China beyond the Headlines

edited by Timothy B. Weston and Lionel M. Jensen
Novelists are totally unethical beings: when the truth of fact and the needs of fiction conflict, the novelist will always favour the latter.

—David Lodge, The Practice of Writing

Novels and poems. Why do we read them? How do we read them? A puzzling question, perhaps, but the range of answers can be instructive when dealing with the literary output of China and with its reception in the West. Historically, that is, throughout the twentieth century, the socio-political intentions and applications of Chinese literature have frequently overshadowed the belles-lettres for a “foreign” audience; read more as a window onto contemporary events and society than for its aesthetic or entertainment values, modern and contemporary fiction and verse have tended to follow, and sometimes subvert, the political and ideological twists and turns of the nation. Whether because of the nature of the writing or because China, like so many countries, appears so culturally remote to Western readers, those few novels, stories, and poems that migrate beyond China’s geographical and linguistic borders attract an audience made up primarily of those who wish to “learn about China” in a more reader-friendly format than a textbook. Take, for instance, the following comments from a New York Times review of Mo Yan’s “breakthrough” novel, Red Sorghum, “In ‘Red Sorghum,’ Mo Yan introduces Western readers to the unfamiliar culture of provincial China through dozens of vivid characters. By the end, they and Mo Yan have put Northeast Gaomi Township securely on the map of world literature,” or on Jia Pingwa’s Turbu-
... "The Chinese countryside, home to nearly a billion peasants, is described in ways that are both instructive and moving."

That "instructive" precedes "moving" is in itself instructive, for that implies a predetermined, and probably nonliterary, motivation for coming to the Chinese novel in the first place. Novels as textbooks, fiction as sociology, facts over imagination. That, in spite of the verity that "literature is not the best way to learn about other lands and cultures, especially when the literature appears in our own culture's forms, that is, when the literature is familiar in form... bent on telling a story in a way we like our stories told."

At the risk of seeming overly idealistic, it seems to me that writing from another culture, at its best, tells us not so much about that particular culture as it does about the similarities and dissimilarities of individuals who are nurtured in that culture with those from other societies; a fine point, perhaps, but significant, in that human truths tend not, I believe, to be restricted by spatial or temporal borders, while the various ways to those truths and how they are articulated and experienced give them greater universal meaning.

Sometimes, of course, the works of Chinese authors are praised for their artistic achievements, if not always on their own terms, as illustrated in Kirkus Reviews:

Balzac and Zola would have recognized a kindred spirit in our author, whose extraordinary pictures of the extremes to which human beings drive one another and themselves seem scarcely inferior to their own.

or, as the novelist Amy Tan states on the cover of Red Sorghum:

Having read Red Sorghum, I believe Mo Yan deserves a place in world literature. His imagery is astounding, sensual and visceral. His story is electrifying and epic. I am convinced that this book will successfully leap over the international boundaries that many translated works face... and that his voice will find its way into the heart of the American reader, just as Kundera and García Márquez have.

This essay has been undertaken in part to supply a "non-Other" context, however superficial or preliminary, to contemporary writing from China, and in part as an introduction for readers who come to that writing in translation, for whatever reason. As a translator first and a critic second, my personal biases will become transparently obvious. That I tend to deal with works and authors I have translated is not as self-serving as it may seem; in a field of endeavor that has attracted few practitioners, I am fortunate to have been free to select and work on much of the best and most appealing fiction written in Chinese, and I cite it here for the reasons that drew me to it, not for the results of the translation. In the role of cultural mediator, for that is what a literary translator becomes, the responsibilities toward authors, texts, and readers are themselves mediated by the pleasures obtained from wrestling with words, concepts, and images from one culture and clothing them in new garb for another.

FROM THERE...

Much has changed in Chinese literature since the days of political and ideological extremism ended in the mid 1970s. Writers, who had been hobbled by Maoist demands for socialist-realist literary production for nearly three decades, began to enjoy a bit more freedom in the choice of subject matter and modes of writing, a phenomenon that has continued to the present, with a brief but tragic interruption in June 1989. Poets and novelists, in line with Dengist liberalization/reform policies and a bit of double-edged neglect during the economic boom, have continually pushed the envelope, taking on increasingly controversial topics and experimenting with a variety of writing styles.

While cognizant of the risk of essentialism when characterizing the corpus of writing that has emerged from China over the past decade, I think it is constructive to identify some of its most prominent features, especially in regard to fiction, which is still the most commercially popular, the most engaging, and perhaps the liveliest genre. Foremost among these features is a move away from mimetic realism, that which strives to imitate the real world, toward new forms of expression. The critic David Wang agrees:

The best contemporary Chinese fiction cannot be classified as realistic in a traditional sense. For those used to seeing modern Chinese fiction as a supplement to social history or as a predictable Jamesonian "national allegory" of sociopolitics, the fiction produced since the late eighties may tell a different story. It shows that literature in the post-Tian’anmen period has not harked back to the old formulas of reflectionism. Precisely because of their refusal either to remain silent or to cry out in an acceptably "realist" way, the new writers see life as an ongoing process, a conglomeration of possibilities and impossibilities. Precisely because of their inability to believe in the one true path through realism to modernism and then postmodernism, or in any
melodramatically predictable path through history, contemporary Chinese writers promise new and lively beginnings for the end-of-the-century Chinese imagination.4

These “lively beginnings” are most notably anchored in China’s past. In encountering novels and stories from fin-de-siècle China, one is struck by an obsession with history and with memory, individual and collective. That is so, I think, for a variety of reasons: First, successful and widely read contemporary writers, most of them in their thirties and forties, are fascinated by China’s past, having lost so much of their recent history through the political process. Second, as the cultural critic Rey Chow has stated, “the weight of history bears upon the writing of ‘fiction’ in such a way as to force one to reflect critically on the space in which the Chinese intellectual has had to live. This is a space without fresh air.”5 Recapturing that past and subjecting it to renewed scrutiny is at the core of some of the most successful fiction in the post-Mao era.

Prominent among this group of writers is Mo Yan, whose re-creations of early twentieth-century Chinese history, especially the war years, in such powerful and panoramic novels as Red Sorghum evoke a sense of futility and loss.6 By merging myth and reality, biographical and historical incidents, heroic and mundane activities, Mo Yan makes a case for cultural degeneration while drawing attention to the way the past is reconstructed, a narrative process that has been characterized as “one that oscillates and mediates between remembered history and imaginative reconstruction.” Referring to his hometown and, perhaps, by extension, all of China, as “the most beautiful and most repulsive, most unusual and most common, most sacred and most corrupt, most heroic and most bastardsly, hardest-drinking and hardest-loving place in the world” (4), he cries out against China’s blind rush to modernity, the human cost of which appears to be civility and morality: “Now I stood before Second Grandma’s grave, affecting the hypocritical display of affection I had learned from high society, with a body immersed so long in the filth of urban life that a foul stench oozed from my pores” (356). Modernity as a national icon takes a substantial drubbing from this “peasant writer,” while historiography, and perhaps history itself, is problematized, to the horror of the literary establishment and the government it represents.

For writers like Mo Yan, and so many of his contemporaries, history is neither circular nor linear but random and shifting, until the boundaries between past and present blur into obscurity. By denying history its tradi-

tional authority, they raise fundamental questions about contemporary life, politics, and values. Historical fiction, once a refuge for writers intent on buttressing or criticizing specific politics or ideologies, has become a showcase of human nature, frequently at its most despicable. The past is now open to a plethora of interpretations by China’s writers, who refuse to accept official versions and, in the most extreme cases, do not admit the “possibility” of knowing history at all. The sanctity of history, we learn from these Chinese authors, exists in its mystery and in its possibilities, not in either its glorification or manipulation by ideologues.

Often characterized as members of a lost generation, writers such as these, whose childhood and teen years were spent “making (or, for the youngest, playing at) revolution” in the service of Mao, only to be abandoned by him and left to contemplate their enormous losses in education, family cohesion, and the little pleasures of life, turned naturally to the theme of alienation, especially in the wake of the Tiananmen Massacre of 1989. Coupled with the heady delights of commercialization, this trend has produced a coterie of novelists and poets whose work reveals a place where surface stability uneasily masks a society in turmoil and whose cynicism has alarmed the official literary community while capturing a considerable readership of like-minded urbanites.

Themes (contents), of course, do not tell all the story. As China stumbles along toward modernity and international respect, its writers have become more experimental, more daring, more self-consciously iconoclastic than ever before. Topics and a host of hybrid narrative strategies once considered taboo now inform the works of many of the writers of fin-de-siècle China. Opaque language, self-reflective and disjointed narratives have, along with unthinkable acts and ideas—from cannibalism to perverted sex—become trademarks of the most conspicuous among them. While they are sometimes accused of pandering to Western tastes, either by filling their work with sensationalist descriptions or dissident views, or by consciously striving for writing with a high degree of “translatability,”7 these writers are nevertheless becoming more defiant and much more self-assured.

It may seem bewildering that they are published at all, given the seemingly subversive nature of much of their writing; indeed, some of their work does disappear from bookstores under withering attacks by conservative critics. Yet so long as they do not openly attack the Party and leadership or call for a new system of government, the limitations of book distribution, contrasted, say, with movies, and, one hopes, the unrelenting
pressure of freedom-to-write advocates and the attention of readers around the world conspire to keep iconoclasm alive and visible. While some of these writers must sometimes publish their work first in Taiwan or, less often, in foreign translation, none with whom I am familiar has yet wound up in jail for a novel, a story, or a poem.

The issue of Western influence, not just on the exploration of nontraditional, even corrupting, topics, but on styles of writing as well, has been widely, and emotionally, debated. Few will deny the influence of the magic-realists of Latin America or the more self-conscious collagistic writings of the Czech novelist Milan Kundera and the like on aspiring writers in the wake of the Cultural Revolution, yet those influences have led to transformations more readily suited to the linguistic, semantic, and cultural realities of China. The highly allusive, myth-laden, and enigmatic stories of a clutch of avant-gardists have plumbed the descriptive powers of the Chinese language as authors have set out to shock and alienate a readership more comfortable with a “reality-anchored” style of writing, whether it is “hard-core” realism or grotesque exposé. In speaking of the avant-garde school, the critic Jing Wang has written:

[I]ts irreverent attitude toward history and culture is decipherable only when seen against the historical context from which it emerged [the economic boom of the late 1980s]. The young heretics’ fabrication of a rootless subject, devoid of memory, was not a mindless pursuit. The making of a subject without a core who narrates without a purpose was a highly subversive act. What the avant-gardists sneered at was the sublime subject construed for a decade by humanist writers and intellectuals. Theirs was a socio-politically centered and culturally invested subject invigorated with a teleological and utopian vision toward life... Posing as seditious elements in the post-Mao era, the avant-gardists adopted an impious attitude toward history. Those who look in their stories for trenchant critiques of the Cultural Revolution will be disappointed. What they display, instead, is a voracious appetite for the clinical depiction of uncommitted violence, which represents a metonymy, rather than just a metaphor, of the historical cataclysm of the Cultural Revolution.8

In the sweep of Chinese literary history of this century, this constitutes an unprecedented change in attitude. In characterizing the goals of writers from the pre-communist period, the critic C. T. Hsia has observed that “what distinguishes this ‘modern’ phase of Chinese literature alike from the traditional and Communist phases is rather its burden of moral contemplation; its obsessive concern with China as a nation afflicted with a

spiritual disease and therefore unable to strengthen itself or change its set ways of inhumanity.”9 As the twenty-first century begins, that no longer holds true, at least not for members of the post–Cultural Revolution generation. One defiantly individualistic novelist, for instance, has claimed tersely: “I can’t stand people with a sense of mission.”10 Concurrent with recent changes in the way novelists are writing these days are changes in the way they view their role as artists. No longer interested in placing their pens in the service of society, which seems to be unraveling in the midst of economic reforms intended to fulfill the national dream of becoming rich and powerful, they view the xenophobic zeal of their parents’ generation with skepticism at best, contempt at worst. They see themselves as independent artists whose works can, and should, appeal to readers and viewers all over the world.11 In their truth-telling about contemporary and historical China, they present a picture of a nation that is turning away from its past and demanding new paths to an urbanized, entrepreneurial, less static future; it may turn out that in the long run they are appreciated less in their own country than elsewhere.

In fact, in this era of increasing globalization and information overload, these young writers speak to the rest of the world precisely because they no longer care to speak for China. The common thread of misanthropy running through much of their work and the emphasis on skewed, anti-Confucian family relations, including incest, rape, murder, voyeurism, and more, underscores a belief that they are no more responsible for social instability in their country than are entrepreneurs who want only to get rich, students who want only to leave, or petty bureaucrats who want only to enlarge themselves at public expense. Whether their pessimistic views of China turn out to be prophetic, mimetic, or even wrong, it is now as hard to make arguments for a benign Chinese exoticism as it was to evoke visions of a genteel, kimono-clad Japan in the wake of novels by “postmodernists” Murakami Haruki and Murakami Ryu, and even the trendy Banana Yoshimoto, who speaks to the fantasies and perplexities of her thirty-something generation.

In the urban centers of China, where images have eroded the power of ideas and where the pace and nature of MTV, rock concerts, and soap operas dominate culture, darkly cinematic writings are winning over a materialistic and cynical readership that is caught up in a rush to embrace capitalist consumerism and experience as much decadence as they can squeeze into their young lives.

The reader will note that up to this point I have focused on fiction, both
because its narrative possibilities, its spatial and temporal sweep, more neatly accommodate the demands of national modernity and more closely capture (or subvert) the zeitgeist of the age, and, of course, because a lot more people read novels and stories—and watch the movies that are adapted from them—than go to the theater or curl up with a book of verse. With the exception of small coteries of intellectuals and esthetes who write, read, and view performances of contemporary Chinese plays—many of which are performed only outside the country—drama has fallen on hard times in the People’s Republic and, for that matter, other Chinese communities. If the term avant garde has a home, it is not in the Chinese novel or short story, but on the stages and in the chap books that struggle to retain a dwindling audience/readership. Gao Xingjian, now a full-fledged expatriate in Paris, is both the best-known and the most prolific dramatist working in Chinese today; his recent plays, extremely opaque and accessible only to the most dedicated viewers and critics, are performed in Europe and America to small but enthusiastic audiences. Several Taiwanese and Hong Kong dramatists, plus a few on the mainland, keep the experiment going, and while their work is occasionally translated into Western languages, it does not travel well.²¹

Poets, on the other hand, do attract readers in the original and in translation. Language, of course, is the supreme barrier, for the highly allusive, concise nature of Chinese is a constant frustration to translators, whose creative talents are strained to the limit. Much in the mold of Western poets such as John Ashbery, whose quest to tease the most out of poetic language has taken him into “slippery syntax, elusive personae, narrative uncertainty, the blending of incongruous dictions,”¹³ today’s poets from the Cultural Revolution generation are turning more inward, more subjective, and more elusive in their writing. What was once characterized as “misty poetry” has, for many at least, become a dense fog through which beauty pokes here and there without ever forming a recognizable whole.

Only one poet, Bei Dao, has had his work published in the West to any significant degree. And he, like a disproportionate number of poets from the People’s Republic, has lived in the West in exile since the bloodshed in Beijing a decade ago.¹⁴ It is, in fact, the plight of the displaced artist that most compellingly informs, and internationalizes, contemporary Chinese poetry, at least that which is published in Western languages. Some poets have begun writing in English; most, however, have continued to write in Chinese while living abroad, becoming more nostalgic and more cynical as their exile deepens.¹⁵

Writing in the New York Times (June 18, 1998), Martin Arnold states that “the sale of foreign translations in the United States is generally like a nearly empty can of shaving cream: a little air and a few bubbles.” As recently as 1990, the percentages of all translated titles were nearly 10 percent for France, over 25 percent for Italy, and under 3 percent for the United States; no figures are available for China, although the number is surely quite high. While this points to the growing influence of English-language production throughout the world, it also leads one to speculate that cultural xenophobia is alive and well in the United States.

The implications are clear: The selection criteria—who to introduce, what to translate, and when to do so—are critical, if Chinese writers are to receive even a fraction of the attention they deserve. And it is virtually impossible for contemporary Chinese writing to enter the Western literary mainstream, as have, for instance, the novels of Gabriel García Márquez, Mario Vargas Llosa, Milan Kundera, and others. As Rey Chow points out:

While the “world” significance of modern Chinese literature derives from its status as minority discourse, it is precisely this minority status that makes it so difficult for modern Chinese literature to be legitimized as “world” literature, while other national literatures, notably English, French, and Russian, have had much wider claims to an international modernity in spite of their historical and geographical specificity.¹⁶

Without a broad and representative corpus of fiction and verse available in translation, Chinese books cannot exert much artistic influence on Western writers. Which takes us back to the prior issue of selection, the one area in which translators can make a difference. But before examining the particulars of what gets translated, and why, it is worth our time to look at some underlying concerns about literary translation in general.

In an essay devoted to an exploration of the latest crop of English-language translations of Chinese fiction, the critic Kam Louie quotes Liu Sola, a well-known (and reasonably well-translated) Chinese novelist who has asserted “the popular proposition that only Chinese can fully appreciate Chinese literature—no matter how skilled the translator, foreigners can never fully understand Chinese writing since they have not experienced the Cultural Revolution, the anti-Japanese War, or the recent reform policies.” Complaining, perhaps in contradictory fashion, that “the world has
been Westernized to a degree where everything is judged from the perspective of Europe/America,” Liu expresses “the frustrations felt by some Chinese writers at the tardy and often reluctant recognition of their works on the international literary scene.” 17 While sympathizing with the author’s frustrations—who wouldn’t?—both Louie and I take strong exception to the claim that cultural interchange is an impossibility, even between China and the West. Beyond Liu’s apparent negation of the power of the imagination, what lies at the heart of this debate is the dialectic between national/indigenous peculiarities and universal issues of humanity. Although the concept of a “world literature” may be too laden with economic, even imperialist and hegemonic baggage, too insular a view of cultural boundaries smacks of cultural relativism, wherein the experiences of one community cannot be understood, appreciated, or shared by another. 18 Furthermore, Liu’s argument leads too easily, and quite uncomfortably, to similar restrictions on age, gender, class, and more. It is not somewhere we want to go if literature is to remain a viable form of “interchange.”

To be sure, the nature and quality of the translated “product” play an important role in the possibility of translinguistic/transcultural exchange. Quality, easily recognized in only the very best and the very worst translations, is too reliant upon subjective criteria for us to consider here. Needless to say, such concerns as fidelity (getting it “right”), understandability, and literariness determine how well a text is rendered from one language into another. On the other hand, the goals and approaches of a translator can be readily determined. Some observers and practitioners of translation insist that a translator is obligated to bring the reader toward the author and not the other way around. To them, a “foreignized text” (a literal translation, for lack of a better word) has become an ideological necessity, a work that happily disrupts cultural codes in the target language, unlike a domesticated (or literary) translation, which is an appropriation of a foreign culture that denies the opportunity of revealing stylistic possibilities in one’s own language that are different from the original.

The “literary” school, exemplified by works that read as if they were actually written in the target language, appears to be winning the publishing lottery, because those are the translations that emerge from the editorial offices of commercial and university presses; whether one celebrates that trend or laments it, the fact remains that “readable” translations of “translatable” books are the ones that get published.

So what does the English-language reader of contemporary Chinese writing have to look forward to? I shall end this essay with some answers to that question, based upon my personal experience as a translator. To that end, I shall focus my examination on three recent, and quite disparate, novels on which I have worked.

Over the past two decades, I have been involved in the production of two dozen or more translations of modern and contemporary Chinese fiction, and while the results of those endeavors can in no way reflect all the literary twists and turns in post-Mao China, they fairly represent my own tastes in literature, some of the strictures within which I work, and, most important, the essence of Chinese novels and short stories to which English-language readers have been exposed. 19

Contemporary writing dates from the early 1980s. The earliest creations of the new Cultural Revolution period, while dealing with issues of reform in the Dengist era, were not all that different from the socialist-realist writing that had monopolized the first three decades of the People’s Republic. Oh, we Western readers were pleased to see that the ideologies were no longer in the spotlight, that reformers were beginning to get their way, and that just plain folk could finally fall in love with something other than a tractor. But the themes and the writing style—hardcore, representational realism—continued to reflect Party and governmental policy; in other words, these novels and many more like them from the early to mid-1980s fulfilled the role of state-sponsored art (if this sounds harsh, it must be remembered that virtually all professional writers at this time were, in fact, on the national payroll and were well paid for their efforts). 20 No breakthrough yet, although more liberal views of sexuality, the autonomy of the individual, and unflattering descriptions of the behavior of Party and government representatives were beginning to appear, however tentatively.

Not until the arrival of members of the generation who were children or teenagers during the Cultural Revolution and who were just beginning their writing careers when the Tian’ anmen Massacre of June 4, 1989, occurred did a remarkable change in the very nature of writing take place. Holding themselves blameless for the horrific excesses of the Maoist era and finding great intellectual and creative stimulation from the nascent internationalist climate in (the cities of) China, they began producing works that excited domestic readers as well as those of us who, in order to practice our craft, had been seeing ourselves as unwitting supporters of “socialist art,” that is, “portrayals of the social state and social space that corresponds to reality and to the possibilities hidden in reality.” 21
It is now possible to choose works to translate based primarily on aesthetic or other literary criteria, although political and market considerations continue to play a role. While it may be true that more critical or darker works are chosen over works that paint a rosier picture of historical or contemporary Chinese society, it is also highly likely that those works are more artistically and intellectually satisfying. I do not think that literature is well served if the translator's choices are ideologically motivated.

As post-Deng turned into postmodern, the very ethos of literary writing, at least among a talented coterie of experimental and often self-indulgent young men and women, changed dramatically. As I implied earlier, personal vision supplanted national policy in their fiction, poetry, and plays, and the tendency was toward an increasingly solipsistic form of writing, that which refers only to itself (sometimes referred to as “art for art’s sake”). Not surprisingly, that vision is dark, often nihilistic, even, at times, perverse. And it has struck a resonant chord with readers outside China. The reasons for this are complex but include, I think, a diminution of the long-held dreamily exotic view of China in the West (with a concomitant lessening of tolerance toward the positivistic brand of writing with which we have become familiar), a global fin-de-siècle anxiety (which informs the sexual and social behavior of characters in recent writing from China), and a fear that the world has become apocalyptically violent. With images of June 4, 1989, still fresh in the public consciousness, in recent literature from China, selected and mediated by translators, we see more currents of commonality than ever before.

The most disturbing Chinese writing to appear in English is laden with graphic depictions of horrific violence, often in egalitarian proportions. One critic’s comment on the novelist Yu Hua could easily be applied to many young Chinese writers: “To journey through his fictional universe is to subject oneself to a harrowing series of depictions of death, dismembered bodies, and acts of extreme and seemingly gratuitous cruelty.” Disorienting stories of grotesque brutality, layered with symbolism and often lacking the traditional markers—time, place, names—that is, stories incorporating a sense of universality, bestow upon the numbing violence in them a true metonymic quality. Savage, homicidal fictions, while seemingly “ready-made for appropriation into the critique of the antihumanistic ravage of the Cultural Revolution,” nonetheless have become “a heresy to the older generation of writers and critics for whom violence [is] a political act and a symptom, albeit an irrational one, of history. The pure con-

sumption of violence as an aesthetic form [is] inconceivable, and not surprisingly, utterly sacrilegious, to survivors of turbulent historical trauma.” But these claustrophobic worlds of depravity and bestiality (not unlike that of the Polish writer Bruno Schulz, a Jew who was killed in the Holocaust) epitomizes what David Wang has called a “familiarization of the uncanny. [By] turning the world into a realm of fantastic and uncanny elements or by identifying normalcy with the grotesque and insane, writers awaken their readers from aesthetic and ideological inertia, initiating them into a new kind of reality.”

Violence and evil, with all their metonymic possibilities, are nowhere more powerfully evoked than in Su Tong’s catalogue of horrors with the innocuous title of Rice.

The tale of a thoroughly malign individual who corrupts (or kills) every person with whom he comes into contact during the course of his self-consuming life, the novel portrays a society (pre-war China) bent on self-destruction and, in the view of many critics, the pervasive dehumanizing climate of contemporary society. Rice is a grim, numbing, disturbing, even profane work that, with all its exaggerated grotesqueries, is all too believable. One reviewer, having posed the question “Why would anyone read this book in the first place?,” supplies her own thoughtful answer: “Because Su Tong renders these people so vividly that they possess, for us, the individuality that they deny one another. Even their rampant misogyny . . . tells us how willfully alone each is, how frightened and defensive. And because when we read about bad things happening to bad people, we feel bad—and that’s good. That’s what makes us human.” Su Tong’s novel, and many of his stories, paint China’s recent history—and by allusive implication, its present—in unrelied darkness. Fiction with a historical setting, particularly during the Republican era, that is, the first half of the twentieth century, presents an opportunity to deal obliquely with contemporary events with a measure of safety; one can, however disingenuously, point to the damning visions in one’s writing and imply that the setting, now past, would be impossible in the socialist context, and that is precisely how many of them refute the accusations of conservative critics that their work is somehow “unhealthy.”

No one has been accused of writing “unhealthy” fiction more than Mo Yan, until recently a member of the Cultural Section of the People’s Liberation Army. With Red Sorghum he created sympathetic heroes out of bandits, adulterers, murderers, and anti-Party activists. With his second novel, The Garlic Ballads, he went further, examining the precarious, even antag-
onistic, relationship between the Chinese peasantry and the Communist government in his most transparently ideological novel. In *Large Breasts and Full Hips*, the focus is on sex, politics, and, echoing *Red Sorghum*, China’s frightful modern history. None of these works, each unique in its own right, prepared the reader for what, in my opinion, may be the most astonishing novel to appear from China in this century, *Republic of Wine*.

Hailed by one critic as a “twentieth-century fin-de-siècle masterpiece,” this experiment in narrative technique is a multi-layered work of fiction that confronts the Chinese trait of gluttony, a national discomfort with the issue of sex, and a host of human relationships, many of them quite bizarre. Reminiscent of, if not exactly parallel to, Swift’s “A Modest Proposal,” the novel explodes the myths of a benevolent government ruling over a civilized nation; while it is but the latest in a long tradition of literature dealing with cannibalism in China, the novel views the aberrant behavior as an extreme example of China’s vaunted gourmandism in the context of a racy parade of sexual misconduct and ultimately constitutes an attack by Mo Yan on some of China’s cultural sacred cows, as well as a reaction by him to the horrors of June 4th at Tian’anmen Square.

Beyond that, *Republic of Wine* is concerned not only with issues of culture and humanity, but with the process of writing as well, a self-conscious “retrospective” of the author’s oeuvre. The text includes a series of fictional correspondences between an amateur writer who lives in Republic of Wine and engages “Mo Yan” in discussions of fiction, of the novel in which he appears, and of food, liquor, and sex. The dialogue between the two characters is further enhanced by the inclusion of stories by the amateur, stories that get increasingly bizarre and intriguing as the novel progresses. Finally, it is a novel about liquor, whose paradoxic able functions—an elevation of the spirit as well as the epitome of excess—undergird the structure of the novel as a whole. If I were to be asked the same question the reviewer asked in regard to Su Tong’s *Rice*—Why would anyone read this book in the first place?—the answer would have to include the sheer joy of his Rabelaisian humor and gusto, the structural artistry, and the satirical barbs, much, but not all, of which is apparent even in translation.

Su Tong and Mo Yan, pretty heavy stuff. But what about the young novelist who “can’t stand people with a sense of mission”? He reigned as China’s most popular writer for much of this decade, and the powers that be dislike him as much as the reading public, particularly the young, adores him. Wang Shuo, in whose novels self-indulgence, hedonism, and the pride of sociopathy mock both the establishment and the vaunted reforms of the Dengist era, has been called Beijing’s “bad boy” and worse (or better, depending upon your point of view). The characters of his short novel *The Operators*, for instance, are unprincipled young men who sell their services as proxies—for lovers, people in trouble, henpecked husbands—thus thumbing their noses at social norms: anything for a buck. In *Please Don’t Consider Me Human*, a satirical farce that mocks the campaign to recoup feelings of national pride in the wake of the loss of the bid to host the 2000 Olympics, a pedicab driver is chosen by a group of Beijing punks to defend the nation’s honor by getting castrated in order to participate in an international sporting event as a woman. Wang Shuo, it has been pointed out in the *New York Times*, “romanticizes young alienated rebels in much the same way that Jack Kerouac did. He explores the paradoxes and absurdities of society, as Joseph Heller and Kurt Vonnegut do.”

Instead of criticizing the Communists for being autocratic, Wang Shuo does what is far more devastating: he mocks them for being uncool.

In *Playing for Thrills*, Wang Shuo plays with the mystery genre by building a story about a murder that might have occurred and the young hedonist who might have committed it. The “thrill” for Wang Shuo is in describing the Beijing “lower depths” and weaving a tale that mystifies as it delights, sending the reader off with at least as many questions as answers. For some, like mystery mogul Stephen King, who provided a cover blurb for the novel, Wang has written a book for everyone:

*Playing for Thrills* is perhaps the most brillianty entertaining “hardboiled” novel of the 90s ... and maybe of the 80s, as well. It constitutes a genre by itself, call it China noir, and offers guilty pleasures beyond any most readers will encounter in a bound set of Kinsey Milhones or Lucan Davenport. What the hell is this anyway? Jack Kerouac unbound? I don’t think so ... you have to experience this in order to really get it. Most ultimately cool.

... AND BEYOND ...

More translations of contemporary Chinese literature are appearing these days than ever before; whether this means that the readership base is expanding at the same time, that more people from different walks of life are switching to fuller “cans of shaving cream,” is impossible to determine. There is, of course, the fluctuation principle to consider, that literary works
from China gain popularity every time China is in the news and disappear from bookstore shelves during more quiescent periods; also at play is the coattail effect, in that as the number of people who travel to China to work or visit increases, so, too, do the quantity and diversity of reading material, including literature.

Another encouraging factor is the trend among U.S. trade publishers toward enriching their lists by adding Chinese authors—not just individual books—and promoting them with at least modest enthusiasm. Unhappily, however, as the burgeoning market economy in China holds out the promise for the more enterprising among its population to enjoy unprecedented material comforts, many writers find it increasingly less rewarding to employ their talents in an endeavor that is not well appreciated in a consumer-capitalist climate. Jianying Zha is correct when she writes:

Every Chinese intellectual is waking up to one common fact: no longer is the government the only thing they must deal with. Now they must reckon with forces of commercialism. They can’t kid themselves anymore: the days of huge readerships are gone, along with the feeling that a writer is the beloved and needed spokesman of the people and the conscience of society.

Many promising young novelists appear to have abandoned their quest for artistic perfection for the more lucrative fields of commerce, TV scriptwriting, and the like. In my view, this could actually work to the advantage of belles lettres in and from the People’s Republic, in effect a winnowing process that will leave only the most dedicated and talented writers on the scene and will motivate them to further polish their craft in the face of a smaller though more demanding readership, both in China and abroad. At present, no more than a dozen novelists, most in their middle years, are regularly published in the West; they are becoming identifiable on an international basis and are being read as much for their literary talents as for the windows onto contemporary Chinese society they inevitably provide.

It is, of course, an uphill struggle. Yet even with all the perils inherent in the translation process, and the “Third-World” status of literature from China, contemporary literary works, however mediated, can be uniquely satisfying for, and revealing to, readers beyond China’s borders; there is no reason why the words of one critic cannot apply to Chinese literary works rendered into foreign languages: “A translation gives us access to the literature of the world. It allows us to enter the minds of people from other times and places. It is a celebration of otherness, a truly multicultural event without all the balloons and noisemakers. And it enriches not only our personal knowledge and artistic sense, but also our culture’s literature, language, and thought.”

And if it is true that “translating authors from other cultures can prevent a literature from becoming too nationalistic or too provincial,” then the literary borders between China and the rest of the world must, and will, remain open for free movement in both directions.

NOTES


2. Andrew F. Jones has dealt in detail with the marketing of Chinese literature abroad in his essay “Chinese Literature in the ‘World’ Literary Economy,” Modern Chinese Literature, vol. 8 (1994), 171–190. In this essay I have not considered the literature from Taiwan, Hong Kong, or any of the other places where fiction, drama, and prose are written in Chinese. The interested reader may consult The Columbia Anthology of Modern Chinese Literature, Joseph S. M. Lau and Howard Goldblatt, eds. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995). More can be found in the Columbia University Press series “Modern Literature from Taiwan” and the Hong Kong translation journal Renditions, which also publishes books.


4. Needless to say, a substantial amount of writing that hews more closely to Party ideals continues to be published in China; it, too, has a loyal readership, as do all the popular genres—detective fiction, science fiction, romance, even pornography—and bad writing generally. Little of it gains serious attention within China and hardly any gets translated.


8. This is the charge leveled against the poetry of Bei Dao (and, by extension, most modern Chinese poets) by the classical Chinese literature specialist Stephen Owen, in “What Is World Poetry?: The Anxiety of Global Influence,” in The New
Republic: (November 19, 1990): 28–32. Domestic critics, too, have stated their concern over a tendency by writers and moviemakers to cater to Western tastes. The journalist Dai Qing has written of Zhang Yimou’s film adaptation of Su Tong’s Raise the Red Lantern, “this kind of film is really shot for the casual pleasures of foreigners.” Quoted in Jianying Zha, China Pop: How Soap Operas, Tabloids, and Best-sellers Are Transforming a Culture (New York: The New Press, 1995), 94.


11. While these writers have taken heart in the rather amazing reception of Chinese films around the world (do, in fact, participate in the scriptwriting), they are puzzled that their books do not generate the same enthusiasm.


14. Several anthologies of Bei Dao’s poems have been translated into English, including The August Sleepwalker, Bonnie S. McDougall, trans. (1990), and Landscape over Zero, David Hinton, trans. (1995), both from New Directions. Bei Dao continues to edit the literary quarterly Jintian (Today), begun during the heady “Democracy Wall” movement in 1979, which includes fiction, poetry, criticism, and a feature entitled “Rewriting Literary History.” The most comprehensive view of contemporary Chinese poetry is provided in Bonnie S. McDougall and Kam Louie, The Literature of China in the Twentieth Century (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

15. It is not surprising, given the marginalization of Asia generally and China specifically in Western literary studies, that only two contemporary writers from Asia, the Japanese novelist Yasunari Kawabata and the Chinese short-story writer A-cheng, appear in two recent books on exile: Exile and the Writer, Bettina L. Knapp (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991) and Alletgether Elsewhere: Writers on Exile, Marc Robinson, ed. (Boston and London: Faber & Faber, 1994), both in the former.


18. The ideal of a world literature (Weltliteratur) originated with Goethe, who wrote that “there can be no question of the nations thinking alike, the aim is simply that they shall grow aware of one another, understand each other, and even where they may not be able to love, may at least tolerate one another.” This statement has been adopted as a motto for the literary quarterly World Literature Today.

19. In recent years, a half dozen anthologies of contemporary Chinese literature in English translation have been published in the West, added to that are a couple of dozen novels or single-author story collections and a few books of poetry. Not a large figure, by any stretch of the imagination, but a broad enough cross-section of offerings in Chinese to give English-language readers an idea of the quality and type of available writing and a wide-ranging glimpse of the society that has spawned it. Most have been published by commercial presses, but university presses have added to the number. Worthy of note is the “Fiction from Modern China” series from the University of Hawaii Press. Foreign Languages Press in Beijing also publishes work by contemporary writers.

20. The Hungarian poet Miklós Haraszti writes: “Before socialism, the function of art had been simply to preserve its own autonomy, or, in a wider sense, to preserve the possibility of autonomy within society at large. In the culture of social commitment it has a new function: to enlarge, direct, and give cohesion to an organized public, the nucleus of the future society.” This socialist art, he continues, “neither hates nor worships ‘reality;’ it merely denies reality the chance to be mysterious.” The Velvet Prison: Artists under State Socialism (New York: Basic Books, 1987), 37, 38.


23. Jing Wang, China’s Avant-Garde Fiction, 4.


29. Zha, China Pop, 46. According to Zha, the joke around Beijing a few short years ago was “there are more people writing novels than reading novels” (135).

30. Wechsler, Performing without a Stage, 11.

SUGGESTED READINGS


*Modern Chinese Literature*, vol. 8 (1994).


