

CHINESE
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LITERATURE

LI CHUNYU



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Preface: Chinese Literature Going Global – The Significance of Mo Yan’s Prize to the History of Literature

On 11 October 2012, the Swedish Academy awarded the annual Nobel Prize in Literature to Chinese writer Mo Yan. The impact of this event on the development of Chinese literature was immense. Mo Yan’s success demonstrated that Chinese literature is slowly finding a global audience, and is gaining recognition within world literature from a unique angle. The prize was not only a dream come true within Chinese literary circles, but also made Chinese people treat the Nobel Prize calmly. It also provided the opportunity for Chinese literature to reflect on its own development. According to the Nobel Committee’s prize announcement, Mo Yan’s novels “merge hallucinatory realism with folk tales, history and the contemporary;” his



At the 2012 Nobel Prize Award Ceremony, Chinese writer Mo Yan received the Nobel Prize in Literature from the King of Sweden.

reflections on history and analysis of human nature strike a chord not only in China, but around the world. This demonstrates that for literature to transcend time and national boundaries, it should focus on real life and reflect the human soul, rather than express political views or cater to the mass market and consumer culture. As well as Mo Yan, there are a number of unique contemporary Chinese writers who show great creative potential, such as Jia Pingwa, Chen Zhongshi, Wang Anyi, Yu Hua, Su Tong, Liu Zhenyun, Bi Feiyu and Chi Zijian. Their work reflects a wide range of views and perspectives, and they have gained a large overseas audience.

In terms of its origins, Chinese literature can be traced back more than 3,000 years. From then until the early twentieth century, its development was unbroken; it has nurtured the souls of Chinese people across the generations, and has played a large part in establishing the nation's cultural identity. In the early twentieth century, a profound transformation of Chinese literature took place that included its concepts, contents and language, and even its relationship with world literature. It thus entered a new phase. Over the course of the new century, China's ongoing development and growth in international status have led to it receiving ever greater attention; the nation's deepening levels of reform and openness have promoted exchange with the wider world, laying the foundations for its literature to reach out yet further. Literature embodies China's profound history, reflects the complex and evolving reality of today's society, and expresses the nation's dreams for a better future. Literature is the most fruitful medium for communication between China and the rest of the world. Exploring global concerns, and expressing human nature and feelings, are responsibilities that it should gladly embrace; indeed, these have been some of its qualities since ancient times.



Overview of Ancient Chinese Literature

Literature occupied a unique position in ancient China. Cao Pi, Emperor Wen of Wei (who reigned from 220-226), said, "Writing lies at the heart of a country's administration; moreover, it lasts forever," indicating that he considered literature important enough to have a bearing on both the governance of the country and on its legacy. Ancient China's imperial examination system played a key role in this, in that officials were selected on the basis of their literary ability, especially their skill in writing poems and essays. China's long history shaped unique literary concepts and artistic methods, and exerted a far-reaching influence on the literature of later ages. Ancient Chinese literary genres such as poems, essays, novels and dramas gradually evolved and matured over different eras, and added a number of great classics to the world's literary treasury.

Evolution of Ancient Chinese Literature

Chinese literature developed over thousands of years, which can be roughly divided into three periods: the remote ancient times (before the third century CE), the middle ancient times (from the third century CE to the sixteenth century) and the near ancient times (from the sixteenth century to the early twentieth century). People usually see the “literary revolution” that began in 1917 as a turning point; everything before that date is termed ancient literature.

Literature of the Remote Ancient Times

The earliest literature was pre-Qin, which includes the Shang Dynasty (1600 BCE–1046 BCE), the Western Zhou Dynasty (1046 BC–771 BCE), the Spring and Autumn Period (770 BCE–476 BCE) and the Warring States Period (475 BCE–221 BCE).

One prominent characteristic of pre-Qin literature is that it sat within the matrix of culture and was not distinct from history and philosophy. Its greatest achievements included not only historical works such as *The Book of Documents*, *Chronicle of Zuo*, *Conversations of the States* and *Strategies of the Warring States*, but also philosophical writings of the Confucian School, the Taoist School, the Mohist School and various others such as *The Book of Changes*, *Laozi*, *Analects of Confucius*, *Mencius*, and *Zhuangzi*. Other notable pre-Qin achievements were in the field of poetry; *The Book of Songs* and *Verses of Chu* maintained their status as magnificent works for generations to come. *The Book of Songs* is China’s first collection of poems, and includes works from the early Zhou Dynasty to the mid Spring and Autumn Period, an era spanning over five hundred years. *Verses of Chu*, another collection of poems, emerged later. The literary forms, dialect and sounds of the Chu State (today’s Hubei and Hunan) are used to describe local mountains, rivers, people, history, and customs with enormous passion and romance. The main writer of *Verses of Chu* was Qu Yuan, the first great poet in the history of Chinese literature.

Qin and Han literature followed on from this era; it included that of the Qin Dynasty (221 BCE–206 BCE), the Western Han Dynasty (206 BCE–25 CE) and the Eastern Han Dynasty (25–220CE). Against the backdrop of political and cultural unification, Qin and Han literature lost the vitality seen in pre-Qin literature, becoming somewhat hackneyed and sterile. This is seen most clearly in the typical form of the period—the Han rhapsody. Most Han rhapsodies give exaggerated depictions of palaces, cities, emperors’ hunting trips and the like, using flowery language overflowing with detail and metaphor. The best Qin and Han prose is found in Sima Qian’s biographical history, *Records of the Grand Historian*, which was outstanding in its standard of narration and characterization. The poetry of the era, however, found a new lease of life. Yuefu folk songs of the Han Dynasty grew in popularity, while *Nineteen Ancient Poems*, written by scholars of the middle and lower classes, describe partings, frustrations, and concerns about the uncertainties of life in clear, sincere language that can still strike a chord with readers thousands of years later.

Literature of the Middle Ancient Times

Literature of the middle ancient times spans the Wei Dynasty (220–265CE), the Jin Dynasty (265–420CE), the Southern and Northern Dynasties (420–589CE), the Sui Dynasty (581–618CE), the Tang Dynasty (618–907CE), the Five Dynasties (907–960CE), the Song Dynasty (960–1279), the Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368) and the mid Ming Dynasty (1368–1644).

In the first phase of this era, from the Wei and Jin dynasties to the mid Tang Dynasty, Chinese literature left spontaneity behind for writings of greater self-consciousness. Poetry, in particular, reached a peak. Over several centuries, many brilliant poets emerged, from the Three Caos, Seven Scholars of Jian’an and Zhengshi poets to Tao Yuanming, Xie Lingyun, Yu Xin, the Four Great Poets of the Early Tang Dynasty, Chen Ziyou, Wang Wei, Meng Haoran, Gao Shi, Cen Shen, Li Bai, Du Fu... the list goes on. These poets’ unique personalities were reflected in their styles. The fervent, solemn Jian’an style; the voice of the Zhengshi poets, which was infused with sorrow, joy and rationality all at once; or the magnificent and vigorous style of the prosperous Tang Dynasty all exerted a far-reaching influence on later generations’ poetry paradigms.

The second stage of the middle ancient times spanned the mid Tang Dynasty to the fall of the Southern Song Dynasty. In this period, the most important literary development was the Classical