

Fatos Kongoli.
Dragoi i fildishtë [The Ivory Dragon]
Tirana: Çabej. 1999. 192 pp. ISBN 99927-33-12-8
Le dragon d'ivoire. Edmond Tupja, tr.
Paris: Rivages. 2000. 257 pp. ISBN 2-7436-0652-5

The 'Ivory Dragon' is the third novel of a tetralogy by Albanian writer Fatos Kongoli. It focusses primarily on the life of an Albanian student in China in the 1960s.

The Sino-Albanian alliance of 1961-1978 may in retrospect be regarded as one of the most curious political alliances of the twentieth century, the marriage of the elephant and the mouse. The political leadership of Stalinist Albania broke with the Warsaw Pact in 1961, accusing the rest of Eastern Europe of revisionism. Bereft of friends and allies in Europe and increasingly isolated in the world, the little Balkan country turned to China, which happened to be offering a substantial amount of development assistance. Communist China for its part was only too glad to acquire a bridgehead for Marxist-Leninist propaganda and revolution in Europe. Thousands of Chinese cadres poured into Albania in the sixties to assist in the country's development, and a modest number of Albanians were given an opportunity to study at Chinese universities and institutions.

For Genc Skampa and the other fictive Albanian students highlighted in the novel, studies in China provided an opportunity to discover the world. Having contact not only with their Chinese comrades but also with foreign students from all over the globe, they were able to pursue their goals of intellectual and personal development. Among these pursuits were discreet sexual freedoms which would have been unthinkable in puritan Albania itself, where everyone was watching everyone with a malevolent eye.

Interwoven into the novel is the life of the protagonist in post-communist Albania thirty years later, as a journalist invited to Paris with a group of Balkan colleagues. Now divorced and suffering from personal isolation and the ravages of alcohol, he looks back in a haze to the decisive years of his life in China and ponders over the emotional consequences of his turbulent love affair with Sui Lin.

The 'Ivory Dragon' is the tragic parable of one man's life, of adventure, alienation and self-destruction. It is told in the same atmosphere of poetic melancholy which pervades Fatos Kongoli's first two works of the tetralogy: *I humburi*, Tirana 1992 (see WLT 71:4, p. 842-843), and *Kufoma*, Tirana 1994 (see WLT 73:1, p. 189-190). Although the backdrop to this novel is quite different from the earlier works, the underlying themes of despair and isolation are the same. Through Kongoli's eyes, Albania's closely knit society is seen for what it is to many creative writers and independent thinkers: provincial and stifling. For him, it is something to escape or withdraw from. And yet, Fatos Kongoli has remained and has now become one of the most forceful literary representatives of his impoverished homeland.

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