



# chinese whispers

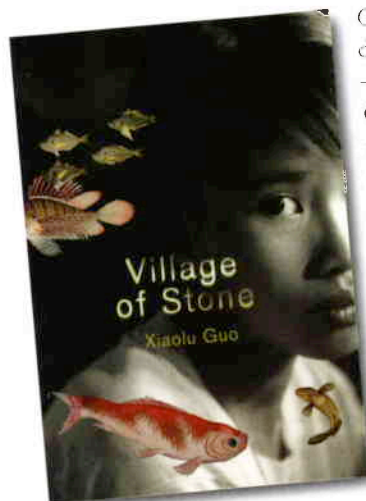
A fascination for the unknown and exotic has fostered huge interest in China among Western readers. **CLAIRE SCOBIE** examines the past few decades of Chinese literature and traces the sometimes tortuous path from Maoist repression to contemporary soul-searching.

**T**he pace at which China is moving is really amazing ... The new generation don't believe in the Communist thing,' said Chinese chick-lit author Wei Hui last year. 'The only thing you can believe in is money. Or, of course, sex.'

When *Shanghai Baby* was published in 2000, Wei Hui was denounced as 'decadent, debauched' and 40,000 copies were publicly burned. Her crime: to write a semi-autobiographical story about Coco, an aspiring writer who, tiring of her impotent Chinese lover, begins a passionate affair with a married German accountant. *Shanghai Baby* would be unlikely to shock a Western audience. But within China the account of her hedonistic tribe – 'sons and daughters of the well-to-do' – was damned by conservative moral forces and the subsequent controversy earned Wei Hui cult status and an international profile.

After reading a raft of older Chinese authors, many of whose stories are tragic, with epic themes spanning several generations, *Shanghai Baby* came as a refreshing candyfloss read. Wei Hui and her rival Mian Mian, author of *Candy*, are two thirty-something 'bad girls' whose stories of sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll illuminate contemporary urban China – a world of skyscrapers, casual romance and fast money. Xiaolu Guo gives a more brooding insight in her novel *Village of Stone*, which flits between contemporary Beijing and the heroine Coral's harrowing childhood. 'I love darkness and all those heavy things,' Guo told me.

Influenced by the experimental modernism of the eighties, the current generation of Chinese writers is now able to push literary boundaries even further. Under Mao, writers were considered socially responsible, often held a didactic role in society and wrote to reinforce political ideology. With the demise of Mao came 'the golden age when authors were celebrities or spokesmen for the nation', according to Cambridge sinologist Julia Lovell. 'After years of Maoist repression, over three million





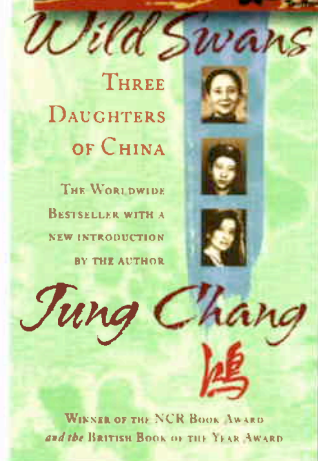
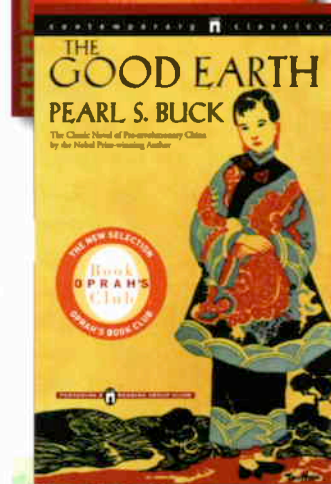
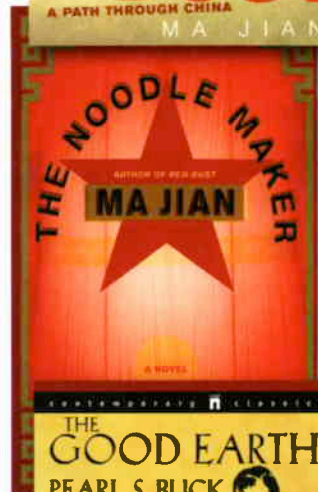
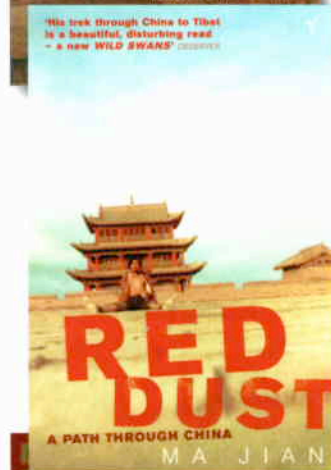
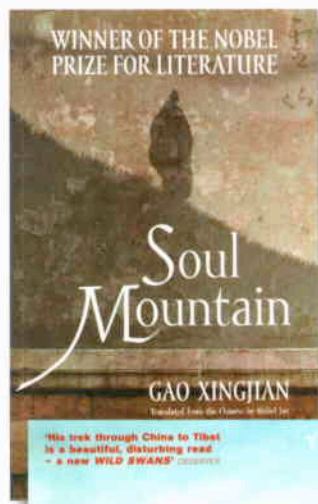
intellectuals returned to public life in 1979. The ensuing ten years were dominated by a high culture fever that climaxed in the 1989 pro-democracy movement.'

In the eighties, as writers again found themselves at the vanguard, new literary movements were spawned – avant-garde, 'root-searching' where authors such as Li Rui and Mo Yan 'made names for themselves exploring the rural roots of Chinese culture, language and history, inspired by readings from Márquez, Faulkner and Borges,' says Lovell. Writers also sought ways to come to terms with the tragedies, both personal and collective, wrought by the Cultural Revolution and the massive social problems caused by socialism gone insane.

Zhang Xianliang, author of *Half of Man is Woman*, was dubbed China's Milan Kundera for his sparse, haunting novels. Xianliang endured two decades of hard labour in China's gulag in bleak northern west China. The autobiographical *Half of Man is Woman* tells of a poet who falls in love but fails to satisfy the woman because of sexual impotence. Zhang uses this as a metaphor to illustrate the emasculated role of the Chinese intelligentsia under Mao.

Intellectuals may have been rehabilitated into society during the eighties, but under Deng Xiaoping any writer had to be wary of transgression. Criticising the Communist Party was a fraught and hazardous endeavour, social critique had to be oblique or heavily disguised to avoid censorship – or worse. Playwright and novelist Gao Xingjian fled Beijing in 1983 when he heard he would be sent to a labour camp for being a 'spiritual pollutant' and spent the next ten months travelling through Sichuan. During the Cultural Revolution he had burned many of his earlier works rather than face imprisonment. He later turned his experiences into *Soul Mountain*, about 'one man's quest for inner peace and freedom', which won him the 2000 Nobel Prize for Literature (amid accusations by feminist camps of misogyny). Xingjian now lives in Paris.

No one better captures the frustration of living in this ideological straightjacket than Ma Jian in *Red Dust*: part travelogue, part-memoir, this won the 2002 Thomas Cook Travel Book Award. With his louche behaviour, sexual frivolity and unsavoury friends, Jian was considered a threat to society. In 1983, the then 30-year-old artist was living in Beijing, recovering from a nasty divorce. His new girlfriend was cheating on him and the police were monitoring him. Jian packed a few belongings, including a copy



of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, and began an epic three-year journey across China and Tibet.

Writing in a moody, irreverent style, Jian captures China's paradoxes, the disillusionment among artists and the freewheeling corruption of petty officials. In his search for himself and the soul of this vast country, he breaks rules and lusts after women. Reminiscent of Kerouac's *On the Road*, his book is still banned in China. Jian now lives in London with his partner Flora Drew, who translated both *Red Dust* and *The Noodle Maker*, his latest book, a novel that darkly satirises life in China. According to Jian, China is 'completely lacking in self-awareness. As someone who has stepped outside that society, I have a responsibility to write about it as I see it.'

Such a bold assertion strikes a sensitive literary nerve among Chinese writers who view the émigrés with a mixture of envy and derision. It was Pearl S Buck's bestselling *The Good Earth* that brought home to Chinese writers the international appeal of their country. For many Western readers, this was their introduction to life behind the Great Wall. Written by an American who grew up in China, *The Good Earth* won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1937 and Hollywood immortalised it in a big screen production. Now considered a classic, this universal tale of a poor farmer with high aspirations is set against the backdrop of war and a country breaking with its imperial past. Wang Lung buys his silent wife, O-lan, a slave from a noble household, and they work the land together, 'moving in a perfect rhythm'. Their life is full of hope until a great famine reduces the peasants to 'eating what grass they could find' before some turn to human flesh. Then fortune's wheel turns again, and ultimately Lung reaps rewards from his precious land, celebrated as a character in itself.

Pearl Buck's success illustrates how works about China written in English generally fare much better than those translated from Chinese. It's a sore point among some Chinese authors, says Lovell, who both aspire to 'join world literature' yet are 'resentful of Chinese memoirs such as Jung Chang's *Wild Swans* that look back on the past. They think the West is obsessed with this image of a weak, suffering China ... focusing on past horrors rather than on present successes.'

Nonetheless, Chang opened a gate that many other exiled writers have since walked through – assisted considerably by British literary agent Toby Eady, who has introduced a

clutch of Chinese authors to an English-speaking audience. No easy task: *Wild Swans* took seven years of editing before it went on to sell ten million copies. 'Wild Swans, Falling Leaves by Adeline Yen Mah and *Lili: A Novel of Tiananmen* by Annie Wang are Westernised views of China,' says Eady, 'tailoring their experience to another language's perception of China and the Chinese. None of the books was an instant success. All took word of mouth to sell.'

Many Chinese works have failed to make it in the West because of poor translation. It takes time and perseverance to capture the nuances of this ancient language – one of signs and ritual symbols, with over 18,000 characters – and convey this fluently in English. Before the advent of mainland Chinese writers in the West, China was portrayed through works by Asian-American authors such as Amy Tan and Maxine Hong Kingston.

Émigré Ha Jin has challenged this status quo with *Waiting*, a poignant love story about a married army officer who keeps

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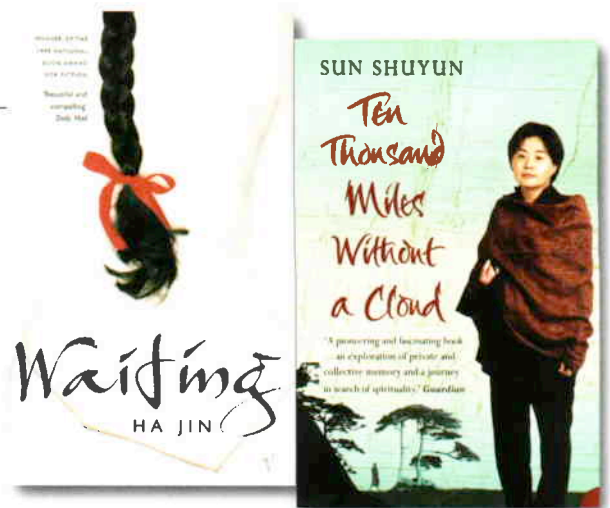
his girlfriend waiting for 18 years while his wife refuses to divorce him. So too has Adeline Yen Mah, with her confessional memoir *Falling Leaves: The True Story of an Unwanted Chinese Daughter*. This is a compelling portrait of Yen Mah's family, splintered by her cruel stepmother, Niang, who singles Adeline out for particularly harsh treatment. For this bestselling Cinderella-esque tale, where ultimately good prevails, Yen Mah was deeply criticised back home. The book breaks the taboo of silence that surrounds the sanctity of the family. Yen Mah insists she wrote it to heal her past, not for revenge.

*Ten Thousand Miles Without a Cloud* by Sun Shuyun is another woman's search for her roots. In Yen Mah's book it is her Aunt Baba who plays the role of the wise sage; for Shuyun it is her grandmother, who, despite Mao's edicts banning religion, continued to practise Buddhism devoutly and inspired the young Shuyun to read *The Monkey King*. Through reading this classic folktale Shuyun learned about Xuanzang, a Buddhist master who journeyed from China to India in AD 600. In her book she retraces Xuanzang's steps along the Silk Road, interweaving his journey with her own life.

Another female writer who chose to write in English is Annie Wang, whose novel *Lili* tells of a young woman growing up during the Cultural Revolution and the events leading up to Tiananmen Square, which Wang witnessed firsthand in 1989 before emigrating to America. Tiananmen shattered any dreams that economic liberalisation would come in tandem with political freedom and, within China, still remains a forbidden subject. Politics, unless approached through allegory as in Mo Yan's

*The Republic of Wine*, which satirises the insatiable desires and moral vacuum created by China's new market economy, remains off-limits.

If the eighties had been a time of literary idealism and experimentation, the climate changed dramatically after Tiananmen and the rise of capitalism under Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms. No longer were the arts to educate but to entertain. Nor were professional authors automatically given a salary for life by the socialist Writers' Union: now they had to make money from their talents. Rebel writer Wang Shuo, whose 20 novels have sold over ten million copies in China, revolutionised both the role of writers and what they wrote. Wang Shuo made the hooligan – the anti-hero – hip. In the vein of the Beat generation, the boho-punk lifestyle is cel-



ebrated. Intellectuals, bureaucrats and nationalists are scorned for being 'uncool' (Lovell), and in his 1989 satirical novel *Please Don't Call Me Human* Wang Shuo ridicules China's obsession with 'saving face'.

The hard-smoking Mo Yan has also dramatically shaped Chinese literature. After winning numerous prizes in China, he became internationally known when his novel *Red Sorghum* was made into a film by Zhang Yimou (of *Raise the Red Lantern* fame). Set in the 1930s, this brooding novel, his first to be published in English, seeps with blood as it veers between history and myth, telling the story of three generations caught in the maelstrom of

### SUGGESTED READING

*Red Dust and The Noodle Maker* by Ma Jian, translated by Flora Drew

*The Good Earth* by Pearl S Buck

*Wild Swans* by Jung Chang

*Falling Leaves: The True Story of an Unwanted Chinese Daughter* by Adeline Yen Mah

*Red Sorghum* by Mo Yan, translated by Howard Goldblatt

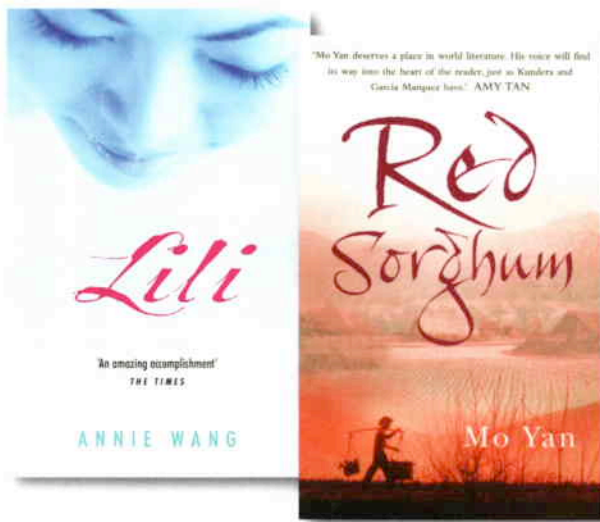
*Half of Man Is Woman* by Zhang Xianliang

*Soul Mountain* by Gao Xingjian, translated by Mabel Lee



the Japanese invasion and civil war, an 'unending cycle of kill-or-be-killed, eat-or-be-eaten'. The work's powerful, visceral imagery is reminiscent of magical realism: 'Grandma broke down and cried. It was an agreeable, emotional, moist sound, which the room couldn't hold, so it spilled outside and spread ...'

Unlike Western literary traditions, which examine the past to make sense of the present, in China people have little notion about events that happened only a decade before. While Mao was keen on people remembering how terrible the pre-1949 society was, Communist rulers post-Mao have actively discouraged people from reflecting on the past. 'This is a serious problem,' believes Xinran Xue, author of the bestselling *Good Women of China*, a disturbing account of women's grim lot in China. 'During the Cultural Revolution history reports were burned

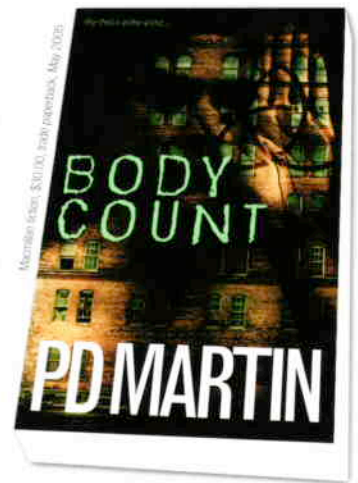


and the education system was destroyed like in a war. Today lots of people have no idea what happened. Lots of Chinese were disappointed by my book. For the old generation it is too painful. The younger generation says what I described is impossible.'

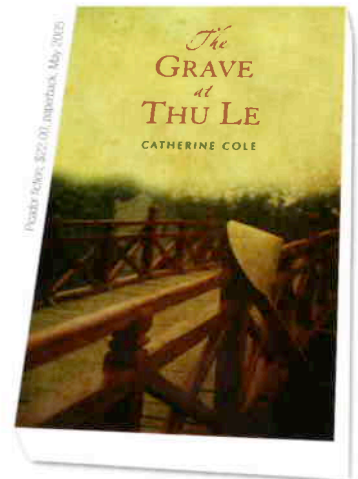
More than ever before, writers are no longer bound by strict rules and the Chinese literary scene is more fluid than it has ever been. Figures drift in and out or change jobs when their muse dries up. 'Our generation is so individual,' says Xiaolu Guo. 'But I feel a bit lonely in the West. There are hundreds of writers in China, but only a handful will ever make it here.'

*Lili: A Novel of Tiananmen* by Annie Wang  
*Ten Thousand Miles Without a Cloud* by Sun Shuyun  
*Shanghai Baby* by Wei Hui, translated by Bruce Humes  
*Candy* by Mian Mian, translated by Andrea Lingenfelter  
*Please Don't Call Me Human* by Wang Shuo, translated by Howard Goldblatt  
*Waiting* by Ha Jin  
*Village of Stone* by Xiaolu Guo

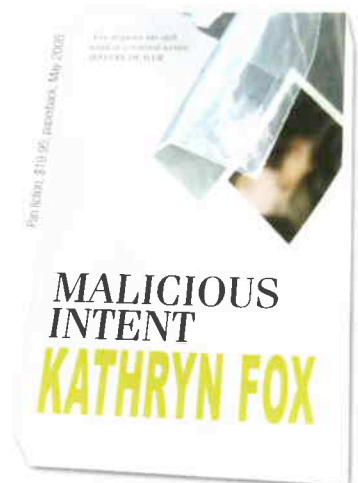
When a woman is found brutally murdered in DC, Australian FBI profiler Sophie Anderson suspects that the killing spree has just begun. With her fellow agents she delves into the mind of the killer, trying to predict his next move. But when the next victim turns up, Sophie knows that she's "seen" the woman before, raped and murdered – in her dreams.



The desire for a holiday and a break from her life in Paris prompts Catherine Danyers to visit Hanoi to trace her family's history in the city, where the family left an intriguing legacy. But in the quest for truth, lies are often unearthed... It is the story of a family, and the myriad contradictions of living a colonial lifestyle in a country rapidly changing.

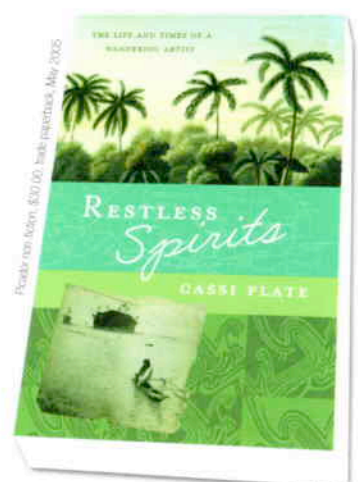


Dr Anya Crichton, a pathologist and forensic physician, is asked to look into the seemingly innocent death of a teenage girl. While investigating, Anya notices similarities between this girl's death and several other cases she is working on. As she delves deeper, her findings point to the frightening possibility that the deaths are not only linked, but part of a sinister plot.



The first in the Sydney University/Picador 'From Thesis to Book' Project.

After discovering treasures from her grandfather's sea trunk, Cassi Plate decides to trace his footsteps across Australia and the Pacific, exploring the places he tried and failed to make his home, and in doing so discovers what it means to be a restless spirit.



BOOKS OF THE MONTH

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