

# THE CHINA WAVE IN LITERATURE

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At the Hay Dhaka Literary Festival of 2012 the celebrated Indian writer Vikram Seth, after reading some of his fine translations of Chinese poetry, remarked that he found it odd that his fellow South Asians were incurious about the great civilization north of the Himalayas. It was late November. Just over a month earlier Mo Yan had been declared the Nobel laureate in literature. He wasn't the first Chinese author to get the award. In 2000 it had gone to Gao Xingjiang. But Xiao was an émigré who had settled in Paris. Mo Yan was very much a part of the Chinese literary scene; in fact, he was Vice-Chairman of the Chinese Writers' Association. My curiosity was piqued. I read what I could find of Mo Yan – *Red Sorghum*; *Pow!*; *Change* -- and was impressed. If a powerful writer like him could function in China it was



Yu Hua (b. 1960)

Prize for Literature, which many regard as an alternative Nobel; in 2010 it went to the Chinese poet Duo Duo. I had stumbled upon a new and exciting literary continent. As a lifelong student of literature I have come to believe that engaging with the arts and writings of other nations and civilizations may help defuse the belligerence that often bedevils international relations. I thought: why not write a series of articles on books by contemporary Chinese authors I found interesting? Readers might be induced to look up the books and judge their merits for themselves. The series title above alludes to Zhang Wei Wei's bestselling book *China Wave: Rise of a Civilizational State*.

**Brothers by Yu Hua**  
 I will start with *Brothers*, a novel by Yu Hua (b. 1960). First published in Chinese in two volumes (2005 and 2006), it became a popular success, and its single-volume English translation, published in New York in 2009 by Pantheon, was shortlisted for the Man Asian and won the French Prix Courier International.

On the very first page, a piquant juxtaposition of wildly contrasting toilets imagistically captures the socio-economic metamorphosis of China between the late sixties and the start of the new millennium. The opening paragraph shows the protagonist, Liu Town's 'premier tycoon', Baldy Li (thus nicknamed because his mother has his head shaved to save money), seated on a gold-plated toilet seat, contemplating a trip in a Russian spaceship that will cost him \$20 million.

We are then catapulted three decades back. The town has a communal pit latrine with a 'flimsy partition' to separate men and women squatting on a board over a common cesspool. Fourteen-year-old Baldy grips the edge of the board, bends over to peer under the partition and defying the toxic stench feasts his burning eyes on five female bottoms, or rather on the one belonging to the town beauty, Lin Hong. Baldy takes in every delectable detail of Lin Hong's posterior and bends down further to get a view of the pudendum. Just then an intruder grabs Baldy by the scruff of the neck, yanks him to his feet, and angrily lectures

him. The women flee, 'shrieking and weeping.'

The upholder of decency is the twenty-something Poet Zhao, one of the town's two 'men of talent'; his fame rests on the publication of 'a four-line poem' in the 'provincial culture centre's mimeographed magazine'. His friendly rival, Writer Liu, who has distinguished himself by placing a two-page story in the same organ, joins him in frog-marching the juvenile delinquent to the Police station, accompanied by an excited crowd. The literary men make a mildly comic duo with minor roles in Baldy's life-story. They tell everyone about Baldy's notorious act with the suavity of talk-show stars; the point that the media circus of the talk-show as well as literary pretentiousness is satirized need not be labored.

Blacksmith Tong, whose fat-arsed wife was one of the women in the latrine, promptly knocks out two of Baldy's teeth and makes "his ears buzz for the next 180 days", a detail that signals the novels' kinship to folk-tales and magic realism. Baldy's notoriety revives his mother Li Lan's old shame, which Baldy learns about now. Li Lan was heavily pregnant when her husband, playing peeping tom in the public latrine, bent over too far, fell, and drowned in excrement. The hero of the moment was a tall, strapping middle-school teacher, Song Fanping, who fished out the dead body through the cesspool opening and carried it to his home, just in time to see his wife collapse and give birth to Baldy Li. Five years later Song Fanping's wife dies, and the way is clear for the widower's romantic marriage with the widow Li Lan. Born out of the unlikely conjunction of cloacal humour and eroticism, the new family is exemplary in the bonding of its members. Baldy Li and his step-brother Song Gang, a year his senior, lend the book its title; the story only ends when one of them dies.

Even as a child Baldy is 'a live-life-while-you-can kind of guy' who can turn even his notoriety (people start calling him Buttpeeper) to economic advantage. Everyone, from the policeman who interrogate him to Poet Zhao and Blacksmith Tong, want to hear him describe the bottom of Liu town's 'resident beauty', and he is willing to oblige – for a price. From Poet Zhao, the most persistent inquirer (he claims this is research for a story he plans to write), he extracts bowls of delicious noodles that he devours with gusto. Thus, from the word go we are plunged into a zany, raunchy, perverse, freewheeling, Rabelaisian narrative; but its comic surge also carries along gruesome tragedy.

The Great Backward Somersault (my phrase, not the novelist's) of the Cultural revolution lands in Liu Town, just after Li Lan, who has been suffering from severe migraine, is sent for treatment to Shanghai. Everyone sports Mao badges, carries The Red Book, parades shouting revolutionary slogans; and one by one 'class enemies' are picked out and made to stand wearing dunce's caps, with placards hung from the neck announcing their counter-revolutionary crimes, while crowds jeer and jab and spit on them.

Song Fanping is at the head of a mammoth procession one day, waving a huge red flag; the next day he is in a dunce's cap wearing a placard declaring him a landlord: his father used to own 'a few hundred *mu* of farmland', which had long ago been distributed among the peasants, reducing him to an economic level lower than theirs, but the family's class background officially remains 'landlord'. Song Fanping is beaten to a pulp and locked up. When he is released, he makes his way to the bus stop to go to Shanghai and bring back his wife. Red Guards spot him and think he is trying to escape, beat him to death, and leave his body in the street, where it is discovered by the two brothers half a day later. (The author, we know, had witnessed such a mob beating in his boyhood.) Li Lan, after waiting forlornly for her husband, comes home alone to find out that she is widow once again.

Li Lan can only afford a coffin that is too small for the tall corpse. The undertakers smash the knees to fold the legs into it. With incredible dignity Li Lan holds the hands of her sons as they follow the coffin amidst 'revolutionary' jeers. Sun Wei, who had been one of the brothers' 'revolutionary' tormentors, is next killed with a razor, and his father, denounced as a capitalist because he owned a shop, is tortured till, utterly crazed, he kills himself by driving a nail into his skull. Li Lan, who works in a silk factory, keeps Baldy locked up at home for safety. Song Gang lives with his grandfather for ten years, making occasional visits to Liu town; the brothers are reunited after the death of the old man. Not long after, Li Lan is mortally ill. Her deathbed wish is that Song Gang should look after his brother, a promise he solemnly makes.

Part II is set in the era of Deng Xiaoping's reforms, when Baldy comes into his own as an entrepreneur with a Midas touch, and takes on numerous fellow townsmen as associates and partners. But though widely admired by ordinary people and officialdom, he is spurned by Lin Hong, who finds his short, squat, thick-necked form unattractive, and is disgusted by his bizarre tactics of wooing, e.g. hiring street urchins to shout slogans declaring his romantic interest in her. His tall, handsome brother Song Gang refuses to join him in his wheeling and dealing, and does lowly jobs, but wins Lin Hong's love. Their marriage leads to an estrangement between the brothers, largely because of Lin Hong's antipathy to Baldy.

The narrative impetus goes into overdrive to keep up with Baldy's dizzying rise. He begins with a humble job like his brother, in the Good Works Factory, a losing charitable concern under the Civil Affairs Bureau. The factory 'has fourteen other employees: two cripples, three idiots, four blind men, and five deaf men, and unsurprisingly runs at a loss. Within six months Baldy turns it into a profit-making enterprise, and soon becomes (virtually self-appointed) director.

Profits skyrocket from year to year until he suddenly resigns, and raises capital to set up a garment factory. He goes to Shanghai to seek orders but comes back

empty handed, the sole hiccup in his career.

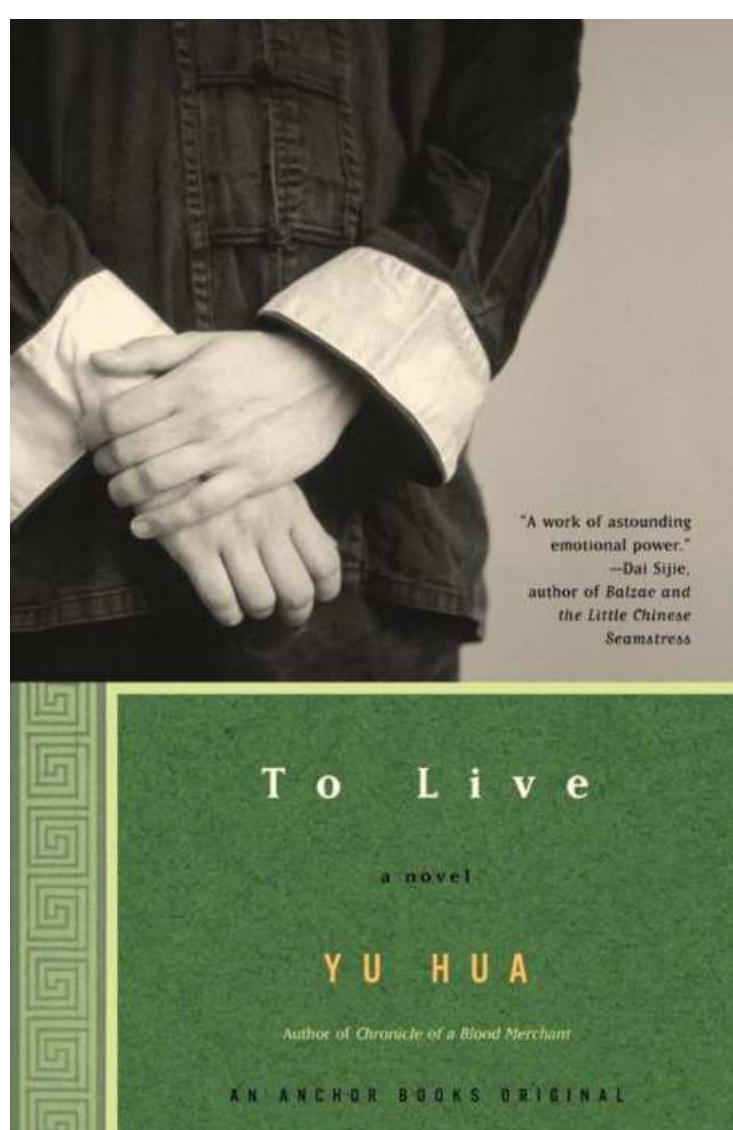
He wants his job at the Good Works Factory back, and when turned down becomes the biggest scrap dealer in the country. He visits Japan and returns with thousands of 'junk suits', which sell like hot cakes. He buys the Good Works Factory from the government and turns it into the Liu Town Economic Research Business Corporation, appointing the two cripples as corporation director and deputy director, and the remaining twelve as 'senior researchers'. The befuddled director and deputy director are told to study Chess, while 'The four blind men will study light and the five deaf men will study sound. But about the three idiots? Fuck, let them study evolution! We are now in the realm of comic fantasy.'

It is pointless to try to capture the verve of such a novel through a summary. Its keyword is perhaps excess, essential for the success of a Rabelaisian tale. Episodes are drawn out with a voracious appetite for detail. Baldy exhibits unremitting satyriasis. Thirty women name him in paternity suits, unaware that after his great romantic disappointment he has had a vasectomy. The court case becomes a source of general merriment. Suddenly he comes up with the idea of a National Virgin Beauty Competition (a satirical take on the contemporary Chinese fascination with beauty pageants), which leads to a spike in hymen reconstruction surgery, and the sale of artificial hymens peddled by an 'itinerant charlatan' who inveigles Song Gang into joining him. Song Gang accompanies him to Hainan for a year, during which time Baldy finally succeeds in seducing Lin Hong in an epic love-making session.

When Song Gang finally returns to Liu Town and hears of his cuckoldry he lies down on the rail tracks and is nearly severed in two. Lin Hong's sexual liaison with Baldy not only makes her rich but also inculcates in her a shrewd business sense. She sets up a beauty salon, which is a front for a high class cat house. A note left by Baldy goes: 'Even if we are parted by death, we will still be brothers.' Baldy retires from business and trains for his space trip. He will carry his brother's urn and put it in orbit: 'my brother Song Gang will be a space alien!'

The novel ends in 2004, when China ranked 6<sup>th</sup> in the world in terms of GDP. *Brothers* is a rambunctious epic of the first phase of China's economic transformation. Much has happened since then. The media is awash with statistics, but to grasp the human significance of the Chinese experience literature is a better guide. Reading *Brothers* led me to formulate the hypothesis that contemporary Chinese literature can offer better models than western literature to writers in countries like Bangladesh. Readers who join me in looking into Chinese authors will be able to test the hypothesis.

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logical to assume there were others; perhaps he was the tip of the proverbial iceberg. I set about finding out more, and to my surprise discovered that the range and vitality of contemporary Chinese writing was an open secret. The University of Oklahoma, which published the influential journal *World Literature Today* (WLT), had launched a sister publication in collaboration with the Beijing Normal University, *Chinese Literature Today*, both under the Taylor & Francis/Routledge imprint. Oklahoma University and WLT also awarded the Neustadt International