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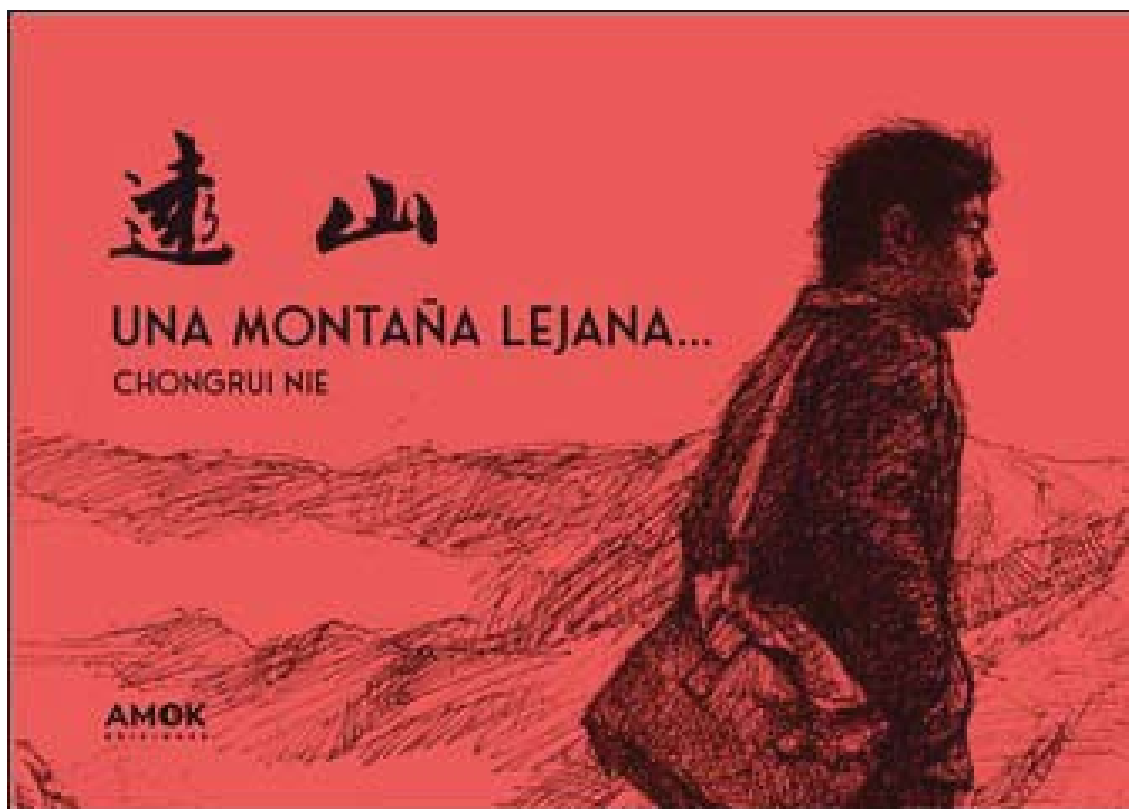
REVIEW

Una montaña lejana... (au loin, une montagne...)

Chongrui Nie

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Not so long ago, to speak of a comic strip or book was to speak of children's entertainment, animation or science fiction, beyond even the narrative quality of the story and of course, the drawing technique and the means used to capture the story. However, this vision, not really attuned to the fact that people were in front of authentic literary or pictorial works, or a symbiosis of both, began to change at the end of last century. To cite a before and after, in 1992 Art Spiegelman received the Pulitzer Prize for his work *Maus*, until then the only one awarded to a comic book author, although Spiegelman had already perceived comics from an *underground* perspective as a model of visual experimentation, yes, but also as the ideal vehicle for telling stories as shocking as that of his father, a Holocaust survivor in a world of mice, cats and pigs. The 80s and 90s were also the years of genre greats such as Will Eisner, Frank Miller and Alan Moore. The concept of "graphic novel" was born to magnify the genre, although there is no reason why it should be denigrating to talk about "comics", given that it is fairly recognisable that they are pictorial and literary art worthy of both academic research and exhibition in museums.

The work of the Chinese artist Chongrui Nie —although based in France for decades—, *A Mountain Far Away...* or, to mention its original name in French, *Au Loin Une Montagne...*, belongs to the comic genre and to the genius within it. Moreover, if society's lack of knowledge of authors, narratives and works from far-off China are taken into account, it is a great success for the Amok publishing house to have published it in Spanish from the original French, translated by Fabián Rodríguez Piastrí, in this excellent edition available in hardback and paperback and in its original format —large, 30 X 21 cm. This allows the reader to dwell on the beauty and symbolism of Nie's drawings, as well as on the interior narrative of the protagonist, Nie himself, as *A Mountain Far Away...* is an autobiography of Nie's own experiences during the Cultural Revolution in Mao's China (1966-1976).

Amok specialises in bringing Asian literature to Spain, from China to Laos, including Malaysia, Singapore and Sri Lanka, as a result of the personal experience of its editors in the vast continent of Asia and their interest that authors famed in their own countries and beyond —in the United States and other European countries— should also be recognised in Spain. Without going any further, Chongrui Nie is also the artist of *Judge Bao*, a series that oscillates between the genres of detective fiction and mystery, set in China in the of the 10th-11th centuries, also published by Amok. This is a series that entertains the reader who is simply looking for thrills and good literature, while simultaneously serving as a first-hand source for other readers interested in learning more about Chinese history. The same may be claimed of *A Mountain Far Away...*, which depicts the China of yesterday and today in every word and image.

The book, originally written in French in 2019, is set, as stated above, in the period between 1966 and 1976 in China, during Mao's Cultural Revolution, which supposedly pursued the utopia of creating a new society and a new man, detached from a past presented as a dark era and contrary to all the revolution's ideals of

equality. Thus, millions of young city dwellers were moved to distant rural areas to work as peasants and labourers. One must not forget that the current Chinese leader, Xi Jinping, was one of them, Chongrui Nie was another, and in this work he recounts his experience, full of dark and light moments and not exempt from criticism. He became a mechanic and was sent to build weapons factories in the remote province of Shanxi. Nie was soon caught up in the breathtaking natural beauty that surrounded him, exposing the contradiction of the destroyed landscape, peace, remnants of the past in the form of temples and formerly sacred sites due to over-industrialisation, the savage exploitation of resources, urbanisation and the fast-paced economic development of a changing new China. It was the beginning of an accelerated time as opposed to the proverbial Chinese patience, something that can be seen multiplied exponentially today if one takes a look at the course of the last decades in China and the current geopolitical situation, where all deadlines appear to be shortening.

Like the talented comic book artist that he is, Nie introduces the reader to the story by means of a powerful visual narrative, large panels that guide the reader through the story, with a pacing determined by the framing, the arrangement of the images and the expressiveness of the characters that appear in the story: the bonhomie of the peasant and his family who are obliged to house the officials and workers sent by the Party, Nie's surprise at the beauty of his surroundings and their progressive deterioration, not only in terms of the natural elements, biodiversity—deeply rooted until then in the conception of the world by these tranquil rural enclaves for hundreds of years— or the contrast between the industrial worker and the farmworker, but in terms of the appearance of the evil inherent in man. Nie dwells on the artistic expressiveness of the faces, which reveal fears curdled into violence, the narrow-minded rejection of otherness, the cynicism of following orders to progress, or dogmatic intransigence. While characters and expressions of friendship, love and joy do appear, they are but brief situations that are eventually uprooted by the pragmatism of reality, like an inevitable and fatal tsunami that takes the reader to the machine-man.

In addition to the detailed depiction of the characters and their expressions, the use of perspective, the shading that provides drama and depth to the scenes, and the interplay of black and white to convey atmospheres and emotions are also noteworthy. The author has sometimes stated that his style is inspired by the Chinese painter and draughtsman Wang Huaiqi. Similarly, Nie also stands out for his exquisitely detailed and realistic style, reminiscent of classical engravings or traditional Chinese illustrations. His stories are made all the more captivating, as in *A Mountain Far Away...*, since he looks not at great characters or events, but on their impact on the everyday lives of ordinary people, which is an exercise in humanising the reader, an “it could be you” that reinforces the narrative, in this case to depict the harshness of Chinese history with a shocking realism, but one that is devoid of sordidness or pathos. Everything flows towards an inevitable end that is accepted.

Although it might seem otherwise, and although he lives between France and the United States, Nie's comics —much like *A Mountain Far Away...*—, which often explore historical, social and political themes, and approach Chinese history with an admittedly critical perspective, have had no problems getting published in China either. In fact, between 1997 and 2003 he held the post of artistic director of the Beijing People's Fine Arts Publishing House, although he eventually left it to devote himself more deeply to painting. In this sense, Nie's stance is partly reminiscent of Xi Jinping's own stance regarding Mao's Cultural Revolution, of which he and his family were also victims. It was a Red-Guard-led nightmare that brought repression and death to China, but it was also the painful economic basis, with the sacrifice and hard work of millions of people, for the start of China's launch. Until today. However, Nie opted to adapt and let himself be led by the system. As a matter of fact, he himself appears in this work highlighting the injustices and violence against opponents or simple people who did not agree with the repressive measures, although never confronting them and seeking, so to speak, to live in a sort of inner exile. On the contrary, Xi Jinping experienced his and his family's misfortune —his parents nearly lost their lives— with the aim of “becoming redder than red”, as quoted in his excellent biography by Stefan Aust and Adrian Geiges, *Xi Jinping: The Most Powerful Man in the World*.

Ultimately, in 1966, Chongrui Nie was first forced to work as a labourer in a construction factory in Beijing, then as a mechanic in Dongzhai and Guan Cen Shan, which led him to turn away from his youthful dream of becoming a painter. More than fifty years later, with that dream come true, he brings the reader closer to look out of a small window, his own, on China's Cultural Revolution. He undoubtedly does so without rancour or to settle any supposed scores, considering this experience as an opportunity that he was given, beyond the harshness of the work and the political risk of falling foul of the Red Guards, thanks to the beauty of the environment that surrounded him. *A Mountain Far Away...* also owes its existence to the drawings that Nie began sketching in small notebooks. For the reader, the results may prove jarring with Nie's calm vision: a reality of Chinese youth under the aforesaid Cultural Revolution, the impact of unbridled industrialisation that became devastating for natural resources and incompatible with the social tradition that had existed until then, especially in rural areas, rooted in ancestral traditions and beliefs. The author's illustrations also become the latest testimony of the destruction of these remnants, many of them from the centuries-old Ming dynasty, during the Maoist era.

Since then, as is also depicted, the mountains of Guan Cen Shan have never stopped calling on Nie to return. This is also reflected in the work, and the contrast between the idyllic and rugged landscape of his youth, and the radical march of time is even more unavoidable, although not so much for the rural communities he knew. Life appeared to advance in step with this nature that man tries to tame. As if it were a magic number, fourteen years later, Nie returned once again to Guan Cen Shan, and a following fourteen years later, he made a third trip. With each visit, China changed, and his pencil captured that transformation. This work ends

with a glossary of names that the reader will appreciate, thanks to Natalie Nie — the author’s wife—; an extensive biography of Chongrui Nie himself; numerous photographs of the region; and notes and drafts used by the author as the basis for his drawings. Amok’s decision to include them is a felicitous one. If one were to summarise this magnificent work in one sentence, it would be to say it is a comic that takes people back in time to the Cultural Revolution China. As Nie himself says: “Art not only documents history, but also questions it. Through my strokes, I attempt to rescue what time and man strive to erase.”

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