ChinaX Book Club: A Conversation with Professor David Wang and Professor Peter Bol

PETER BOL: Hi, I'm Peter Bol. I know many of you from ChinaX, which Bill Kirby and I have taught, our general survey of Chinese history. And today, I'm introducing to you Professor David Wang. David is a professor of Modern Chinese Literature here at Harvard. And he has developed a series of interviews with leading Chinese novelists, where you'll have a chance to read the novels, to meet the novelists, and to meet David as he talks about them and their importance. But today, I wanted to introduce David to you and to give you a sense of why he thinks we ought to pay attention to modern Chinese literature.

So David, I wasn't aware that in Taiwan—after martial law in 1949 to 1987—that in a sense, modern literature from the mainland was banned after the May fourth movement. But it must've been true in the mainland too that after 1949, people's access to literary traditions and literature was also sharply limited.

DAVID WANG: Absolutely. I just cannot tell you enough about this long history of a censorship, of suppression, with regard to reading and the writing literature in China after 1949. Ever since 1942, when Chairman Mao gave his famous three talks on literature and the arts, the party line has always been the main driving force in directing the writing and the reading and the circulation of literature. Probably readers here can hardly imagine the kind of dogmatic constraints being prescribed by the party, by the government in regime, and how such a kind of guidelines have been imposed on writers and readers alike, in terms of literary circulation. So many writers have been purged, have been exiled, have been even executed. So literature in a way, is a very dangerous thing. And this phenomenon sort of came to an end when the great Cultural Revolution finally came to an end.

PETER BOL: And then in 1978, Deng Xiaoping takes over and he proclaims Reform and Opening—opening to the world. These five very famous contemporary Chinese novelists. Did they sort of make their reputations then after 1978?

DAVID WANG: Yes. These five writers were all young and upcoming sort of talents in the '80s period being described as the new era. For about six or seven years, China was undergoing a kind of a sudden sort of opening to various kinds of sources of inspiration and stimuli, both in terms of the traditional resources and foreign importations. And it was during this period these five writers being introduced in this program came to learn from their predecessors about how to write, how to better understand literature as such, vis-à-vis the circumstances of China.
PETER BOL: So we have Yu Hua. Now, he has many novels and also films made of his novels. Then we have Mo Yan. And Mo Yan got the 2012 Nobel Prize. We have Yan Lianke. And his work is both satirical and funny and quite devastating.

DAVID WANG: Devastating, carnival-esque and very dark.

PETER BOL: And then we have Wang Anyi.

DAVID WANG: I think she’s one of the most important writers in the PRC and perhaps, one of the most important chroniclers of the changing ethos of China over the past 30 or 40 years.

PETER BOL: And then sort of the odd man out, but interesting odd man out is Ha Jin, who actually is a writer who’s here in Boston.

DAVID WANG: He’s a writer based in Boston. And more than that, he’s a writer writing in English. So I expect some kind of curious questions about why we have invited an anglophone writer—although with a Chinese background—to be part of our program. I just wanted to highlight the fact that Ha Jin started out being a poet writing in Chinese. But the 1989 June fourth Tiananmen Incident sort of changed his plan as a writer in Chinese. He felt at that time, he couldn’t have continued his creative undertaking anymore if he kept using the Chinese language as his tool of communication. He has chosen to exile himself, so to speak, to English. So English became the only way for him through which to articulate his concerns about China.

PETER BOL: This brings me to this larger question is that all of these writers—as I’ve been reading them—are all terribly concerned with China and its present circumstances and its future. And yet some of their novels have strong political elements, but not only—they’re not only political novels. They’re not cheap "roman à clef", as they say.

DAVID WANG: Exactly.

PETER BOL: They have a certain profundity. But if you had to explain to people who study modern Chinese history why they should read contemporary Chinese novelists, what do you say?

DAVID WANG: Well, for one thing, we have to understand that "literature" with quotation marks as such in the Chinese tradition has come a long way. Literature shouldn't be understood only in aesthetic terms, not just merely we have a group of writers trying out different kind of styles, engaging in personal whims or imaginations or fantasies. Instead, the literature has all along been regarded as
part of sort of Chinese civilizational development. It is a part of our continued engagement with history, politics, and everyday concerns.

PETER BOL: So you're saying, in essence, it sounds to me like in China, the idea that literature was for literature's sake, or art for art's sake was never a dominant position.

DAVID WANG: It was never a dominant position. And probably instead of calling these writers, "writers", perhaps literati, or intellectuals engaged the words in specific form, as we understand it—literature by contemporary definition.

PETER BOL: As you know, my interest in contemporary China is really much more in terms of intellectuals.

DAVID WANG: That's right.

PETER BOL: And intellectuals and political philosophy, moral philosophy, and things, but those people are interested—who are not writers, are not literary figures, aren't writing novels—they're also are interested in China. What makes the difference between the public intellectual type of writers, philosophers, neo-Confucian writers, political theorists, and these novelists you're talking about.

DAVID WANG: The line sometimes is hard to draw. But all I want to emphasize is the fact that writers above all are privileged to use their imagination, to indulge in their fantasies. While in the Chinese case, however, these writers were still deeply immersed in political historical issues and circumstances. So to continue the dialogue between literature as such and other humanistic disciplines is of one of the most important features of contemporary Chinese literature.

PETER BOL: Are these writers—I think Ha Jin is something of an exception—but if we think about the fact that Chinese literature, Chinese ideas, philosophies, now really have a worldwide audience, having people who are writing about China in English makes sense too. But are these writers also really influential in China?

DAVID WANG: Very much so. Particularly, writers such as Mo Yan—who now is a Nobel literature laureate—has tremendous impact on the Chinese public. The irony is, however, that while the majority of the Chinese people may not necessarily read anything by Mo Yan, everybody knows about him. So there's the very concept that the literature matters with regard to everyday life and politics and historical dynamics. I think it’s a very deeply ingrained in the traditional sort of concept that literature is part and parcel of the making of Chinese civilization.
PETER BOL: And I think that argument we can extend right back to ancient times.

DAVID WANG: When we are looking at the contemporary scene of modern Chinese literature, we always want to keep in mind the dynamics behind the scene.

PETER BOL: In the early part of ChinaX, our history series, when we're talking about the transition from Shang and Zhou, one of the sources we cite is the Book of Odes—the Shijing, the Book of Poetry, and the tradition of literary writing and of short stories and of fiction and imagination.

DAVID WANG: Absolutely. I would argue that history is always there. And it is very important for us to understand the dialogical relationship between literature and history throughout the whole tradition of Chinese literature, premodern and the modern and the contemporary.

PETER BOL: Thank you very much, I do hope that people will take this rare opportunity, both to meet you and to meet the novelists.

DAVID WANG: Thank you very much.

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