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6 Tanyin Alley

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6 *Tanyin Alley*

by Liu Zongren

China Books & Periodicals, 1989

Here in vacant lots children find mutilated bodies and abandoned infants. Yet, they don't run to tell an adult, they ignore them as commonplace. This is Beijing, China, from 1949 to the 1980's. And in this view of China readers may grow to imagine that the world of George Orwell's *1984* was indeed a reality.

6 Tanyin Alley is for the most part the story of one courtyard in Beijing, and the 11 families who live in it, as seen through the eyes of the main character, Longsen. During a long period of political upheaval, Zongren takes us into homes where only paper windows and underfed stoves keep the winter cold out.

Lives in the alley are intertwined and are caught up in the cultural revolution. Gossip, the central recreational activity of the courtyard (and the reason China needs no KGB), brings the people of the alley together and then, maddeningly, drives them to isolation when saying the wrong thing to the wrong person, or having the wrong friends, begins to be the means that can send you to prison or worse.

Longsen is an intelligent man who hides his often persecuted gift of intelligence from his working class neighbors. He's careful at the Bureau where he works to be quiet, make no enemies. But various factions of the Red Guards are loose, beating people to death on the spot for things as simple as having wealth; or having had wealth; having been picked out as a "capitalist roader" by the neighborhood committee for making two yuan more than they a month; having been in the army 14 years before; or simply belonging to the wrong faction of the Red Guards. Longsen's friends, the people he grew up with, lives with, and depends on for companionship, belong to one Red Guard faction. Longsen is an innocent who tries to avoid trouble by never becoming an actual member of their group, never participating in any of their activities. But all that care proves useless when the new political group comes in and begins to arrest his friends for crimes that may or may not have been committed. They soon accuse Longsen of being the group's mastermind.

The novel gives the reader a sense of the chaos of Chinese communistic history. The reader experiences that what has replaced the old system in China is a system where those few in power control everything. And the poor, with no chance of attaining power, suffer at the hands of those struggling for some middle ground of power.