

*Book & Readings*

# Chinese writers fail

By Ben Bl...

BEIJING: Hobbled by censorship at home and ignorance of China abroad, Chinese writers are failing to make a major impact globally, 90 years after a landmark literary revolution.

The May 4 Movement of 1919 started out as student protests against a decision at the Paris Peace Conference, after World War One, to award Japan control of German concessions in China's Shandong province. It soon encompassed a broader debate about how China should modernise.

It spawned a host of writers famous throughout the Chinese world, including Lu Xun, who, like George Orwell, wrote biting social satire and sought to change what they viewed as a corrupt, backward and foreign-dominated China.

Yet to this day, works by leading lights of the movement such as Lu and others who wanted to reinvigorate an ancient but stagnant cultural tradition, remain largely unread abroad, despite their continued influence on the modern Chinese psyche.

Modern Chinese literature is at best a niche interest overseas, breaking through only occasionally in the form of books like Mo Yan's "Red Sorghum", later made into a film by Oscar-nominated director Zhang Yimou.

Chinese authors bemoan the lack of interest abroad in its literary treasures.

"When Western literature first started coming into China over that period of the May 4 movement, there were lots of people translating their books into Chinese," said



CHINESE books have yet to win an international readership.—Reuters

Feng Jikai, whose most famous novels explore the chaos of the Cultural Revolution. "But there is hardly anybody in the West translating Chinese works. It's important to introduce Chinese literature to the West, but it's not the fault of the Chinese that it's not happening," the towering, wild-haired writer told Reuters.

"It cannot be Chinese translating books

for Westerners. It has to be Westerners translating the books," said Feng.

Indeed, a Chinese national has never won a Nobel Literature Prize, a sore spot for a country that sets high store on both international recognition and its literary tradition.

Gao Xingjian, who won the prize in 2000, was born in China but was a French national when he won the award.

# to find global voice

Blanchard

## The 'banned in China' brand

Jo Lusby, general manager of publisher Penguin China, admits to a sense of frustration at trying to bring contemporary Chinese authors to a Western audience, even as sales of classics such as "Monkey", also known as "Journey to the West", are strong.

"Chinese writers are writing for a Chinese audience about China. There are some books I would love to do out of China, but I think it needs too much backstory for a Western reader to enjoy them in the way a Chinese reader reads them," she told Reuters.

A lack of translators compounds the problem, Lusby added.

Often, the books which do achieve a level of success overseas are not the ones the government approves of, though there are exceptions. Jiang Rong's strongly political and best-selling "Wolf Totem" has sold well in English.

In 2000, China banned two novels for their graphic sexual content which then caused a brief stir abroad after they were translated into English - Mian Mian's "Candy" and literary counterpart Zhou Weihui's "Shanghai Baby".

These are not the kinds of writers China, keen to promote itself as a modern, cultured and benign rising power, wants to be popular abroad.

"Westerners are attracted to Chinese books which have been banned, even if they are not terribly good works of literature,"

Chen Jianguo, vice-chairman of the government-linked Chinese Writers Association, told Reuters.

"They are curious about them. So sometimes Chinese authors write simply to shock and be banned so as to appeal to foreigners," he added.

Penguin's Lusby said that it is usually a challenge to bring Chinese writers over for book tours because few speak much English, so publishers need some other way of drawing in readers.

"Oftentimes 'banned in China' is the only selling point publishers can use to communicate what the book is about," she said.

"I don't think it's surprising it's not necessarily the big literary tomes from China which are making it out, but it's the more pacy, pacey books."

## The toll of censorship

But while censorship may help sell sensational novels abroad, some novelists worry that it is eating away at Chinese authors' efforts to build a creative, modern body of work that will have more than voyeuristic appeal overseas.

Booming Internet use and rampant piracy means many banned books do not stay unread for long.

Yet the threat of a book being shut out of the main domestic market means authors have to step carefully if they want to make a living from their art, even if the censor-

ship system today is not the terrifying beast it was during the hardline Maoist era. Writers have to ensure that they do not broach sensitive topics, or only tackle them obliquely.

"It hurts," said writer Yan Geling, referring to censorship. "I'm at the peak of my career now, my prime-time. Sometimes it's painful to have to compromise, to hurt your own work, in order to get published."

Wang Gang, the urbane and quick-witted author of the Chinese bestseller "English", a semi-autobiographical novel about growing up in Xinjiang during the Cultural Revolution, admitted he had to self-censor his book to get it passed by the authorities.

"Generally speaking, there is freedom, but there are certain things I did not write about," he said at the launch of the English-language translation of his book.

"For example, I did not mention the missionary background of the English teacher (in the novel) nor ethnic problems in Xinjiang. I feel regret about that," Wang said.

The far western region of Xinjiang is home to the Muslim Uighur minority, many of whom chafe under Beijing's rule.

Wang, though, has an explanation for how he was able to write so candidly about a period of time all but removed from government-vetted history texts.

"Officials don't read any more," he said slyly. "That's how this book had a chance to come out."—Reuters