



JOHNSON COUNTY  
COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Johnson County Community College  
ScholarSpace @ JCCC

---

Library Papers and Presentations

Billington Library

---

2009

# China's Gold Medal Novelists

Andrea Kempf

Johnson County Community College, [akempf@jccc.edu](mailto:akempf@jccc.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [http://scholarspace.jccc.edu/lib\\_pp](http://scholarspace.jccc.edu/lib_pp)



Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Kempf, Andrea, "China's Gold Medal Novelists" (2009). *Library Papers and Presentations*. 6.  
[http://scholarspace.jccc.edu/lib\\_pp/6](http://scholarspace.jccc.edu/lib_pp/6)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Billington Library at ScholarSpace @ JCCC. It has been accepted for inclusion in Library Papers and Presentations by an authorized administrator of ScholarSpace @ JCCC. For more information, please contact [bbaile14@jccc.edu](mailto:bbaile14@jccc.edu).

## China's Gold Medalist Novelists

### **Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out by Mo Yan**

New York: Arcade, 2008 trans. By Howard Goldblatt

### **The Song of Everlasting Sorrow by Wang Anyi**

New York: Columbia University Press, 2008 trans. by Michael Berry and Susan Chan Egan

### **Beijing Coma by Ma Jian**

New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009 trans. by Flora Drew

### **A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers by Guo Xiaolu**

New York: Nan A. Talese/Doubleday, 2007

China dazzled the world with Olympic pageantry and athletic prowess; however, an equally inspiring performance has been achieved in the last several years by its creative novelists. In the last two years four exciting novels have appeared in English; three are translations from the Chinese; the fourth was actually written in English. Three of these authors - Mo Yan, Ma Jian, and Wang Anyi - are old enough to have experienced most of the political and social upheavals in their country during the last fifty years. Guo Xiaolu, twenty years younger than the other writers, came of age in a rapidly modernizing country. Her perspective is, in many respects, eons apart from the other authors.

Mo Yan grew up in a rural community in Shandong province where he set many of his novels including *Life and Death Are Wearing me Out*. He is known for his satirical take on life in the People's Republic, and on occasion has been forced to withdraw a book from publication. Noted for his outrageous narrative voices, he exceeds all expectation in this novel. In 1949, just before the novel begins, an honest landlord Ximen Nao is executed. Down in Hell, Ximen Nao refuses to confess his guilt to Lord Yama; so after two years of unspeakable torture during which he continues to affirm his innocence, Ximen Nao is sent back to his village – reborn as a donkey in the family that was his during his lifetime. The narrative voice in the first section is that of Ximen Donkey. Lan Lian, one of Ximen Nao's workmen, who was given a parcel of redistributed land after the revolution, is the owner of the donkey as well as the new husband of one of Ximen Nao's former concubines and the step-father of his children. It is this family unit that the narrative follows. The donkey, however, doesn't survive for long. He is killed and eaten

during the famine following the Great Leap Forward. Then still refusing to confess his guilt Ximen Nao is reborn as Lan Lian's ox. As the century progresses, he continues to describe Chinese history from the point of view of the family's animals. The Cultural Revolution is viewed through the eyes of the ox. The end of the 1970's and most of the 1980's with an improvement in the standard of living is seen through the eyes of a pig. A dog takes the reader through the rapidly modernizing and consumer-driven 1990's, followed by a monkey, and finally a big-headed boy. The breathtaking invention of the narrative has to be experienced. Mo Yan has been touted for the Nobel Prize and this novel certainly will burnish his reputation.

Wang Anyi's *Song of Everlasting Sorrow* follows the same trajectory of Chinese history, but in an urban environment. Shanghai, with its traditional neighborhoods called longtangs, is far from the rural poverty of Shandong Province that Mo Yan describes. And the author's protagonist is no dumb animal, but rather is Wang Qiyao, a shallow beautiful woman who wins third place in the Miss Shanghai Beauty Contest, just before the revolution convulses China. As the reader follows her life through the changes brought by Communism to her and indeed to all the residents of Shanghai, the protagonist becomes not just a woman who must adapt to a radically changing China, but also a symbol of Shanghai itself. That city, one known for its sophisticated, cosmopolitan charm, the richness and variety of its life, was a symbol for all Mao wanted to change. Wang Qiyao, beautiful and pleasure-seeking, looking for a comfortable existence, suffers as her city suffers, maintaining her individuality in tiny ways – like playing mahjong when it is banned. This urban view of Chinese history is moving and just as powerful as Mo Yan's rural vision.

Focusing on a shorter period of time *Beijing Coma* by Ma Jian looks primarily at the events leading up to and following the Pro-Democracy movement and the Tiananmen Square demonstrations. Dai Wei lies in a coma after having been shot during the demonstrations. Unable to communicate, he is still aware of the events around him and also able to remember the events leading up to Tiananmen as well as his family's suffering during the Cultural Revolution. Author Ma Jian, who has lived in self-imposed exile in London for a number of years, is concerned that the Chinese government's ban on any mention of the Tiananmen events has led to a collective amnesia in his country. Using the novel as his vehicle, he sees himself as the

chronicler and preserver of history that has been erased from the memories of the Chinese people. The narrative goes into excruciating detail about the various factions whose wrangling was only silenced when the People's Liberation Army finally quashed all traces of rebellion. This challenging almost 600 page book is in part a genuine historical document, in part a lyrical depiction of a man unable to control his destiny, and also a polemic against the repressive nature of the Chinese government. Again, the hero is as much an individual as a symbol. Dai Wei's inability to control his destiny is representative of his countrymen's inability to control theirs.

Finally, *A Concise Chinese Dictionary for Lovers* by Guo Xiaolu is focused on the present. History is almost non-existent for Zhaung (called Z. by the British who cannot pronounce her name), the twenty-something narrator of this charming novel. She has come to London to perfect her English, so that she may help her peasant-born parents in their ever-expanding international shoe manufacturing business. The novel is divided into twelve chapters, one for each month of Z.s stay in London. Then each month is divided into sections headed by ambiguous English words and their definitions in her dictionary. As the year progresses, Z.'s English improves. She finds a lover. She explores popular British culture from fast food to sex shops. This is indeed a novel about the Chinese in the twenty-first century – discovering Western culture and consumerism, learning the nuances of a complicated non-Asian language and negotiating the vastly difference social mores of the world outside China – written in a voice, simultaneously naïve and wise. Author Guo Xiaolu, who wrote the novel in English, is an award-winning filmmaker living in London and Beijing. Her charming, easy-to-read novel has more depth than is at first obvious to a casual reader. Like the three previously mentioned works, *A Concise Chinese Dictionary for Lovers* is definitely a gold medal novel.

Andrea Kempf is a Professor/Librarian at Johnson County Community College in Overland Park, KS. She was named Fiction Book Reviewer of the Year 2000 by the *Library Journal*. She is also an alumna of the Asian Studies Development Program at the East-West Center, University of Hawaii