float down the Yangtse to a mythical Heaven Township where they can have the child in peace away from the authorities.

Kongzi and Meili travel down the Yangtse Heart of Darkness and experience all hardship that could be brought upon peasants in Communist China. They are imprisoned, fined, sent to work camps, forced prostitution, forced abortions, see chemical and toxic wastes until they reach Womb Lake, the Heaven Township. An electronics toxic waste dump, it becomes their paradise to create a new life, only to experience new hardships.

There are times where words fail to accurately describe events in this book. The use of the word "dark" in the title is insufficient to describe these events. It's like putting a Band-Aid over a shotgun wound. There were three times I had to put the book down because the events were so disturbing. When I thought I was desensitized enough Jian could then top that. This story is about forced abortions and sterilization of women. It's the Communist state coldly implementing the One Child policy. Those who violate this law will be hunted down. They will be fined, their property confiscated, their home bulldozed to the ground, and family members punished. If the woman is found to be pregnant, she is dragged into a room, held down, and a forced abortion is performed. Jian captures this in terrifying detail. As Meili and Kongzi travel to escape the authorities, they see constant road signs saying better rivers of blood than one more child.

This is a book to read to reveal some of the dark underbelly of Communist China. It's a cross between a

totalitarian state and the Wild West. Government agents can bring harm, but the rampant criminal underworld can do the same. There is no escape from this vise. Only the polluted river provides any refuge or escape. Furthermore, the conflicts of Old China and New China between Kongzi and Meili also have devastating consequences as the need for a boy puts Meili at risk by the government. Once she is pregnant, she is an illegal person. Jian does a brilliant job probing this experience. His personal experience must add to the story as the events are too shocking and frightening to be simply made up. It's an educational, but very disturbing read.

Mircalla64 says

la via delle riforme è lastricata di corpi lasciati a marcire

Kongzi, ultimo in linea genealogica di Confucio e questo spiega perchè non può esimersi da cercare un figlio maschio, è in fuga sul fiume Yangtze con quella poveretta di sua moglie Meili, la quale, avendo già una figlia femmina che sconsideratamente non ha ucciso alla nascita, non fa nemmeno in tempo a subire un Aborto di Stato che il marito ricomincia a cercare di metterla incinta del figlio maschio che, secondo lui e il suo illustre antenato, gli spetta di diritto...ora che il Compagno Deng abbia stabilito che le famiglie cinesi si debbono accontentare di un solo figlio ci potrebbe anche stare, che questo vada contro tutti i principi confuciani pure, dal momento che Confucio secondo Mao faceva parte dei "vecchiumi" da abbattere, ma che una donna in procinto di partorire un figlio illegalmente concepito venga trascinata ad abortirlo proprio no...l'avvocato Chen Guangcheng è stato perseguitato in patria, fino all'intervento della Clinton che lo ha aiutato a fuggire, per il solo fatto di aver attirato l'attenzione del mondo sulla brutta faccenda degli Aborti di Stato, ma Ma Jian ci va ancora più pesante e ci racconta la vita dei poveretti devoti confuciani che vogliono tramandare il nome di famiglia senza ammazzare le femmine che nascono anche se non desiderate, gente che vive ai margini, sempre in fuga dalle Brigate di Pianificazione Familiare che ammazzano come se non ci fosse un domani sia i bambini illegali che le mamme che si oppongono, e a questo punto della storia viene da chiedersi come mai uno Stato così deciso a tenere basso il numero delle nascite non si prenda la briga di sterilizzare gli uomini invece di uccidere le donne...vabbè, la storia diventa surreale, Meili cerca in tutti i modi di difendere il suo ultimo feto, e questi decide di non nascere finchè non si sente al sicuro...

un libro tosto assai, molto più dell'annacquato Le Rane del cerchiobottista Mo Yan, che raccontava la stessa storia dall'ottica di chi gli aborti li praticava...un libro che lascia il lettore a chiedersi se sia giusto o meno guardare i cinesi dall'alto in basso, come fanno molti qui da noi, senza sapere da cosa fugge questa gente che si accontenta di vivere lavorando e morire in silenzio per assicurare un futuro ai propri figli...ecco...un libro così io lo farei leggere nelle scuole...così la smettiamo di sentirci superiori a quelli nati in posti meno fortunati di quelli in cui siamo nati noi, o con il colore della pelle diverso dal nostro...

Albert says

In the backdrop of rural China, in the villages and waterways, Ma Jian has crafted a tale both alarming and distressing on the abuses of China's one-child policy.

"...Meili remembers seeing Yuanyuan hobbling back from the school the day they left. Her mother-in-law was beside her, one hand supporting her round the waist and the other gripping the aborted fetus by the arm. Yuanyuan went into labour as soon as she was strapped to the school desk, but by the time the baby was born the disinfectant had already killed it. The Family Planning Officer dropped the dead baby into a plastic

bucket, but it was so big it toppled out. It lay sprawled on the ground for hours. No one bothered to pick it up. When her mother-in-law came to fetch her, she scooped it up from the floor and refused to let go of it..."

Meili has already had her one child. A girl. But her husband Kongzi is determined to continue his line which he believes goes back to the great philosopher Confucius and demands a son. When she becomes pregnant they flee their village and travel the rivers in rural China to hide from the Family Planning Police. The enforcers of China's one-child policy.

..."What a fine voice you have," the man says coldly. "Your cries won't change anything, though. We've seen it all in this room: vomit, faeces, blood, urine, screaming tantrums. But however much the women curse and resist, they must all surrender their babies to us in the end. You think you can defy the state? Don't waste your breath."

"When we tied you to this table there were two of you, but when you get off there'll be just one,"

Meili suffers greatly in her duty to provide Kongzi with a heir. She is beaten, raped and suffered the horror of watching her newborn child strangled in front of her. But an even greater indignity is in her realization that although she and Kongzi were once respected and held in esteem in the village they came from. That now. They are no better than the peasants they once looked down upon. That now they are the outcasts in their own country. This in turn changes the way she sees herself and her husband.

"...The village teacher she once worshipped has become a man who fills her with disgust. She looks down at him now and spits: "What were those sayings you kept rattling off? Cultivate yourself and bring order to your family, and the nation will be at peace..."

The abuse and tyranny Meili suffers at the hands of the government and the husband she loves is as tragic and horrible as the truth that leaks from this novel. You want to believe that much of what is written here is not true, but in your heart, you know it is.

Guy Salvidge says

I thought I had already read the bleakest novel ever written, Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*. But I've found one still bleaker, by my favourite Chinese writer Ma Jian, who hasn't had a new book in about five years. *The Dark Road* is the tale of Kongzi, seventy-sixth descendant of Confucius, his wife Meilie, and their daughter Nannan. It's about the brutalities of modern Chinese life, the one child policy, and the environmental chaos found there. It's about corruption and despair. These three and especially Meilie suffer unceasing torment at the hand of the Chinese authorities and various unpleasant people. There's no light at the end of the tunnel. Toward the end, the book becomes a strange variant of fantasy with Meilie being pregnant for the fourth time - for five years. She says she won't give birth until the one child policy is revoked.

I can't praise this highly enough, both in terms of the subject matter and the writing (expertly translated by Ma's wife Flora Drew). But it isn't for the fainthearted. I can read virtually anything and yet there were passages in this, especially in the first half, that were among the most gruelling and horrific I've read anywhere. You've been warned.

Still, it's an essential book by an essential writer, one of the brightest and best critics of modern China.
