



**20<sup>th</sup> Century China and the  
Contemporary Chinese Novel**

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## The Contemporary Chinese Novel

“Contemporary China, itself a huge book filled with sound and fury, abounds in extraordinary happenings and is stained with blood and tears. This constitutes a boon for Chinese writers: calling upon little imagination, they can tear any page from this book and turn it into a work of art. The line between fact and fiction, after all, is blurred—history has been read as fiction and fiction regarded as an extension of history.”

**--Bei Dao (Chinese poet)**

Art and literature must “awaken and arouse the masses and impel them to unite and struggle to change their environment...What we demand is unity of politics and art, of content and form, and of revolutionary political content and the highest possible degree of perfection in artistic form.”

**--Chairman Mao, 1942**

“The state promotes the development of literature and art, the press, broadcasting and television undertakings, publishing and distribution services, libraries, museums, cultural centres and other cultural undertakings, that serve the people and socialism, and sponsors mass cultural activities.”

**---Article 22 of the Chinese State Constitution, 1982**

“Fiction may be able to speak where history has fallen silent.”

**--Bonnie McDougall (author, Fictional Authors, Imaginary Audiences)**

“Chinese intellectuals have a traditional duty, for which there is no equivalent in the West: to worry, to take responsibility for all under heaven, to argue the question -- What can we do with China?”

**--Perry Link (author, Evening Chats in Beijing)**

## Introduction to Contemporary Chinese Novels

For the purposes of this project, the term “contemporary Chinese novels” refers to novels written since 1980 by Chinese authors still living in mainland China or Chinese authors who have emigrated from mainland China and who may write in either their native Chinese or in an adopted foreign language. However, before beginning a study of this very recent literature, it is necessary to have at least a basic understanding of what is considered “modern” Chinese literature to serve as a context for more recent fiction.

Modern Chinese literature is generally considered to have begun in the late Qing period (1895-1911) during a period of great intellectual fervor. One of the features of this period is that Chinese intellectuals began to look for solutions to their national crisis outside of their own tradition. The literature of the period is marked by a mixture of traditional Chinese and newly-discovered Western narrative techniques. Fiction was more focused on the present than the past, and themes revolved around social issues and ethical dilemmas. Major literary reformers of the period include Lu Xun, Hu Shi, and Chen Duxiu.

Following the collapse of the Qing dynasty in 1911, the Republican era (1911-1949) was ushered in with a mass popularity of love stories, written in either the classical language or, more frequently, in the vernacular. This fiction is often criticized because of its lack of social engagement with the upheaval in the country. During the 1920s and 1930s, creativity flourished, and many literary journals and literary societies were founded, representing various literary theories and schools of thought. Major writers of the period include Ba Jin, Mao Dun, and Lao She. Many of the most respected writers of this period would later be persecuted during the Cultural Revolution.

In 1942, Mao Zedong presented the “Talks at the Yan’an Forum on Art and Literature,” a series of lectures that defined literature as subservient to politics, and this would be the policy during the Maoist era (1949-1976). After coming into power, the Communist party nationalized the publishing industry, brought all writers under governmental control through the Writers Union, and initiated a period of strict censorship. During this period, there was absolute insistence on the use of socialist realism. Unlike “critical realism” in the west, which attempted to provide a critical, yet realist view of life, socialist realism was used only as a tool to build the ideal classless society. Despite the draconian measures that were implemented by Mao’s regime, great novels continued to be written during the early part of the era. Some of the major writers of the period include Liu Qing, Qu Bo, Liang Bin, and Yang Yiyang. However, during the Cultural Revolution, most artistic creation disappeared (at least publicly), and no significant literary works were published.

The Post-Mao era (1976-present) is of greatest interest for this project. One of the first genres to emerge in the late 1970s is called “scar literature” or “literature of the wounded,” which

documents the physical and psychological horrors of the Cultural Revolution. The literature of this short but prolific period was extremely powerful because of the immediacy and raw emotion remaining just after the decade of the Cultural Revolution. These writers were typically not opposed to Communism but, instead, relied on the Communist Party to rectify past tragedies and “embraced love as a key to solving social problems” (Liu Jianmei, Revolution Plus Love). While there were many novels written, short stories were the primary mode of scar literature. Two of the most well-known stories are Liu Xinwu’s “The Class Teacher” (1977) and Lu Xinhua’s “Scar” (1978), which gave the genre its name.

Another genre popular beginning in the 1980s is called “root-seeking literature,” which portrays a nostalgic but conflicted vision of the Chinese past: part traditional, part modern. Richard J. Smith writes that “the Root-Seekers reveled in ancient Chinese philosophy and myth; they advocated a return to (or an ‘escape into’) nature, and aimed at rediscovering the Chinese language and recovering lost innocence.” Their goal, according to literary critic Huang Ziping, was to “search for our roots in order to have a dialogue with the world” and to become part of the global literary scene. One of the most famous Root-Seekers is Mo Yan, especially in his well-known novel Red Sorghum (1986). Other popular writers of the period include Han Shaogong and Ah Cheng.

The authors of “experimentalist literature” or “avant-garde literature,” such as Yu Hua, Can Xue, Ha Jin, and Su Tong are in direct reaction *against* the utopian writings of the Root-Seekers. Richard J. Smith argues that these writers expose the dark side of China “without the high-minded concern for human dignity, social justice and national development” that characterizes other contemporary genres. Examples include To Live (2003) and Brothers (2009) by Yu Hua; Waiting (1999) and many short stories by Ha Jin; Wives and Concubines (1990) and Rice (1991) by Su Tong; and The Noodle Maker (2006) and Beijing Coma (2008) by Ma Jian.

Finally, another genre with a strong tradition in modern Chinese writing is called “reportage literature” or “the new realism,” stories and novels that straddle the boundary between journalism and fiction, such as Woman From Shanghai: Tales of Survival From a Chinese Labor Camp (2009) by Xianhui Yang. Often this genre focuses on more contemporary problems, from official corruption and bureaucratic bungling in The Republic of Wine (2001) by Mo Yan to the spread of sexually transmitted diseases, such as AIDS, in Dreams of Ding Village (2007) by Yan Lianke. As during the May Fourth movement, women writers also contribute to this genre by exploring female subjectivity in a radically changing society, such as Shanghai Baby (2002) and Marrying Buddha (2005) by Wei Hui, Love in a Small Town (1998) by Wang Anyi, and K: The Art of Love (2002) by Hong Ying.

The end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has brought much attention to today’s Chinese literature and writers, both those still living in mainland China and those who have sought other sanctuaries in which to create. Mainland Chinese artists and writers today are torn, as is the entire nation, by the

complexities and contradictions inherent in a Communist society developing into a capitalistic economy. The present Chinese government, as in past regimes, tries to control the content of art and literature, but to much less avail than in the past. For example, any literature that is intended for the public market must be approved by China's state-run General Administration of Press and Publication (GAPP). The GAPP has the legal authority to screen, censor, and/or ban any print, electronic, or internet publication in China. From the official standpoint of the Communist Party and the state, there can be no such thing as "art for art's sake." All art and literature are to serve the Party by serving a social purpose: they must improve the mind, nurture the spirit, and reflect socialist moral values.

However, as Professor Richard J. Smith of Rice University argues, it is increasingly difficult for the Chinese government to unify politics and art or to resist what it considers harmful cultural influences. Smith states that "a major contradiction exists between the new individual initiatives, material incentives, competitive entrepreneurial practices and decentralized structures that have contributed to such dramatic economic growth in China during recent years, and the collectivist, conformist, and centralizing impulses that have defined PRC cultural policy in the past. Despite its best efforts, the Chinese state is far less able than ever before to control the content of either local or national artistic and literary productions."

Of course, one way that contemporary artists can escape any measure of control by the PRC is by emigrating to another country, and several of the Chinese writers whom are well known in the west have done just that. For example, Ha Jin, the author of numerous short story collections and the novels In the Pond, Waiting, The Crazy, War Trash, and A Free Life, left China for the United States in 1985, after serving in the People's Liberation Army for six years. Ha Jin was studying at Brandeis University when the Tiananmen Square protests occurred in 1989 and decided to remain in the U.S. and write in English rather than his native Chinese. Likewise, Ma Jian, author of the novels Stick Out Your Tongue, The Noodle Maker, and Beijing Coma, left mainland China for Hong Kong in 1986 after some of his works were banned. Since then, he has lived in Germany and England, where he currently resides with Flora Drew, his partner and translator. Yet another expatriate Chinese writer is Dai Sijie, author of Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress. Because he was from an educated, middle-class family, Dai was sent to a re-education camp from 1971-74. He later completed high school and university, and he left China for France on a scholarship in 1984. He continues to live in France and writes in French as one method of rejection of Chinese totalitarianism. Finally, one of the most famous of Chinese émigré authors is Gao Xingjian, China's only Nobel Prize for Literature winner. The author of the novels Soul Mountain and One Man's Bible, Gao now lives and writes in France. His drama, Fugitives, which mentions the Tiananmen Square protests, resulted in all of his works being banned from production in the PRC.

Of course, many of the Chinese writers that westerners have come to appreciate in translation still live and flourish in the PRC. One of China's most popular writers is Mo Yan (his real name

is Guan Moye), whom Donald Morrison describes as “one of the most famous, oft-banned and widely pirated of all Chinese writers.” Mo Yan sets many of his novels near his hometown of Gaomi Township in Shandong province, and his novels have been published in more than twelve languages. Some of his novels include Red Sorghum, The Garlic Ballads, The Republic of Wine, Big Breasts and Wide Hips, and Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out. Another writer popular in both China and worldwide is Yu Hua, often discussed as a contender for China’s next Nobel Prize. He is the author of the novels Chronicle of a Blood Merchant, Brothers, and To Live, among others, and sees his writing as a social and moral critique of China’s evolution.

While this curriculum project aims to focus on a relatively short, specific period of literary creation and a very limited number of novelists, it should be apparent from this brief introduction that there are few consistencies among the authors and works to be studied. Some of the authors still live and create in mainland China; others have emigrated to other countries but continue to write in Chinese, while still others have emigrated and have even surrendered their native language as a reproach against the PRC. However, there are similarities, and the one that this project will focus on most thoroughly is the intersection of fiction and history, how, as Chinese poet Bei Dao stated, “history has been read as fiction and fiction regarded as an extension of history.” For as critic Bonnie McDougall states, “Fiction may be able to speak where history has fallen silent.”

## Essential Questions

1. How do contemporary Chinese novels “respond” to the quotations from Bei Dao, Chairman Mao, the Articles from the Chinese State Constitution, Bonnie McDougall, and Perry Link on the first page of this document?
2. What is the role of government censorship of literature in the PRC today?
3. Which of the contemporary authors discussed here still reside and publish in the PRC today? Which authors are exiled or expatriots? Which authors write in Chinese for a primarily Chinese audience? Which authors write in another language? Which authors living outside of the PRC are read in mainland China?
4. How can western audiences make sense of and understand literature written primarily *for* a Chinese audience? Likewise, how can we make sense of writing *about* historical and political China *for* a western audience? Is either possible?
5. How do writers in the PRC today respond to the growing capitalism of their nation? How do they reconcile Communism and capitalism?
6. In the mid 1980s, Fang Lizhi, one of China’s most famous scientists and a leading university administrator, claimed that intellectuals were “the leading class in China,” with special responsibilities toward the masses. What is the responsibility, if any, of mainland and expatriated Chinese authors to accurately portray their nation’s history—both proud and shameful? Is this, indeed, an expectation for contemporary Chinese writers? If so, is this also an expectation for western writers? What, if any, are the differences?
7. What is the responsibility, if any, of contemporary writers to effect change in China’s human rights’ issues today?
8. What is the artistic merit of contemporary Chinese literature?
9. Can fiction “make real” ideologies and cultures so different from an audience’s own?
10. What, if any, is the responsibility of western audiences toward Chinese literature? To move beyond simple voyeurism? To try to see commonalities between two very different political systems? To make an effort to understand a culture so different from their own?
11. What critical issues does translation create in a literary work?

## Syllabus

### The Contemporary Chinese Novel

#### Course Description:

- A course for upper-level liberal arts major with no previous study of China. An introduction to the history, politics, culture, and arts of 20<sup>th</sup>-century China through the study of six contemporary Chinese novels. All novels are written in English or translated into English. Films are in English or in Chinese with English subtitles.

#### Course Objectives:

- To introduce essential Chinese historic events of the past century, including
  - 100 years of humiliation
  - Boxer Rebellion
  - Fall of the Qing dynasty and rise of Sun Yat-sen
  - Civil war
  - Formation of Chinese Communist Party
  - Japanese Invasion
  - The Long March
  - Foundation of People's Republic of China led by Mao Zedong
  - The Hundred Flowers Campaign
  - The Great Leap Forward
  - The Cultural Revolution
  - Deng Xiaoping
  - Tiananmen Square protests
  - Emerging capitalism
- To introduce recent Chinese literary movements, including
  - Scar literature
  - Reportage literature
  - Roots movement
  - Avant-garde movement
- To make meaningful connections between novels and their historical and social context
- To recognize similarities and differences between novels written by authors still living in the PRC and novels written by exiled or expat authors
- To understand the complexities and contradictions of life in the PRC at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century

**Texts:**

- Red Sorghum by Mo Yan, 1986 -- A novel by one of China's most popular contemporary novelists, the story is set in the 1920s and 1930s as the Chinese were battling each other and the Japanese invaders and tells the story of three generations caught up in the brutal unrest.
- Waiting by Ha Jin, 1999 -- A novel by one of the most popular Chinese writers now living in the west, the plot centers around a domestic situation between a man, his wife, and the other woman he thinks he loves, intertwining the domestic and the political as it unfolds.
- To Live by Yu Hua, 2003 -- Set during the Cultural Revolution, it is both a testament to life and a critique of history from 1945-76.
- Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress by Dai Sijie, 2002 -- Set in 1971, the novel describes how two city youth are sent to the countryside for "re-education."
- One Man's Bible by Gao Xingjian, 2003 -- A novel by China's only Nobel Prize winner, it is a semi-autobiographical, stream-of-consciousness novel about a man remembering his life during the Cultural Revolution.
- Beijing Coma by Ma Jian, 2008 -- A novel set in 1999 as its main character, a student wounded in the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989 and in a coma for the past ten years, listens to the changes in the world around him and remembers the events leading up to the June 4 crackdown.

**Films:**

- China: A Century of Revolution, 2007 -- a historical, political, and cultural introduction to the course
- The Last Emperor, 1987 -- the fall of the Qing dynasty and the beginning of the modern period in China
- Red Sorghum, 1987 -- accompanies novel
- Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress, 2002 -- accompanies novel
- To Live, 2003 -- accompanies novel

## Sample Module: Beijing Coma by Ma Jian

These are the types of questions that would be developed for each of the novels on the syllabus. I have also included a short biography of the author and a list of web resources available to help present the novel to students, including historic photos, videos, audio, book reviews, and interviews with the author. Complete course plans would include these resources for each of the novels being taught. For example, Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress also has a similar guide available from the publisher as a starting point for class discussion and short critical papers.

**\*\*\*This introduction and the discussion questions are directly from Farrar, Straus and Giroux's "Reading Group Guide" for this novel at:**

**<[http://www.readinggroupguides.com/guides\\_B/beijing\\_coma1.asp#discuss](http://www.readinggroupguides.com/guides_B/beijing_coma1.asp#discuss)>**

### **"Reading Group Guide"**

In this cross-generational, allegorical novel of the struggle between oppression and liberation played out in the streets of a tumultuous China, critically acclaimed author Ma Jian guides us through the furthest extremes of human suffering, hope, and imagination. **Beijing Coma** centers on the life of Dai Wei, a man trapped inside his own mind, the victim of a bullet to the head during the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989. Now, after ten years in a coma, Dai Wei has only the memories from his life to reflect upon while China continues to change around him. His aging and at times mentally unstable mother is left to care for him while facing complete disillusionment with the Communist Party she once so fervently defended. Through an interweaving and often overlapping narrative, Ma Jian leads us through the life of Dai Wei, using memories as his stepping stones from the past to the present. As we follow Dai Wei from childhood through adolescence to his years as a student at university, we bear witness to an entire nation's struggle against corruption and oppression and its citizens' collective movement toward freedom.

### **Discussion Questions:**

1. What was your initial reaction to the opening passage of the novel, written with second-person pronouns that appear to address you directly? How did your understanding of this passage change at the end of the novel?
2. In what ways do the political affiliations of his father impact Dai Wei as a child? How does his mother's reaction further influence Dai Wei's life? How do his parents resolve the clash of family obligation and civic duty?
3. Ma Jian writes, "The literal meaning of the Chinese characters for 'revolution' is 'elimination of life'" (p. 55). How does this apply to Dai Wei's understanding of the Cultural Revolution in which his father participated? How does this statement play out in the novel's themes?
4. How does Dai Wei's attitude toward women develop and progress? What are the similarities and differences between the relationships he forms with the four primary women in his life --- his mother, Lulu, A-Mei, and Tian Yi?
5. How does memory influence the novel's theme, plot, characterization, and imagery? In what way do the

five senses define and distort Dai Wei's recollection of the past --- and his recovery in the present?

6. Discuss the significance of cultural heritage and identity in Dai Wei and A-Mei's courtship. How does geography shape the characters later in the novel, especially in terms of the various provinces and countries affected by the protests?
7. What is the significance of **The Book of Mountains and Seas**? When he is left with only his imagination, how does Dai Wei's recollection of past events, places, and people merge with his memories of this book in particular?
8. How does his mother's strict adherence and loyalty to the Communist Party affect Dai Wei? How does this work to both distance mother and son and also bond them together? After Dai Wei becomes comatose, how does his mother's sense of nationalism change?
9. Discuss the following quote: "Leaders emerge in times of chaos, and it's always the radical ones who gain the support of the people" (p. 175). How does this apply to the several revolutions and counterrevolutions throughout history? What does it suggest about the students depicted in the novel, in particular those struggling for power during the protests?
10. What is the role of technology and information industries in Ma Jian's description of a modernizing China? How have hand-held cameras, telephones, and the foreign media transformed the process of protest?
11. Discuss the importance and perception of the father figure as portrayed in the novel, especially as it relates to Dai Wei and his family. How is this mirrored in other characters? In what respect did the Cultural Revolution of their father's generation shape their own student movements, which led to the protests of 1989?
12. The students seem to have vastly different stances and reasons for protesting. Discuss the factors of family, society, power, and politics as they influenced this spectrum of motivations. How would you have responded under similar circumstances?
13. What made the hunger strike particularly effective in helping the students gain the wide support among the Chinese people? Describe the parallels between the hunger strike and Dai Wei's comatose state. What does this imply for him both spiritually and as a revolutionary?
14. If Dai Wei had lost his ability to hear, how would his progress have been affected? How does the fact that Dai Wei can still hear shape his understanding of his surroundings and knowledge of his former friends?
15. What is the source of Master Yao's influence on Dai Wei and his mother? How does their life change after Yao is arrested and jailed?
16. What were your impressions of the sparrow described in the novel's closing scenes? How does the bird capture the potential of a new future for Dai Wei while relating to his past, especially A-Mei?
17. What does **Beijing Coma** teach us about the dualities of death and rebirth, despair and hope, and oppression and freedom?

## Ma Jian Biography

Ma Jian was born in Qingdao, China in 1953. He worked at a variety of jobs, including watchmender's apprentice, propaganda boards painter, and photojournalist. In 1983, he left his job and traveled across China for three years, about which he wrote his first book, the autobiographical Red Dust: A Path Through China. In 1987, he completed work a book of short stories called Stick Out Your Tongue, which prompted the Chinese government to ban his work. Ma Jian left mainland China for Hong Kong in 1987 as a dissident, but he continued to travel to China. He supported the pro-democracy movement in Tiananmen Square in 1989, being present during most of the protests. He left the Square a few days before the government crackdown because his brother had been in an accident in Qingdao and was in a coma. The intersection of those two events in his life formed the basis for his 2008 novel Beijing Coma. After the handover of Hong Kong to China, Ma Jian moved to Germany and then to London. He continues to call for official recognition and remembrance for the 1989 pro-democracy protesters.

## Sources for Ma Jian and Beijing Coma

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*Book review that argues that "this vivid, pungent, often blackly funny book is a mighty gesture of remembrance against the encroaching forces of silence."*

Ma, Jian. "The Great Tiananmen Taboo." Guardian. The Guardian, 2 June 2009. Web.

*Ma Jian describes being in Tiananmen Square during the student protests in 1989, then returning to the Square with his son during the Olympic Games. He explains that he left Beijing on May 28, 1989 because his brother had been in an accident in Qingdao and fallen into a coma. He parallels his brother's situation today to that of the Chinese people.*

"Ma Jian: Slaughter and Forgetting." The Independent. The Independent, 2 May 2008. Web.

*A review of Beijing Coma that emphasizes Ma Jian's desire to "chronicle these events, to hammer them down like nails in a piece of wood, so no one would be able to forget." Concludes that the novel is "destined to be an eagle whose wings will cross the world."*

Mishra, Pankaj. "Tiananmen's Wake." The New Yorker. The New Yorker, 30 June 2008. Web.

*Discusses the "attempt to engineer collective amnesia" about the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests. Concludes that "by turning away from China's complex struggles Ma Jian will deny himself the moral passion that is the truest wellspring of his art."*

"On the 19<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Tiananmen, Ma Jian Speaks Out Against the Silence of Chinese Writers." London Times Online. The Times. 30 May 2008. Web.

*Discusses the author's belief that the Chinese people have been denied their history and memory and that it is the writer's responsibility to restore them to the people.*

Row, Jess. "Circling the Square." The New York Times. New York Times, 13 July 2008. Web.

*Book review that argues Beijing Coma is “an important political statement, appearing as it does immediately before the 2008 Olympics and a year before the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the June 4 massacre” and concludes that Beijing Coma “is one of the most optimistic novels I’ve encountered in a long time.”*

Taylor, Alan. “Remembering Tiananmen, 20 Years Later.” The Big Picture: News Stories in Photographs. Boston.com. N.d. Web.

*Features iconic photos from the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests and photos from the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the protests. Posted comments from viewers around the world offer interesting contrasts in knowledge and perception of the original protests and the anniversary.*

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