

Beijing Coma

By Ma Jian
(Chatto and Windus)

Twenty years ago, countless numbers of students joined academics and civilians from all over of China who flooded into Tiananmen Square in the centre of Beijing, to demand democracy from their less than unwilling communist government. In the ensuing massacre – the echoes of which still resound today – thousands of people were killed and millions of lives were changed drastically.

The manner in which these events unfolded is dealt with in very fine and sometimes exhausting detail in *Beijing Coma*, the third novel from Chinese writer Ma Jian.

We travel through the very real events in the company of the fictional character Dai Wei, a young student heavily involved in the centre of the protest who, through his mere presence amid the chaos, receives a shot to the head which puts him into a coma.

The book is divided up into short chapters, switching from Dai Wei's early life to events in the time leading up to the Tiananmen Square protests, separated by vignettes from both sides of the narrow divide between the living and the almost living.

*One of the most important and powerful novels in Chinese literature
The English version of the best-selling Chinese*

MA JIAN



BEIJING
COMA

One reviewer has suggested that Dai Wei's life is a metaphor for the ability to remember and the inability to act, which I guess is the curse of history in general, but which also has a particular sting in the tail when it comes to recent Chinese history, given that these events still are not to be mentioned.

Naturally, *Beijing Coma* itself has been banned in China, and its author – who took part in the protests – has settled in London. Yet the very fact that the novel has been written reflects in itself the possibility of hope through remem-

brance.

For someone not well versed in Chinese history, this book was a treat in its painting a very clear picture of the immensity of the events at hand. But it also links them historically in a manner which makes one wonder how and when the Chinese state's erasure of history will ever come to an end.

Nevertheless, for me the book was very slow in getting going, and at points I found myself flicking ahead to see if it ever would. Despite this, I particularly enjoyed the parts describing Dai Wei in his coma, the sensations that he discovers, the incredible detail that life presents to him so much more so in that state than ever before. Also, it's clear Ma Jian must have done some serious research into the medical reality of a comatose patient.

To my delight, these preferred elements increasingly grow, and halfway through the book seems to gather the speed necessary to hold my attention. Not until then do I really see why this book has drawn the praise that it has.



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