

**"CHINESE FICTION IS HOT,"** declared *Businessweek* in October 2012, the month that Mo Yan became the second Chinese-born writer (after Gao Xingjian, in 2000) to win the Nobel Prize in Literature. Yet despite the growing palate for Chinese fiction, relatively few native writers have been read outside of China. In 2012, according to Open Letter Books, a literary translation press, American publishers bought translation rights for 453 foreign titles, about 3 percent of all books published in the United States. Chinese titles comprised 16 of those titles. "China has the largest reading public in the world, but until recently we've had relatively little access to its literary scene," said Open Letter Books publisher Chad Post. State censorship, of course, limits what comes out of the country. But there's more to the story: the Chinese writer Xiaolu Guo, not alone, has said that she began writing in English out of frustration at the shortage of literary translators.

But that has started to change. Penguin Books established its China division in 2005. Amazon recently launched AmazonCrossing, which sells e-books in translation. The literary magazine *Pathlight*, in conjunction with the websites *Paper Republic* and *People's Literature Magazine*, translates new Chinese fiction and poetry. The China Classic International project, launched in 2009, introduces Chinese books abroad.

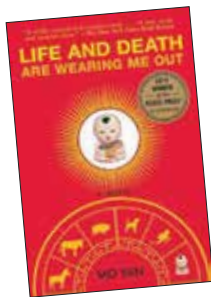
Chinese fiction is reaching English readers slowly but surely, with topics both familiar and new. The major political events of the 20th century, such as the Cultural Revolution and its lasting impact, are still fair game—especially for writers who came of age during the 1960s and 1970s. But the country is changing at a bewildering pace, with younger writers (think: punk) now exploring the harsh social and economic realities of the "New" China—an increasingly capitalist, urban, and often corrupt economy.

Below we highlight some Chinese authors whose literary fiction of the last decade or so is now available in English translation; dates refer to the book's year of translation.

## WRITERS WHO EXPERIENCED THE CULTURAL REVOLUTION

### Mo Yan

Often described as a Chinese combination of Franz Kafka, Joseph Heller, and Gabriel García Márquez, Mo Yan (1955–) won the 2012 Nobel Prize in Literature for work that "with hallucinatory realism merges folk tales, history and the contemporary." Born into a family of farmers, his studies were interrupted by the Cultural Revolution; he later joined the People's Liberation Army and began writing. Western readers first became familiar with his fiction with the 1987 novel *Red Sorghum*, which chronicles various generations of



a rural Shangdong family between the 1920s and 1960s. In *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* (2008), a benevolent landowner who is executed during Mao Zedong's land reform movement is reincarnated as various farm animals, who then witness China's later political movements. A more recently translated novel, *Pow!* (★★★★ Mar/Apr 2013), an allegory of contemporary China's corruption, features a young village boy who recounts his life story to an old monk.

### Yan Lianke

Much of Beijing-based Yan Lianke's (1958–) satirical fiction, though banned in China, has been widely translated internationally—and for good reason: he tackles the social scandals that have plagued China since the rise of capitalism. The moving *Dream of Ding Village* (2011), a fictional critique of the country based on a real-life blood-selling scandal in eastern China, was short-listed for the Man Asian Literary Prize for its portrayal of AIDS sufferers in Chinese villages, whose leaders dream of getting rich by any means possible. One of Yan Lianke's most popular works, *Serve the People!* (2008), follows a plot resembling D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. Set against the Cultural Revolution, this send-up of life in 1960s China features the young wife of an older, impotent army general. When she seduces a lowly soldier, he becomes aroused after defacing images of Mao Zedong, a crime punishable by death. See also the award-winning *Lenin's Kisses* (2013), an absurdist novel about a village that decides to purchase Lenin's corpse—and about the limits of capitalism in China.



### Yu Hua

The brutality of the Cultural Revolution inspired Yu Hua's (1960–) novels and stories. "The violence that began in my youth hung over me like a shadow," he writes. His best-known novel, *To Live* (2003), named as one of the most influential books in China in the last decade (though initially banned there) and made into an award-winning movie, explores the horrors of Communist China. When the son of a wealthy landowner gambles away his family's fortune, he experiences the atrocities of land reform and famine as he slowly evolves into a humble peasant. *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant* (2003), Yu Hua's second novel, features a man who sells his blood in an attempt to improve the lives of his family. The subversive *Brothers* (★★★★ May/June 2009), which was short-listed for the 2008 Man Asian Literary Prize and won France's Prix Courier International, criticizes Chinese culture in the 20th century—from the Cultural Revolution to modern Chinese capitalism—in its tragicomic tale about



# CHINESE NOVELS IN ENGLISH TRANSLATION

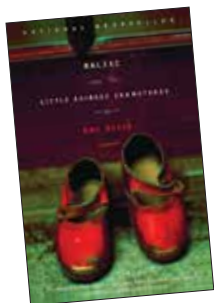
BY JESSICA TEISCH



two brothers who take divergent paths in life. See also the acclaimed essay collection *China in Ten Words* (★★★★ Mar/Apr 2012).

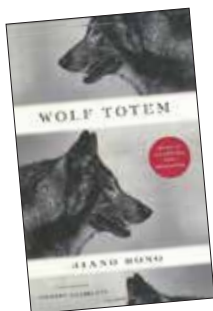
## Dai Sijie

We can't resist including Dai Sijie (1954–) here, though he writes in French. Born in Chengdu, he left China for France in 1984 and currently lives in Paris, where he is also a successful film director. Dai Sijie's fiction deals extensively with Chinese culture and his personal history. During the Cultural Revolution, he engaged in spartan training in a re-education camp in rural Sichuan, material that inspired his first book, *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress* (2001). In this love story, two young men move to a remote mountain village for reeducation. Instead of embracing peasant culture, they read forbidden books and transform the life of a seamstress. His second book, the funny but politically trenchant *Mr. Muo's Traveling Couch* (★★★★ Sept/Oct 2005; ♦ PRIX FEMINA), recounts the travels of a Chinese man from China to France, where he trains as a psychoanalyst, and back home again to free his sweetheart from prison. See also *Once on a Moonless Night* (2009), a rich collection of tales within tales that ties together China's imperial past and a valuable Buddhist scroll to the adventures of a French student in contemporary China.



## Lü Jiamin

Lü Jiamin, an outspoken supporter of democracy and individualism, was born in Jiangsu in 1946. At age 21, he joined the Red Guards, ransacking homes in Beijing and burning any books deemed counterrevolutionary. Torn, he began to hoard books—Chinese novels, Western classics—that should have been confiscated. He soon volunteered to work in the Mongolian steppes, a locale remote enough for him to read his contraband. Living with native nomads for 11 years, he became fascinated with the wolves of the grasslands, even raising his own cub. The acclaimed, semiautobiographical best seller *Wolf Totem* (2009), written under the pen name Jian Rong and winner of the first Man Asian Literary Prize, is a parable about the death of Mongolian culture and a call for political freedom; it draws on the author's life in Mongolia in the 1960s. In it, a young, disillusioned Chinese intellectual is sent from Beijing to work in Mongolia during the Cultural Revolution. The book contrasts the Han Chinese famers (a critique of Mao's agricultural collectivization) with the nomadic Mongolian herdsmen (descendants of Genghis Khan), nearing extinction, who live in a delicate balance with the grassland's wolves, and passionately condemns China's ecological and ethnic devastation.



## Hong Ying

Born in 1962, Hong Ying is one of China's most internationally recognized writers today. Her artful novels focus on hardships and marginalized groups rather than the political sweep of history. In *K: The Art of Love* (2002), Hong Ying penned an imaginary, erotic account of the real-life love affair in the 1930s between English poet Julian Bell, Vanessa Bell's son and Virginia Woolf's nephew, and Ling Shuhua, one of China's acclaimed writers. The novel raised such a scandal that in 2002, the Manchurian court declared Hong Ying guilty of "defaming the dead" and engaged in a major libel case. In *The Concubine of Shanghai* (2003), a teenage girl is sold to a Shanghai brothel in 1907; through a few powerful women, the novel depicts the city's underworld in the early 1900s. See also the bleak but gripping autobiography *Daughter of the River* (2003), which follows the author from the slums of Chongqing and her family's devastating secrets through the Cultural Revolution to Tiananmen Square.



## Wang Shuo

Wang Shuo (1958–), considered China's literary bad boy and a "spiritual pollutant" for his pioneering "hooligan" style, is one of China's most popular and most successful writers. He has written more than 20 novels, with 10 million copies in print (he is also a screenwriter and director), but only two have been translated into English. A child of the Cultural Revolution, he and his brother grew up in Beijing without their parents, who had been sent to a reeducation camp in the countryside. It's not surprising that Wang Shuo writes about China's culturally confused, cynical, and rebellious youth. The vulgar and politically irreverent *Please Don't Call Me Human* (2000), one of his earlier works, criticizes the Chinese urge to "save face." The novel imagines an Olympics-like contest in which the government's attempts to define a national hero instead produce a degraded and humiliated competitor. In the existential thriller *Playing for Thrills* (2008), a former soldier, now morally adrift in the world, spends his time gambling and wondering if he had had a hand in the murder of a former soldier a decade before.



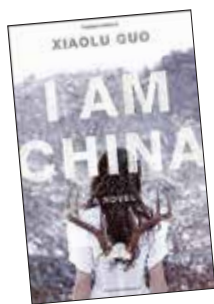
## Further Reading

- A DICTIONARY OF MAQIAO | HAN SHAO GONG (2003)
- THE LAST QUARTER OF THE MOON | CHI ZIJIAN (2013); ♦ MAO DUN LITERATURE PRIZE
- WOMAN FROM SHANGHAI | YANG XIANHUI (2009)
- TONGWAN CITY | GAO JIANQUN (2013)
- BEIJING COMA | MA JIAN (2008)
- OLD TOWN | LIN ZHE (2011)
- DECODED | MAI JIA (2014)

## WRITERS OF THE POST-CULTURAL REVOLUTION

### Xiaolu Guo

Novelist and filmmaker Xiaolu Guo (1973–) was a schoolgirl in a Chinese fishing village when the Tiananmen Square protests erupted. Since then, she has explored themes of alienation and exile, memory, independence, human rights, and the problems of translation, broadly speaking. When she was 30, she settled in London; in 2013 she was named as one of *Granta's* Best of Young British Novelists. Her first translated novel, *Village of Stone* (2004 ♦ INDEPENDENT FOREIGN FICTION PRIZE SHORT LIST), draws on her childhood by the sea. In her first novel written in English (since her Chinese-language novels could not get noticed outside of China), *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* (★★★★ Jan/Feb 2008; ♦ ORANGE PRIZE SHORT LIST), Zhuang Xiao Qiao's parents send her from China to London to learn English. Instead, "Z" ends up majoring in love and sex amid a sea of cultural difference. *20 Fragments of a Ravenous Youth* (2008; ♦ MAN ASIAN LITERARY PRIZE LONG LIST) addresses a young Chinese peasant's coming-of-age as a film extra in Beijing. The multilayered *I Am China* (2014) asks questions about the politics of art and culture through letters describing the tortured relationship and exile of a Chinese punk rocker.



### Sheng Keyi

At age 19, Sheng Keyi (1973–), born in an impoverished Hunan province village, ran off to Shenzhen, the booming southern Chinese city, to escape the yoke of village life. Experimenting with style, voice, and predominantly female characters and themes, her works cover the gamut of social and emotional territory inspired by her own experiences and the economic reforms of the late 1970s. Over six novels, Sheng Keyi has raised controversial social and gender issues and has, in turn, been banned. *Northern Girls* (2012; ♦ MAN ASIAN LITERARY PRIZE LONG LIST) tells the tragic story of a naive 16-year-old girl, an economic migrant from a rural village in northern China, who seeks her fortune in the boomtowns of the south in the late 1990s. She soon discovers, however, the pitfalls of her dream, including sexual exploitation. "These are women whose eyes and bodies see and feel the ruthlessness of the age, the difficulty of surviving," Sheng Keyi writes. The author titled her sixth novel, *Death Fugue* (2014), after a poem about Nazi concentration camps, but it is a deft allegory about the crackdown at Tiananmen Square. Set in a thinly veiled Beijing reminiscent of the society in Orwell's *1984*, the novel explores issues of love and betrayal, history and totalitarianism, and the loss of ideals in a morally vaporous society.



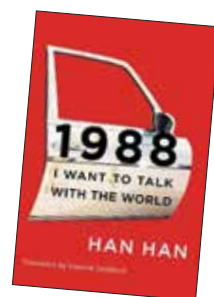
### Xu Zechen

Born in 1978 in Jiangsu Province, Xu Zechen is one of China's young literary stars. He started publishing his stories while studying at Peking University; he now serves as editor at *People's Literature* magazine, where he was selected as that magazine's "Future 20" best writers in 2011. His three novels and collection of short stories generally focus on China's less fortunate social classes, though he depicts their plights with humor. *Running Through Beijing* (2014), the first and only of his books to be translated into English, presents stories of modern-day Beijing's migrant youth living on the edge—from hawking DVDs and porn to serving time in prison—in a morally degraded society that has witnessed the fracture of traditional Chinese families. In this slice of subculture, Xu Zechen explores, with a sort of punk sensibility, life in the capital's underbelly, where solutions to life's problems don't come easily. Xu Zechen's other works have been translated into other languages, though not yet into English, so look for these titles in the future: *Night Train*, *At the Water's Edge*, and *Jerusalem*.



### Han Han

Han Han (1982–) just may be the enfant terrible of his generation—a figure both revered and despised, a symbol of China's new sense of engagement with public issues. Born in Shanghai, the best-selling author, magazine editor, race car driver, and one of the world's most widely read (and censored) bloggers was named *GQ* Person of the Year in 2010 and was included on *Time* magazine's list of the world's most influential people. Difficult to categorize, his work tells of party corruption, censorship, pollution, and the exploitation of young workers; it also advances his passions: girls and cars. Han Han's first novel, *Triple Door*, which he wrote after dropping out of high school, is a scathing satire of education and authority that sold two million copies (it has not yet been translated into English). His translated novel *1988: I Want to Talk with the World* (2015) is a road trip, of sorts, involving a man and a pregnant prostitute he meets at a seedy motel. See also Han Han's collection of blog posts: *This Generation: Dispatches from China's Most Popular Literary Star (and Race Car Driver)* (2012).



### Further Reading

**SHANGHAI BABY** | WEI HUI (2002; SEQUEL: **MARRYING BUDDHA**)

**THE MAN WITH THE COMPOUND EYES** | WU MING-YI (2014)

**THE BOOK OF SINS** | CHEN XIWO (2014)

**LEAVE ME ALONE: A NOVEL OF CHENGDU** | MURONG XUECUN (PEN NAME OF HAO QUN) (2013)

**THE GIRL WHO PLAYED GO** | SHAN SA (2001; ♦ PRIX GONCOURT DES LYCÉENS AND KIRIYAMA PRIZE) ■