THOUGHTS ON CAT COUNTRY, BY LAO SHE

A SCI-FI POLITICAL DYSTOPIA FROM 1930S CHINA

WRITTEN BY LLA

When we think of the science fiction genre today, we have in mind an imaginary impregnated by the cult films between the 70s and 90s: Star Trek, Matrix, Blade Runner or Star Wars (the latter halfway between science fiction and fantasy), but for a long, very long time the science fiction media par excellence remained the book, in which it was imposed and also reaches its first climax with the work of H.G.Wells. Certainly before him there had already been books of settings and features more or less sci-fi, like those of Verne, but novels such as the invisible man, the war between the two worlds or (my favorite) the time machine created, Still at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the guidelines that would later become the pillars of the genre. When Lao She first approached the science fiction novel in 1932, this world could not be called mature, it was a genre still in strong development and that opened to many possible emerging themes and that's what She tried to do. It was, however, completely absent in Chinese literature, and will continue to be for a certain period after its publication, given its only partial success both by the public and critics.
Written between 1932 and 1933, the day after, and in response to the Japanese invasion of Manchuria and Shanghai, Cat Country belongs to several subgenres: science fiction, of course, for the setting and plot, combined with future dystopia, satire, which is used extensively and also some elements of the fable. Although not outstanding in all of them, it presents itself as a solid and original critique of Chinese politics and not only of a world that, as we will see, is much more similar to ours than we would like.

The plot of the book revolves around the story of a Chinese astronaut, who remains anonymous throughout the course of history, stuck on Mars after his spaceship's wrong landing, and the civilization with which he comes into contact: that of cat-men, zoomorphic creatures with a deprecable nature. Once flourishing, now the country of Cats has fallen into a phase of stagnation and social-cultural crisis that seems to have no way out, suffocated by the negligence and selfishness of its inhabitants, by their dependence on the lotus leaves and the indirect yoke of foreign peoples. Forced to live with those people so alien to him, the astronaut will have a way of understanding how terrible and indissoluble can become the link between homeland and people, vice and normality and wealth and decay.

THE ABSURD MARS OF THE CATS

Lao She hardly chose randomly the idea of representing the co-protagonists of the book as cats: this animal has a great relevance within Chinese culture and folklore, was always a symbol of luck, but also of honor and loyalty. Here, the last two qualities are as far away from Mars' cat men as possible: their nature is almost exclusively inclined to their ego, desires and ultimately survival. Cats are selfish, they are capable of empathy in very few cases and only among close blood relatives, they are not able to build or even imagine a society worthy of that name, but live life as solely built on personal choices and objectives. Nevertheless, since theirs was a decay and not an eternal stagnation, they inherited the society of their ancestors, which hides complex traits, clearly inspired by that of ancient imperial China.

At the top of the country there is the emperor, absolute and rich ruler, inviolate in politics and almost omnipotent thanks to his cunning, his resources and the absence of intelligence of his people. Below him there is a vast and unspecified social pyramid based on access to public offices: the nobles and the great landowners are its pinnacle (among them there is also Great Scorpion, the aristocrat for whom the astronaut works), followed by a vast multitude of state officials, militaries and other salaried employees, all hoarded by the very poor employment and the insatiable meager of ambition, corruption and resources. Below the state hierarchy are the intellectuals, completely without qualities worthy of note and simply engaged in appearing intelligent and educated, then artisans and peasants, who live on hardship and collect the crumbs of wealth of the empire.

The society of cats is based primarily on appearance, on making what is not appear and make disappear what is. Almost no one speaks frankly, in fact cats use sweet words, imbued with prissiness, by hypocritically masking the various problems that afflict them or society in general. The economy is almost non-existent and relies exclusively on foreign exports, thanks to which easy and large revenues have been considered valid for the closure of industries and the destruction of agriculture. Politics sees a new revolution flourishing almost daily, but they are always either led by the emperor himself or led by men who end up becoming their lollygags, ceding power in favor of their own ideals. Culture is non-existent, abandoned and even sold to foreigners who have completely absorbed or bought it, while intellectuals are full of philosophies and foreign and complex words to set a tone, with almost no knowledge. Schools are places of violence, diplomas, all with high marks, are given away before classes start so that the country can achieve exceptional results. The relationship with foreign countries is based on a deep sense of fear and reverence by cats towards any person outside their country, whose customs they try to imitate but are unable to understand them in depth. The inhabitants are addicted to a massive consumption of lotus leaves, a mixture between food and drug, which also represents their main reason for being, the greatest economic resource in the country and which proves to have amazing effects even on the protagonist.

So in the land of cats, nothing is as it is said. Students do not study, the wise are ignorant, workers do not produce, museums have no works of art, soldiers do not fight, the only truth

seems to be freedom, the highest value of the society of the cat men, indeed, paraphrasing Great Scorpio: "...in plunder it is expressed the maximum degree of freedom and, since its foundation, in the society of cats freedom has been the most important value".

THE CAT MEN

The cats presented in the novel, far from being mere copies of each other, demonstrate their own distinct individuality despite being almost all united by proud selfishness and lack of morality.

The first cat encountered by the astronaut is Great Scorpion, a wealthy plantation owner of lotus leaves and an aristocrat in charge of the emperor's military forces. His ultimate aim is exclusively the enrichment and exploitation of his fellow citizens and whatever situations he encounters, which is why he hires the astronaut to protect his lotus plantations. Ambitious, yet not as stupid as most of his peers, Great Scorpio represents an elite that is well aware of the decadence of their country but, instead of fighting to end it, tries to take advantage of it for personal ends. Like other cat men, Big Scorpion is not totally evil; on the contrary, he seems to have a deep love for his son, Little Scorpion, and respect for his father.

Little Scorpion is the only cat on Mars with whom the Chinese man can make friends and clearly distance itself from its peers for intelligence, morality and spirit. He does not tolerate dirt and has preserved the old habit of the glorious golden age of cats, refuses to have many concubines, but loves only one cat, harshly criticizes the attitudes of his compatriots and his father, but has neither the energy nor the possibility to reorganize and clean up society. Lost in nihilism and the worst black Little Scorpio can not be the hope that the country of cats needs, but actually would not even know how to exploit. Through his words the harshest criticisms are made of the social system, starting with the school system, and then to the bureaucracy, to the wickedness of people, to the lotus leaves and finally to the intellect. If the world imagined and represented by Great Scorpio is all about bright and warm, even in its corruption and cruelty, that of his son is gray and desolate, devoid of any future.

Female cats are less explored than their male counterparts, yet two characters are clearly delineated by the author: the ambassador's wife and Lotus, the lover of Little Scorpio. Both are crushed by the male-dominated system of feline society, where all women are seen as mere sexual objects (this point is repeatedly stressed), so much so that the wealth and power of a man is also measurable by the number of his women. The ambassador's wife is an old woman, widow of her husband (absolutely despicable man and pedophile), that for one night becomes the astronaut's hobby. Her perseverance in refraining from eating lotus leaves has preserved some traits of empathy in her, so that she still maintains her husband's 8 concubines to avoid them ending up on the street. The absence of pendency shows how human qualities are overcome by them, not surprisingly the old woman is isolated from the rest of men cats and

misseen, considered as a madwoman. Equally tragic is the figure of Lotus, who lives an affectionate love affair with Little Scorpion (despite he is already married in a arranged marriage) and that is plagiarized in every sense by misogynic ideas of cats, She does not understand Little Scorpio's attempts to emancipate her and has now become accustomed to living and enjoying the society in which she was born

THE SYMBOLISM OF THE NOVEL

The symbolism represents the muscular system of the novel, supported by a lighter and less developed bone texture. Assuming itself not only as a portrait of the China of the 1930s, but of a wider social and human spectrum, the book links in its symbolic system various themes.
Needless to say, the direct subjects described in cats are the Chinese, an orphan civilization for only twenty years of its empire and now fallen into a decadence that seems destined to collapse the state. In 1932, China was formally a republic, de facto a dictatorship in the hands of the only Kuomintang party controlled by Chiang Kai-shek,shek, who had recently suffered the humiliation of the Japanese invasion of the Manciura and the suppression of communist political forces, previously allied with the government. In the last two centuries of its history, the great Chinese empire, once the largest and most prosperous nation in the world, had been defeated culturally and militarily by the European powers, beginning its long period of decline. Hence the decline described in the book, where cats are pushed by foreigners to consume lotus leaves (allusion to opium, a drug very widespread in China and economic monopoly of the westerners who fought two wars to maintain trade) and gradually losing their identity and their own consciousness. And of course the Chinese elite, that of Great Scorpion, also participates in this trade, which begins to cultivate immense drug plantations. Great Scorpio is an indication of the grave hypocrisy of China of the time: he in fact masks some of his actions as part of the traditions of cats, but as admits his son, His interests in them have disappeared as a result of the contamination with foreigners he had as a young man. The three generations of the Scorpion family are therefore the three stages of the Chinese generations at the dawn of the collapse of the empire: the grandfather still blindly anchored to the traditions of the country, the father, educated in foreign manners, moves in a feeble and astute balance that enables him to exploit the best aspects of both cultures, The son, on the other hand, who is paradoxically more aware of the situation both in his mother country and in the outside world, sees the work of his predecessors and loses hope.
Lao criticizes both those who have stupidly tied themselves to the traditions of Chinese history, too proud and lost in a world and in a time that no longer belongs to him, and those who have decided to copy without critical spirit the western ways, superiorships and lackeys of something they do not even understand, both in politics and in everyday life. In the first case he also launched an attack on Soviet Russia, which sold its dreams and ideology for

power and finally replaced the tsar no different from him. The emperor of cats was never deposed despite many revolutions which tried to overthrow him, because he always worked in such a way as to control the leaders of the revolts and when, on one occasion, the revolutionaries finally managed to kill him, Their leader had taken power and had himself appointed as the new emperor. Not coincidentally one of the titles of the emperor of cats is that of "lord of 1000 revolutions", winner of each of them paradoxically. Lao not only criticise the nationalist revolution led by the Kuomintang, but also expresses his disappointment for the communist one, the communist cats represented in the end of the book are mostly the simpletons and the immoral violents, unable to lead a democratic life, but rather ready to eliminate their own comrades in the event of political disagreement.

Just as China, the cat empire has also sold its artistic and cultural heritage, leaving the state production aside to obtain easier income from export. The emperor's armies are ridiculed: "they were very good at fighting" says the astronaut "when they faced their own kind", to indicate ironically how effective the Chinese armies were in suppressing various revolts (including the most famous one of Taiping), but they proved to be completely useless in the face of the most developed European weapons and strategies.

In the final part a more pathetic parallelism is staged: the city of cats is invaded by a neighboring state and the armies of the emperor are withdrawn before fighting so much is their fear for enemies. Little Scorpion is the only one who tries to organize a defense, but his army is annihilated and he, seeing the country now fallen and lost all hope, decides to commit suicide with Lotus. The rest of the country continues to retreat in front of the enemy, and when Great Scorpion tries to surrender to gain benefits from the new rulers is killed. Civilization is finally swept away without resistance. Lao She in this scenario too pathetic, where he seems to overdo in the lamentation but where at the same time proves prophet of future events, paints in small and evil enemies of cats the Japanese, that the year before the writing of the novel they had invaded China and had occupied the Manciura and that then a few years later they will resume their campaign in order to occupy the whole of China, in the terrible second Sino-Japanese war.

The message of the book of general pessimism and the description of human vices and corruption of its virtues is still today frighteningly current, thanks to a critical reading of the sum of the historical and social processes in Asia, But human-level comparisons, between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a period of history that is perhaps closer than we think

CONSIDERATIONS

Lao She called Cat Country a failed attempt, a satire that overdosed in pessimism and ended up becoming a simple lament. Other critics have criticized the novel, calling it too shaky although solid in structure. The excess of pathos expressed especially in the finale, the haste with which this is conducted and the lack of deepening some possible scenarios of the society

of cats certainly make the work incomplete and imperfect, but does not make a product failed or mediocre. The high symbolic weight, the accurate social criticism, the continuous topicality of the subject, the cold and ruthless irony applied in some points and the extensive world building make the book a remarkable literary product, that if composed by a normal writer would be considered his pinnacle of career. Although it does not reach the level of Animal Farm, which remains an absolute pillar of the political fable, Cat Country has the strength, more than 90 years later, to hit the modern reader in totus and open the doors of the little known but valuable, Chinese literature.