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Dialogue *with* Twenty Contemporary Chinese Writers

Li Bing



FOREIGN LANGUAGES PRESS

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Foreword

A Book of Literary Value

I have been a reader of Li Bing's works for quite some time.

In 2004, as a relative newcomer to Beijing, when I got off work I used to stop at a newsstand and scan the culture column of a city newspaper. One day I noticed an interview with the author Yan Lianke taking up two whole pages of this "thin" newspaper. The article was totally absorbing thanks to the interviewer's acute and artful questions and Yan Lianke's fabulously frank replies. Here is a taste:

Journalist: "Just like four years ago, your work *Sunlight Years* has been nominated for the Mao Dun Literature Prize. So, will you pull off a win this time?"

Yan Lianke: "No chance. The book is not mild enough. Here's why: one, the Mao Dun Prize has never been awarded to a novel; two, some judges may not like my works. If you have a sweet tooth and like chocolate, bitter tasting medicine won't appeal and most of the nominations are chocolatey."

The article was full of such frank and witty exchanges.

These impressive words were a rare treat in an urban newspaper market struggling for survival. This little paper went up in my estimation immediately

So, I bought a copy right there and from then on took note of its cultural column. But I totally failed to register who had written the column. Mentioning this a little later to one of my students Li Bing, she smiled and told me that it was she who wrote all these articles. Only then did I recall that she had worked for ten years as a journalist before becoming one of my students of classical Chinese literature. I learned that Li Bing had presided over the "Cultural Dialogues" column since 2003. I knew it wasn't just academics of literary inclination who enjoyed reading her dialogues with other

writers, even other students of mine working on different media agreed on the pure cultural ethos of her column.

Soon I was reading this paper daily. Li Bing took out a subscription on my behalf, knowing of my interest in contemporary literature as well as her work. After that, I used to settle down every weekend to enjoy Li Bing's pointed questions or kind reactions. And she wasn't shy about asking nosey questions about the interviewee's personal affairs. For example, she once asked the writer Zhang Xianliang "Do you have any gossip?"

Without fail and never disappointing, she would elicit from writers and scholars replies that were often witty, cunning, and sometimes down to earth like the man in the street. To read them was like sipping fine teas – various in flavor but always of high quality and finesse.

Later, Li Bing left that paper and her column was no more. So, I no longer read that newspaper.

For contemporary writers, the years 1950-1965 and possibly the 1980s were probably the time when many young people dreamed of becoming writers. However, in the 21st century, it is actors rather than writers who are most fêted. Kids swarm toward them.

Some writers it seems cannot bear the isolation, turning of their own accord towards the stage. Some dream to be actors, and some attach themselves as sidekicks to wealthy actors. In this uncertain, frivolous and materialistic world, Li Bing concerns herself with their writing and their life situation, doggedly following their tracks.

Chen Ran: "I think granting euthanasia would represent a forward step for human civilization, since it helps people to escape a painful deathbed and die with dignity. It's progress and a guarantee of life quality."

Yan Lianke: "I plan to spend two months in the Henan village with so many people afflicted by AIDS in order to record the lives and emotions of the sufferers."

Xu Xiaobin: "There's something missing in Chinese cinema. In my essay on Ingmar that Zhang Yimou and Jiang Wen may be first-class directors but not masters, because they don't concern themselves with what's hiding in the deepest place of people's souls."

The barely audible voices of the writers interviewed may seem out of step with a society obsessed with entertainment and pleasure seeking. But it's voices like theirs that prevent us from sinking into the mire.

Writers, like scholars, are inclined to let their works do most of their talking. But interviews will force them into talking. Li Bing is a very competent journalist, adept at dictating the tempo. She has honed a proficient and unique interview style; most importantly, she communicates with interviewees without reserve, without putting herself “an equal mental status to the president,” an interview technique advocated by Ruan Cishan. Li Bing also writes fiction and prose essays and numbers writers and scholars in her social circle, so, for them, she is a considerate but not garrulous friend, just like a young sister. Those interviewed are willing confide heart to heart.

This makes Li Bing stand out from other cultural journalists.

This book is perhaps the most direct medium for understanding the psychology and lives of writers and scholars. In a few years time, when someone comes to research this literary generation, this valuable book will be a vital document.

Li Bing studied library science at undergraduate level, and she achieved her MA in classical Chinese literature as my student. Her literary sensitivity and understanding surpassed that of my other students. I’ve always thought she is most suited to be a writer.

Becoming a recognized writer is easier said than done, of course. Writing skills are only part of the requirements. Moral conscience is the other. The former can be taught but the latter calls for natural courage. May hers remain undimmed.

Zhan Furui
Curator of the National Library of China
July 15, 2010

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Bo Yang

I Have No Regrets about My Life



About Bo Yang

Best known works:

The Ugly Chinaman and the Crisis of Chinese Culture and *Outlines of the History of the Chinese*

Thumbnail portrait:

Calls for national self-examination and critical awareness.

Bo Yang's original name was Guo Dingsheng, which was later changed to Guo Libang, a name that he himself changed to Guo Yidong in later life. His birthplace was Xutong County of Kaifeng City, Henan Province, his ancestral home being in Huixian County in the same province. The place of his birth is the government residence of Xutong County where his father was magistrate. The date is less certain: it was around 1920, but in view of the lack of clarity his birthday has been recognized as March 7, the day he was imprisoned in 1968.

At 1:12 am, April 29, 2008, Bo Yang died of pneumonia in Taiwan at the age of 89.

Bo Yang studied in many schools during his lifetime, but was never awarded a diploma. The Ministry of Education permanently barred him from enrollment for having used faked education certificates to get into university.

Bo Yang went to Taiwan in 1949, and published his first article in 1953. In 1960 he started to write satirical columns under the penname "Bo Yang."

In 1968, he was imprisoned for nine years plus 26 days as the result of the "Popeye Incident." A writer and critic of charismatic personality and ideology, his influence reached both sides of the Taiwan Strait.

In 1966, Bo Yang became director of the Pingyuan Publishing House. His wife, the poet Ni Minghua, was a chief editor of the *China Daily News* family section, and Bo Yang was in charge of its comic strip *Popeye*. On January 13, 1968, they published a cartoon showing a father and son purchasing a small, uninhabited island, establishing a small kingdom on it, and holding a presidential election. This strip infuriated the Taiwan authorities, who arrested Bo Yang on March 4 on charges of "insulting the

President." The "Popeye Incident" shocked the whole island. Bo Yang's imprisonment lasted nine long years and 26 days, during which time he suffered severe physical and mental torture. Even so, his willpower never failed, and he doggedly completed the *Outlines of the History of the Chinese*, *Genealogies of China's Emperors, Queens, Princes and Princesses*, and the *Timeline of Chinese History* whilst in confinement. On his release in 1978, the Taiwan authorities stipulated three conditions for Bo Yang continuing to write for the *China Times*: no talking about his past experiences; no harping on his past opinions; and never exposing anything negative about Taiwan society.

In 1979, the *Outlines of the History of the Chinese*, completed during his imprisonment, was published,

In August 1985, *The Ugly Chinaman and the Crisis of Chinese Culture* was published. That same year, Bo Yang's *New Translation of the Classical Chinese Historical Records Retold as a Mirror for Government* (hereafter referred to as *Mirror for Government*) was voted the most valuable bestseller in Taiwan, and the *Outlines of the History of the Chinese* was classed among the top-10 influential books.

In 1993, *Mirror for Government* was completed, a mammoth accomplishment in 36 hardcover volumes and 72 in paperback.

In 1995, *The Memoirs of Bo Yang* was completed.

Bo Yang is famous for his novels and satirical essays. His satire was particularly successful and he became one of Taiwan's top-selling writers. His most popular works include *The Ugly Chinaman and the Crisis of Chinese Culture*, *Who Imposed Curses on the Chinese Nation* and *Outlines of the History of the Chinese*. He directed trenchant criticism towards various deep-rooted bad habits of the Chinese people and weak qualities of Chinese culture.

Bo Yang's creative life after landing in Taiwan in 1949 may be seen as five phases: 10 years of novel writing, 10 years of satirical essay writing, 10 years of imprisonment, five years as a columnist, and another 10 years translating *Mirror for Government*. Therefore, his new translation of this work was milestone in his literary career. He once described the *Zi Zhi Tong Jian* which he had translated as *Mirror for Government*, one of China's two best works of history, but because of historical and cultural changes and the original's difficult classical Chinese language, modern people have neither the ability nor the inclination to read this masterpiece. In some way, his desire to translate the *Zi Zhi Tong Jian* into modern Chinese reflected his wish to promote classical Chinese culture.

Interview Notes

Warm Words across the Sea

I'd tried several times to call Mr. Bo Yang, but his secretary routinely fobbed me off, albeit politely: "It's not convenient for Mr. Bo Yang right now." On the afternoon of October 23, 2003, just as I was about to give up on the idea, my friend Ms. Zhang Weici from Taiwan rushed to tell me: "Quick. Get a call in to Bo Yang right away. He's at home now, and his wife Zhang Xianghua says he's agreed to do an interview." But she also implored me: "Remember he's an elderly gentleman, and don't go on for too long."

A dulcet female voice came on to the line: "Hello, this is Zhang Xianghua. It's Bo Yang you want to speak to, isn't it? OK, I'll put him on." His voice came down the line, with a faint trace of a Henan accent. He spoke in a gentle tone, neither fast nor slow, a delivery hard for me to associate with his pointed and incisive articles. I asked him why he had entrusted a mainland press with the publication of his illustrated book *The Poison of Love* which seems "something not very serious." He told me the book had been planned totally by his wife and the first he knew about the title was when he received a dummy copy from the Writers Publishing House. "I was shocked to see the word 'poison' in the title. I was at the stage of finalizing the draft, and though I knew 'poison' might attract buyers, I was still concerned about its suitability in the title and whether it would get past government censors. But the editor-in-charge told me there would be no problem, and it did in fact get past the censors."

To my surprise we were talking for over two hours, apart from 20 minutes in which his wife breezy teased her husband in the background. Bo Yang held the phone himself, listening or speaking. Quick and original in his ideas, he spoke with humor and laughed out loud a lot. Possibly because of the cross-Strait phone link, his voice sounded far away, so I had to clamp the receiver to my ear in order to hear him. Bo Yang, however, could hear everything without the help of a hearing aid: the cell phone of a colleague in another department some way away kept on ringing and Bo Yang immediately said: "Your mobile's ringing. Why not answer it and I'll hang on." However, previous spine and heart surgery didn't allow him to sit for too long.

Talking about *The Memoirs of Bo Yang*, he told me: "You needn't buy it, and I'll mail a copy to you." Once his wife had found him a pen he took down my address: "Eastern Caihuying Street, Fengtai District...." Then "please convey my regards to my readers."

Maybe the day will come when communications across the Taiwan Strait are easier and we shall have a chance to meet in person. I'm looking forward to that day."

On October 24, 2003, Soong May-ling, widow of Chiang Kai-shek, passed away and I put in another call to hear his reaction. He said that of the three legendary Soong sisters, whose experience ordinary folk could hardly imagine, Soong May-ling had had the most adulation and honor. True she had lived to the amazing old age of 106, but he still felt sorry at her passing, as one of few remaining witnesses to that era.

Not long after, I received the promised copy of *The Memoirs of Bo Yang* neatly inscribed with the words "Humbly waiting for Li Bing's corrections." I was touched that a man in his eighties could honor such a small promise.

I was more taken aback in spring five years later, when, at flower blossom time, this tired old gentleman fell asleep forever. Truly "April is the cruelest month!"

Just now, I found that very copy on my bookshelf. Shaking off the dust, I scanned his life: a young man's journey into the middle years and then old age, with unchanging sagacity and foresight. But I noticed that the further I got into the book, the less there was of harshness and more of tolerance.

I was fortunate enough to read the prologue to *The Collection of Selected Novels by Bo Yang* penned by his great friend Mr. Chen Jiangong: Mr. Bo Yang is famous among readers in the mainland of China as a master of satirical essays and a great historian by reason of works such as *The Ugly Chinaman and the Crisis of Chinese Culture* and *The Big Soybean Paste Jar: A Millennium Nightmare*. Their brilliant ideas and incisive analyses help keep today's readers awake and engaged, and will become eternal spiritual treasures inherited down the generations. Likewise, his historical opus including his translation of the *Zi Zhi Tong Jian* is magnificent and full of new information and innovative opinions. His *Timeline of Chinese History*, *Genealogies of China's Emperors, Queens, Princes and Princesses*, and the *Outlines of the History of the Chinese* completed during his imprisonment are epoch-making masterpieces.

Such comments are by no means an exaggeration.

Bo Yang's influence is not just an echo from yesteryear. Several days ago, my sixth-grader son, solemn-faced, gave me a school booklist including Bo Yang's *Outlines of the History of the Chinese*.

If the writer has a soul in heaven would he feel pleased about this? Sadly, I can't put in a call to ask, and there won't be any future meeting in Beijing.

Dialogue with Bo Yang

(Date of interview: October 23, 2003)

“Women should not be relegated to the kitchen”

Li Bing: Your new book is about love, and you’ve several marriages, including several failed ones, before marrying Zhang Xianghua when you were 58. So, what’s your take on love?

Bo Yang: There are no hard and fast rules. Sometimes people fall in love at first sight, and sometimes they fall in love over a long period of observing each other. Buddhism believes in predestined affinity, so if a man and a woman are attracted to each other, the interaction of their magnetic fields will result in love. I married Xianghua the year after my release from prison. I am 25 years older than she and we have stayed together for 25 years. Actually, married couples the world over are pretty much the same. We quarrel too. But I think couples who never quarrel will not stay together long. Compared with how we loved when young, we are more mature and love each other deeply. To my mind this is because we share the same values, which shouldn’t be considered as right or wrong. However, if one’s values are at odds it can lead to finger-pointing and disparaging exchanges. And let’s not forget, marriage can be dull, banal even. If you want to make it more passionate, you have to make some effort.

Li: How for example?

Bo: For example, I don’t think women belong to the kitchen. My opinion has nothing to do with regarding cooking as something menial. My reason is simple: people should not value themselves too low. It’s been said that housework can’t bring any income to a family. But that’s not true. For example, if the husband works outside for 500 yuan a month, then the housework his wife does at home should be estimated as having the same worth, and their total “1,000 yuan” goes to supporting the family. This is because their labors are equal and should be recognized as such. If the wife finds a better job outside, she needn’t be “a housewife.” If she can’t find any suitable outside job, then her housework should be seen as having monetary value. Xianghua likes to write prose and poetry, and she must follow her bent.

In addition to sharing the same values, the couple should care and respect each

other in daily life. The greater onus is on the husband otherwise it's no different from paying for sex.

“When poverty comes in through the front door, love may slip out through the back”

Li: You've said that one person may love different people at different stages of his or her life. Given that you've had several loves in your life, does that reflect your own experience?

Bo: Most of my previous marriages were against my will. As you know, during the period of wars and social turmoil many decisions had nothing to do with free choice. It was not until later life when Xianghua came along that I finally found my soul mate.

Li: Do you think love is affected by money?

Bo: Don't underestimate its importance. When poverty comes in through the front door, love may slip out through the back. Hah! Women, more so than men, usually wish for financial security and protection.

Li: Your wife tells me you don't touch housework.

Bo: She said that? I'm good at doing pancakes, and I can make dumpling filling, stuff and cook dumplings! I'm very competent indeed. (He laughs.)

