



PODCAST

Ep. 1: Chinese Fiction in the Reform Era

When China opened up in the 1980s, how did fiction writers respond to their new-found — but fragile — freedoms of expression? The China Books podcast finds out

MARY KAY MAGISTAD — OCTOBER 10, 2023

FICTION

HISTORY

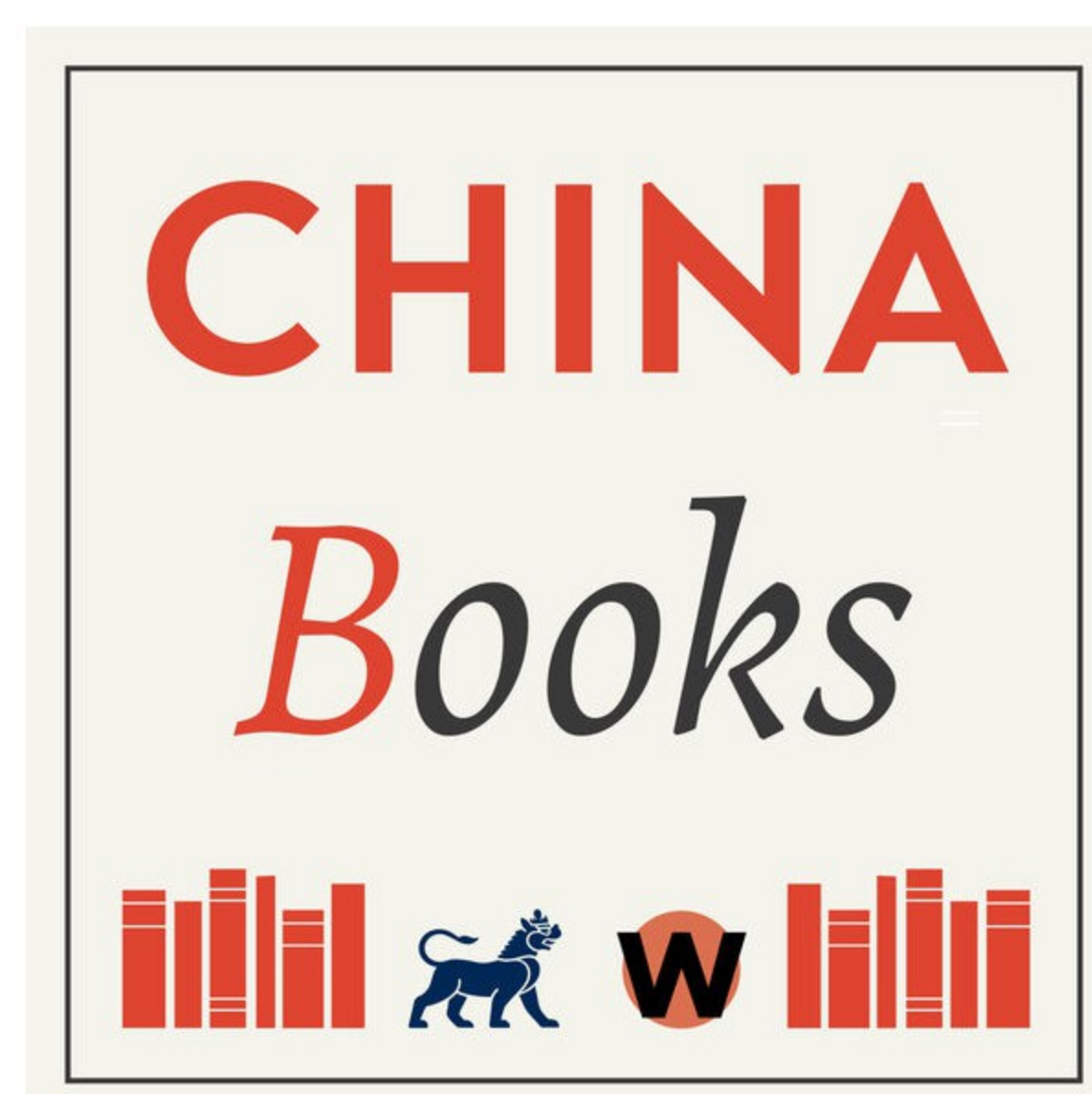


Editor's note: We're delighted to present the first episode of the [China Books](#) podcast, a collaboration between the *China Books Review* and Mary Kay Magistad, a former China correspondent for NPR and PRI/BBC's *The World*, and creator of the critically acclaimed podcasts *Whose Century Is It?* and *On China's New Silk Road*. She is now deputy director of Asia Society's [Center on U.S.-China Relations](#), which co-publishes the *China Books Review*.


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China's epic transformation over the past four decades has seen cities expand, fortunes rise and expectations change. It has left Chinese people to either ride the waves of change, or scramble — perhaps struggle — to keep up. In the midst of it all, Chinese fiction has reflected and riffed on life on the ground, with humor, satire, pathos and good old-fashioned story-telling. At times in the Reform and Opening Up era, Chinese fiction has even driven a national conversation.

In this first episode of the *China Books* podcast, I talk to writer Jianying Zha and literature scholar Perry Link about how Chinese fiction reflected and influenced the societal change in the era of Reform and Opening Up, from Deng Xiaoping's ascent as top leader in the late 1970s until Xi Jinping changed direction from 2013 onward:





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Guests



Jianying Zha (查建英) is a writer, journalist and cultural commentator in both English and Chinese. She is the author of two books in English, *Tide Players* (2011) and *China Pop* (1995), and six books of non-fiction and fiction in Chinese. Her work has appeared in publications including *The New Yorker* and *The New York Times*. Born and raised in Beijing, educated in China and the U.S., she lives between New York and Beijing.



Perry Link is Professor of Comparative Literature/Chinese at University of California, Riverside, and Professor Emeritus of East Asian Studies at Princeton University. He received his Ph.D. from Harvard University in 1976, and specializes in 20th-century Chinese literature. His publications include *The Uses of Literature* (2000), *An Anatomy of Chinese* (2013) and, in Chinese, *Banyang Suibi* (Notes of a Semi-Foreigner).

Authors and works mentioned

- Lu Xun (*Complete Volumes of Lu Xun*)
- Cao Xueqin (*Dream of the Red Chamber*)
- Shi Nai'an (*Water Margin*)
- Wu Cheng'en (*Journey to the West*)
- Leo Tolstoy (*Anna Karenina*)
- Perry Link (*The Uses of Literature, Evening Chats in Beijing*)
- Liu Binyan
- Wang Meng (*Avoiding Loftiness* 躲避崇高)
- Mo Yan
- Ma Yuan
- Sun Ganglu (*A Panorama of Rivers and Mountains* 千里江山图)
- Yu Hua
- Ah Cheng (*King of Chess, King of Children, King of Trees*)
- Han Shaogong
- Wang Shuo (*Let's Have Fun and Die* 过把瘾就死, *Please Don't Treat Me as a Human* 千万别把我当人, *Never Be Serious At All* 一点正经没有)
- Jin Yucheng (*Blossoms*)
- Liu Xiaobo
- Xia Zhiqing (Hsia Chih-tsing)
- Zhang Hen Shui
- Ge Fei
- Han Han

- Wang Xiaobo (“A Unique and Individualistic Pig” 一只特立独行的猪, *My Spiritual Homeland*)
- Zhang Liang, Andrew J. Nathan, Perry Link, Orville Schell (*The Tiananmen Papers*)
- Jianying Zha (*China Pop*)
- Xu Zhiyong

Transcript

(Music)

MARY KAY MAGISTAD: Welcome to the very first episode of the China Books podcast, a companion of the *China Books Review*. I’m Mary Kay Magistad.

I was a China correspondent for 15 years, first for NPR, then for the PRI/BBC program *The World*. I traveled all over China, talked to all kinds of people, and read all kinds of books — about China, and from China. And here, in this podcast, you’ll find fresh takes and food for thought about the world of books and ideas about China, available in English.

This podcast is for anyone interested in China. You don’t have to be a specialist. If a conversation gets into the weeds, I’ll either pull it out, or I’ll provide notes on the China Books podcast page at chinabooksreview.com. The Review’s editor is Alec Ash, and co-published by *The Wire China*, and Asia Society’s Center on U.S.-China Relations, where I’m deputy director.

So, for all those years I was a China correspondent — I wrote about all kinds of things — politics, the economy, the environment, human rights issues, how cities were growing, and how life was changing on the ground for individual Chinese people — from the poorest farmers to wealthy urban entrepreneurs. Through it all, I enjoyed and appreciated reading Chinese fiction.

So, this is where the China Books podcast begins — with a conversation about how Chinese fiction influenced, and was influenced by, China’s decades of economic reform and opening up. And my two guests are among the most knowledgeable people around on this topic:

PERRY LINK: I’m Perry Link. I’m a professor of Chinese language and literature.

JIANYING ZHA: Hello, I’m Jianying Zha. I’m a writer and critic in both English and Chinese.

MARY KAY MAGISTAD: Zha Jianying in Chinese — surname first — was born and grew up in Beijing, and is the author of many critically acclaimed and influential books, fiction and non-fiction, in English and in Chinese. And she’s a contributor to *The New Yorker*.

Perry Link, also the author of many critically acclaimed influential books, on Chinese literature, society, dissidents and language. Perry chairs Innovative Teaching Comparative Literature and Foreign Languages at the University of California, Riverside’s College of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences. He’s also Emeritus Professor of East Asian Studies at Princeton University — where he co-wrote the textbook series with which I began to learn Chinese.

As Perry and Jianying well know, a good novel or short story in any language can transport a reader and provoke thought. It can challenge or reinforce long-held assumptions. It can dazzle with the beauty of the writing, or the richness of the imagination that brought this fictional world into being. It can amuse. It can unsettle. It can satirize, holding up a mirror to a society and its leaders and elites. It can reflect a moment, and it can wrestle with rapid change.

Chinese literature has done all of this in different ways over time including over these past four decades since China emerged from the Cultural Revolution and the Mao era, and began one of the fastest and most globally impactful economic and societal transformations in human history.

But before getting to that — I asked Jianying how she developed her love of reading and writing as a kid who was just entering primary school when the Cultural Revolution began.

3:39: **JIANYING ZHA:** Oh. Well, I was born and raised in a sort of Beijing intellectual family. So even though all sorts of books were banned, and by the end of the Cultural Revolution, the bookstores in Beijing were left with pretty much nothing but Mao’s writings and the classic Marx, Lenin’s writings, plus a few books allowed, like Lu Xun. But I was able to rely on my parents’ home library, which survived home ransack. Some books were taken away by the rebels, but what’s left is enough for me at that age to start a kind of browsing

through the bookshelves. I was able to read classic literary novels — *Hong Lou Meng* — *Dream of the Red Chamber*, *Water Margin* and *Journey to the West*, all of them survived. And Tang poems, Tang poetry, Song poems, and, of course, the complete volumes of Lu Xun's writing. A lot of children from intellectual families probably had the similar experience, starting with from home. And also, by the middle of the Cultural Revolution, I think the atmosphere, the campaign, sort of relaxed enough for people to secretly pass books among friends.

“ By the end of the Cultural Revolution, bookstores in Beijing were left with pretty much nothing but Mao, Marx and Lenin ”

— *Jianying Zha*

5:10: **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** Perry, you were living in China as the country was opening up after the Cultural Revolution — '79-'80. Is that right?

PERRY LINK: Yes.

5:20: **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** Yeah. And in your book, *The Uses of Literature: Life in the Socialist Chinese Literary System*, you recount how much enthusiasm there was in early 1979, when the Chinese political leadership allowed a few Chinese classics like *Dream of the Red Chamber* and foreign novels like *Anna Karenina* to be sold. And you recount how in one bookstore alone, the New China Bookstore on Wangfujing Street in Beijing, there was a line of people two miles long, and the store sold out its entire stock of 800,000 volumes within a week, and that they could have sold more, but there were a lot of scuffles that broke out because people wanted their books.

And you also talk about this survey in 1982 of middle school students in Guangzhou, which is, of course, a city in southern China, not too far from Hong Kong, where the students named reading as their favorite after-school activity, and more students said they wanted to be writers than doctors, or certainly more than officials.

What was it like for you as an outside observer who focuses on literature and language to be in China then? What kinds of conversations were you having that you recall about literature and its importance in that moment?

6:25: **PERRY LINK:** (Chuckles) How many thousand hours do we have for me to answer this question? Yes, I went to China in 1979-80, and that year was the high tide, you might say, of what was called *shanghen wenxue*, scar literature, taking its name from one particular story that a student at Fudan University stuck up on the wall about how the protagonist's family was ruined, her parents' family, and then her own boyfriend was all ruined by politics. And it had such resonance that people all over the country, even though it wasn't a great story from a literary point of view, responded, saying, 'look at that family that was ruined by politics. My family was ruined by politics. So I will read more like this.'

7:15: And then, one after another, different kinds of fiction and what we call reportage came out that, to use the cliché at the time, was called 'breaking into forbidden zones', which was, in a sense, literal. You couldn't write about violence. You couldn't write about political bullying, and all of these political and social problems. And then all of a sudden you could. And there was a sort of a contest among writers to see who could break the line a little farther, who could get away with doing something. And that depended not only on the daringness of the writer, but the connections of the writer. Writers that were better connected could go further.

8:00: But what I studied and what really struck me wasn't the writers' agency in this, if we can use that word, but the popular response — people everywhere. And the circulations of the literary magazines went up to things like 500,000, which was way above what it had ever been before — and after, I might say — because people wanted to participate in the breaking into forbidden zones.

8:28: I think of a writer like Liu Binyan, who I studied then and appreciated a lot. He wrote down things that everybody knew already. So his contribution wasn't to tell people what they didn't know. He wasn't an exploratory novelist in that sense. But he dared, and he had the backing that allowed him to run an idea up the flagpole, as it were, where everybody then clapped and it was a collective catharsis, you might say. In Chinese, they said "jie hen" (解恨) — releasing your pent-up frustrations and antagonisms.

9:08: And that was a magical sort of thing from about 1978 in the Fall until about the middle of 1980, when Deng Xiaoping decided that this opening up of this wellspring of complaint has gone far enough. Of course, Deng wanted it to go to a certain degree, because he wanted to discredit the Gang of Four and the Maoist model, without naming Mao. But he wanted to justify his turn in policy. And therefore, this popular outcry about how bad things were, worked in his favor. But if it goes too far, if it goes to a point where the legitimacy of the regime itself is called into question, then no, put on the brakes. So starting in about mid-1980, the brakes were slowly put on. And then it's a long story about the brakes going on and off and playing cat-and-mouse and tug-of-war.

10:17: **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** Yeah, and I experienced the brakes going on and off when I was reporting in China in the '90s all the way up to 2013. It happened repeatedly. So there was scar literature. Was there anything else emerging that you noticed in the early '80s?

10:24: **PERRY LINK:** Yes, and it became a long-term trend of writing, trying to write modern literature, trying to join the world and write modernist, not to say post-modernist, avant-garde kind of writing, which I have mixed feelings about. But that started also in the late '70s and early '80s. In fact, one of the ways that the corner was turned from writing this complaint about the past to putting on the brakes was to use modernist literature. The famous writer Wang Meng was a very smart writer and very good at that. He started in 1980 and '81, to write very good — I don't want to cast dispersions here — but turning toward modernism, turning toward imitating literature around the world — in order to do that, which is valuable in its own right, but also to pull readers and the whole literary scene away from this intense political complaint that they'd had before.

11:33: And that goes right down to the present day. I'd argue that what we see on the web today is an odd mixture of still complaining about social problems and what's happened in China indirectly, but mixed with this modernism that, among other things, allows a writer to try to become famous. 'Look what I can think.' I'm going to write something that reminds people of Virginia Woolf or James Joyce.

It might not, but it's a way to build a career.

“ [In the 1980s] different kinds of fiction and what we call reportage came out that was called 'breaking into forbidden zones' ”

— *Perry Link*

12:07: **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** Sure. Well, so, Jianying by the early 80s, you were in the United States at the University of South Carolina studying English and literature. Is that right?

JIANYING ZHA: English, yeah. English literature. Yeah.

MARY KAY MAGISTAD: Did you know then that you wanted to be a writer?

12:23: **JIANYING ZHA:** Yes, but I didn't think of writing in English at all. I was a Chinese literature major at Peking University before coming to the US. I really just wanted to have an adventure in the furthest-away country from China as possible. So I ended up in first South Carolina, then New York, majoring in English first, and then comparative literature. But then I returned to China in 1986 and '87 to catch the so-called 'culture fever' that I kept hearing from my friends and classmates in Beijing, because that was the height of the sort of experimentation in literature and art with the West that Perry mentioned.

13:07: Wang Meng is just one of the many writers. Of course, he was among the older writers to experiment with things like stream of consciousness in his short fiction. But the main prominent figures throughout the 1980s literary scene, I would say, belong largely to two communities of writers. One were people like Wang Meng, who you might call the "old rightists", who are now returned back to writing, to the mainstream writing. And the other are the educated youth, which are mostly my generation or within 10 years of my generation, who wrote about their years down in the countryside, but often from an urban point of view. And sometimes they experimented with magical realism. There were people like Mo Yan. He's a peasant boy, but he read Marquez. And so he began to write about his hometown story in this mode. And then there were urban writers like Ma Yuan and Sun Ganglu and Yu Hua and all these who wrote in a high modernist style about their experiences, either in the cities or in small towns.

14:22: And then there were people like Ah Cheng, who wrote in a sort of return — like paying homage to the Chinese classical writing in the vernacular, but with classical overtones, in his famous fiction series, *Chess King of Children*, and *King of Trees*.

14:40: And then there were people who formed this school, including Ah Cheng, a school called Xun Gen Wen Xue (寻根文学) which is Seeking Roots Literature. This is like a sort of a phase beyond the early Scar Literature. In this school of literature, people are looking for deeper roots of what happened. Some went back to people like Han Shaogong, who wrote these novellas thinking the so-called Chinese feudal tradition is really to be blamed for what happened in this modern disaster of an ignorant population following blindly a cult leader, or the patriarchy. And then there were people who tried to learn from the tradition as a source of nutrition for making modern Chinese literature, and that would be represented by writers like Ah Cheng. It's a fairly wide range of writing going on in the 1980s.

15:37: But I would say actually what turns out to be more enduring or have a greater influence throughout the 1990s is actually a writer like Wang Shuo, who wrote a form of urban fiction using the sort of revolutionary language, because he ended up writing a kind of sly subversion of all those old literary tradition, like socialist realism, or the moralistic posturing, lecturing intellectuals. They're also the target of his satire and parodies, along with the official discourse. And that, even though he was writing, starting in the late 1980s and moving on to the early 1990s, has such a huge influence among later writers, and with his connection to cinema, TV series. Because one of the years, I think this was 1988, four of his novellas were turned into movies. And that continued to happen and impact the writings beyond Tiananmen. So I would say this Wang Shuo phenomenon is something that caught, ahead of other writers, a sort of zeitgeist of the time after the 1980s.

16:57: **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** Yeah. I interviewed him in '96. It was shortly after I set up NPR's bureau in China. My news assistant considered him sort of a personal hero. And at the time it was in the middle of the Spiritual Civilization Campaign of '96. So he was just, he was in a little hotel in Beijing and was just sort of despondent because he wasn't writing, and...

16:00: **JIANYING ZHA:** Yeah. I mean, he portrayed the sort of anti-hero, even for the reformist writers that were prominent in the 1980s, they were still kind of stuck in the old Communist style of literature is literature to educate the masses. There was a very elitist posture to educate the masses. So to put it positively, this was a new Enlightenment movement to reconnect with the May 4th generation. But again, this moral hubris embedded in that kind of voice was basically mocked by the so-called hooligan literature represented by Wang Shuo. He was controversial, not only because the old-style Communist censors didn't like him, but also the sort of older generation of reformist writers didn't like him either.

18:20: I think Ah Chang has a memorable way of describing the Wang Shuo sensibility, the difference between Wang Shuo's writing and the early modernist Chinese writing inspired by the European masters. He said, the experimental writers like Yu Hua and even Mo Yan, it's like you start a different banquet, you start a different meal using all the foreign ingredients. But a majority of Chinese are not used to that kind of cuisine.

18:50: Whereas Wang Shuo's writing is like, you go to a seemingly Chinese meal and then you start tasting it. Everything tastes different and you don't know what went wrong, which makes you want to laugh. So this is the kind of deconstruction that's done on the sly, with a smirk on his face, basically saying, look, 'you guys are all the same. You think you're reforming China, but you're going to be the same, just like the enemies you're fighting against. So he has a more cynical, you might say, or jaded attitude about the whole scene, while protecting himself by saying, 'I'm just a little person. I just want to have fun.' This you can tell by the titles of all his fiction, 过把瘾就死, "Let's Have Fun and Die", or 千万别把我当人, "Please Don't Treat Me as a Human," or 一点正经没有, means "Never Be Serious At All."

19:44: The importance of the Wang Shuo phenomenon was incisively captured by one essay written by Wang Meng, in support of him, basically. It's called Duobi Chonggao (躲避崇高: "Avoiding Loftiness"). This was in the midst of a huge debate in around 1992, called 人文精神的失落, means, "Have We Lost the Humanist Spirit?" And so Wang Meng is basically saying the Wang Shuo phenomenon indicates the spirit of the time, which wants to avoid the grand deals, the sort of majestic mission that the intellectuals presumed to carry on. And this is the mood of the moment, which is turning to a secular life with the market. You need to survive in this new tide of commercialism and all that. And don't be too serious. And that's captured by Wang Shuo's writing, which has many spin-offs, and sort of created a way of talking, in the later TV series, and in other younger writers' works.

20:50: **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** So Perry, coming back to your book, *The Uses of Literature*, you wrote about how around the same time in the late 70s, early 80s, and into the 80s, and even into the early 90s, China's leaders were trying to reimpose what you're referring to as a socialist literary system, even as this more

open, robust, irreverent at times, conversation was opening up, not just in Chinese literature, but also in China more generally among intellectuals, writers, students, and others.

I mean, I've heard about the '80s. I wasn't there, but I've heard about it talked about in China as just this really extraordinary time of people really considering a lot of different possibilities for China. And it was reflected in literature and fiction. Jianying has already talked about some of the impacts on society as a whole. But I'm wondering how these two different energies were coexisting or clashing at the same time — the government's attempt to reimpose the socialist literary system with a new generation, well, with a lot of people, wanting to have a different kind of conversation and a different way of thinking, both creatively and to some extent politically.

22:00: **PERRY LINK:** That, to my ear, raises the huge question of censorship, and then eventually self-censorship, and we should probably talk about that.

MARY KAY MAGISTAD: Yes.

PERRY LINK: But I'm so inspired by what Jianying just said about Wang Shuo that if you will allow me, I'd like to pick up on that.

MARY KAY MAGISTAD: Please.

21:58: **PERRY LINK:** In the early 2000s, Wang Shuo and Liu Xiaobo published a book that was based on a long dialogue they had in a hotel over three days. Liu Xiaobo, of course, is the Nobel Peace Prize winner from 2010, a literature scholar who turned political in the 2000s decade. But he and Wang Shuo were friends. And in this dialogue, Liu Xiaobo teases Wang Shuo for not being so revolutionarily anti-mission — what Jianying just said about the sacred, exalted mission that we now have to get away from, 躲避崇高, (Duobi Chenggao, Avoiding Loftiness) and so on, is what Wang Shuo is famous for, and rightly so. But Liu Xiaobo was saying, “no, look what satire does. Satire of your kind, or any kind, implies an ideal. You wouldn't get out there and scream ‘no, no, no, no’ against something unless you had some kind of ‘yes, yes, yes, yes’ inside.”

23:25: And this kind of satire has a long and deep tradition in Chinese literature, too, from the 18th century with the *Rulin Waishi* (儒林外史 “The Scholars”) stories, and then the early 20th century anti-corruption novels that are so famous for being almost Wang Shuo-esque in how they completely satire the way officials behave, or any powerholder behaves.

23:52: But implicit in those, and the reason readers loved to read them was that it implied ideals. It implied something should be better. And Liu Xiaobo teases Wang Shuo for, in a sense, ‘You are giving voice to this frustrated generation who's so fed up with corruption and bullying, but you are at the same time saying we shouldn't be that way.’ He uses the word commodify. ‘Just as in capitalist societies, your people commodify literary ideas. Your extreme cynicism is sort of commodified by you. And look, you're famous, and you're on television. And you're making money.’

24:40: So I like to raise that because, again, as a very broad generalization, I think Chinese writing, all the way from the oracle bones on, and all through the imperial period, there's an idea in Chinese culture that writing should be serious. It should be moral. It should be trying to show people the right way. And popular fiction and pornography that comes along from the 13th, 14th century on is there, yes, but it's looked down on precisely because it doesn't fulfill these moral ideals.

25:20: And in my view, the greatest scholar of Chinese literature in the 20th century, Xia Zhiqing (Hsia Chih-tsing, 夏志清), C.T. Hsia, whom Jianying knows well, she studied with him — he has a famous appendix to his “A History Of Modern Chinese Fiction” that says the moral burden of modern Chinese writing is an obsession with China. And I would argue that very broadly speaking, from the May 4th years all the way through these years, we're talking about, history leads literature in the sense that writers are trying to make sense of, how can China be better in the May 4th period? And there was this looking forward to — how can we do a better job of being a society and modernize in a Chinese way? And then we have the crash of the Maoist years with the terrible famine, and the great Cultural Revolution. And we come to these years we've been talking about so far that are essentially saying, “what happened? How could we? This is terrible. We have to seek roots. We have to have scars. We have to find a new way.” And we look to ancient China, we look to the West, for ways to try to figure that out. But in essence, we're still trying to do what C. T. Hsia, half tongue-in-cheek, he doesn't quite approve of it, but he says is a moral burden and obsession with China.

25:37: **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** Do you think that's still the case over the last decade or two that the most recent generation of novelists, new fiction writers in China are also trying to make sense of history, or that their focus has shifted somewhat?

27:00: **PERRY LINK:** Well, the good ones, yes, but the good ones recently don't have a lot of readers. I think of someone like Ye Fu, who is really good, I think, at looking at the real history of what happened in the Communist revolution. You read his stories that are written about the 1950s, and you feel that, yes, this is China, this is China on the ground, the same way it was China on the ground in the '30s and '40s, except now you have this new regime coming in, and people are adjusting to it.

27:34: But Ye Fu doesn't have a lot of readers. I mean, we can talk about the popular fiction that's all over the internet, and how I see that. I see that more as helping readers to feel comfortable given all of the problems that China has had. I wrote my PhD dissertation about popular fiction in the early 20th century, when the West was crashing in, and there's new style transportation, there's new style women, there's new style ways to be a family. And people feel, 'how do I get used to this?' — and turn to fiction as a way to experiment with 'how can I adjust to the new style without it causing me to risk my whole life?' If you go out in the real world and you go on a new style date and you're a new style woman and something goes wrong, your life is ruined. But — if you read Zhang Hen Shui's fiction about doing this, you can do it in the privacy of your own mind, and you can help to get more comfortable with these changes.

28:42: All the way down till now with the internet literature, I see it as young people trying to come to terms with problems in their own lives. You have these novels about, 'I married a lousy man and now in my new life, when I come back to life, I'm going to marry his worst enemy just to get revenge on him', which talks about values, yes, but not in that societal value, 'how can we make a new China?' How can I get fairness, as it were? How can I read fiction in order to pretend that my sad life is going to have a good turn maybe in the next life or in the next chapter of my life?

“ With internet literature, I see it as young people trying to come to terms with problems in their own lives ”

— *Perry Link*

29:23: **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** Jianying, anything you'd like to add?

JIANYING ZHA: Yeah, I mean, it's a huge question and a huge terrain to really cover, but I would add by saying, the so-called serious fiction, and its role to influence society has, in general, in my view, or to my knowledge, declined, pretty much, since the 1980s. Wang Shuo may be the last writer to be described as a serious fiction writer, to have a mass audience.

29:53: And the distribution of these major literary journals and monthlies had rapidly and steeply declined right after the 1980s. A major literary magazine, fiction magazine like *Shou Huo*, or *Renmin Wenxue* (People's Literature) *Harvest*, *Shi Yue* (October) all these had at its height in the 1980s, enjoyed something like from 1 million to 5 million distributions among — everyone was reading it. And one novel, or sometimes one story, can become the subject of a national conversation. That day basically ended very abruptly after Tiananmen, with the marketization of — Deng's very shrewdly rechanneling all the energies of political questions, questions about serious social reform, channeled into the one game in town, in the country, which is a pursuit of money.

30:55: So the commercial sort of popular fiction writing about businessmen — I mean, Wang Shuo is really the first one to write about these small businessmen as these anti-heroes and protagonists. Then there is a mushrooming of novels and fictions populated by such people, people who are just scamming or doing this and that and completely amoral in their business world. And after that, I think serious fiction became like a small audience — *xiao zhongwen xue*. Readerships just shrunk. And then a lot of them had to adapt to this reality by opening more like soft pages for like weekend relaxing fiction with newspapers and literary journals. And then the internet came in later.

31:45: So all of this, I think really makes it very difficult for serious novels to have the kind of impact it once had. I would say maybe just jumping all the way ahead to the last 10 years, maybe one novel that in my knowledge that represent a kind of a serious literary fiction in terms of style of writing, and was a bestseller, and won all the literary prizes, was this novel called *Fan Hua*, *Blossoms*, written by Jin Yucheng, who was actually the editor of all these 1980s fictions. He was a longtime fictional editor in Shanghai, but he really wrote only a few short stories in the '80s and then just was a professional editor until he used the internet. I

think this was maybe in the early 2000s — or I could be wrong could be later than that — serializing stories about these — Shijing Shenghuo, it's called — these little urban characters in the marketplace and their romantic affairs, their banquets, gossip, and trying to do business and, and get rich.

32:47: And then it had such a popular reaction when it finally was published as a novel, it became a bestseller. And actually right now it's being turned into a TV series, again, by this leading director, Wang Jiawei. So this is the one single example I can think of that was sort of a highbrow literature written in a vernacular Shanghai language, though, people who don't understand Shanghai dialect could read it too. And it has a strong element, the author himself talked about this, of deliberately, consciously picking up the old classical Chinese literary tradition from the Tang (Dynasty era, 618-907 C.E.) Tang Chuanqi (a form of short story) and Song Hua Ben (a short story or novella in vernacular language from the Song Dynasty era, 960-1279 C.E.), and all these old style sort of vernacular novels, dealing with serious topics — a beautifully written, thick description of everyday life.

33:45: In a way, it's kind of an epic novel about small characters doing nothing much. And it has scenes both during the Cultural Revolution and up 'til the late 1990s. And certain chapters of it, you might wonder how come this is not banned? I remember being impressed by a scene where one of the characters, in his youth, he was running from some Cultural Revolution Red Guards violence, and then in this stampede of people running away, scattered on the street, he was stumbling on an eye, a human eye. And it was just one of the startling scenes that was embedded in this thick description of details. There was a hidden political message about the Maoist time and the violence, and how the old class of Shanghai capitalists was suffering home raids, and then had to move on. But it was really well written, and it had a big audience, and it won the high official literary award, like Mao Dun Wenxue Jiang (茅盾文学奖) or Lu Xun Wenxue Jiang (鲁迅文学奖), I think all of them. And also he's (Jin Yucheng's) being kind of promoted by the State, but also he succeeded in having a popular audience, and with a TV series coming out.

35:10: But is that representative of the whole school of literary writers? No, I don't think so, because if you look at the other experimental writers, the leading figures from the 1980s, all of them, after that span of their useful pursuit of a sort of a modernist writing, people like Yu Hua and Ge Fei and Ma Yuan, all this, they've sort of retreated back to the old school Chinese realism. Good storytelling is really the core, not these fancy sort of narrative devices that they once made their fame on.

35:48: And then there was even a figure like Su Ganlu, who was the ultimate avant-garde fiction writer, was experimenting with language. Frankly, there's no plot line or anything. It was just all about language. And last year, after 20 years of not writing fiction, he came out with this novel (*A Panorama of Rivers and Mountains* (千里江山图)) about the Shanghai Communist Party underground, how they succeeded in escaping the persecution of KMT (Kuomintang). And so this become like a homage to the Red Communist tradition kind of novel. And it just won the official Mao Dun prize too. So there's a whole trend of these 1980s serious literary writers, adapting to the new times by either retreating back to traditional realism or maybe being co-opted willingly into the official mode of writing — supporting the Party narrative of history.

36:48: And then those like Ye Fu who, like Perry said, they continue to produce serious fiction that really deal with sort of the dark side of Chinese history, the recent history. But either they have a smaller audience or they're banned. And plenty of them are banned. And I would say, from the 2000s and on, in fact, the interrogation of history, recent history and the current events, were not really performed by fiction anymore. It was really by nonfiction that were like through blog writing. On certain websites, you have these sort of public intellectuals who are doing nonfiction writer.

37:20: And then there were the younger generations like Han Han, who in the early 2000, at least, had a huge audience with each of his blog posts. And they were inspired by — well, this is another phenomenon, called (the) Wang Xiaobo phenomenon. After Wang Shuo, there's someone like Wang Xiaobo who was a "haigui." (Chinese slang for someone who studied abroad and returned to China — a homonym of 'sea turtle) of the educated youth generation who returned after getting his degree in Pittsburgh, and returned to write both novels — he has a series of novels and novellas — and especially his essays, which are written as literary essays. They have a huge influence on the younger authors who were born in the 1970s and early 1980s, like Han Han. And then earlier 1970s, there were a lot of them who were very active in the so-called spreading the universal values, which is a code word in Chinese discourse as those who write with a conviction that values like free thinking, human rights, rule of law, and constitutional governance, these are the values that are universal, that we Chinese also want to go this way.

38:42: **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** And those are, of course, the same values that the Party banned discussion of in universities back in 2013.

38:50: **JIANYING ZHA:** Yeah. And that's manifested, mostly, I would say, not in fiction, but in these nonfiction literary writings: essays, blog sites, and some of them went into investigative journalism. So I think that's a whole move away from the so-called serious literary scene.

39:10: And then people, this whole new generation of authors and writers and journalists grow up from 2000, 'til, I would say, right up 'til Xi Jinping came into power. So you have maybe 10 years, 15 years where you have a whole generation of writers using different forms — often not fiction, but nonfiction — forms to push that kind of new thinking. But they have a different tone from the older generation of more elitist 'educating the masses,' because these are people who are very savvy with the new media.

39:50: And for about 10 years, a lot of these mainstream publications, like the Southern Newspaper Group, they're almost taken over by these young liberal intellectuals. And older intellectual authors like Wang Xiaobo is one of those influences. Liu Xiaobo, because he was banned, was not able to publish publicly in China. So his influence would only be more indirect. People who use VPN, were able to read maybe Liu Xiaobo's writings.

40:28: But someone like Wang Xiaobo, whose essays are written in a lucid style and very — for example, this very famous collection of his essays is called *Yi Zhi Te Li Du Xing de Zhu*, "A Unique and Individualistic Pig." The title piece, it was about — because he was an educated youth — talking about this pig who has such a rebellion spirit that he refused to stay in the pigsty with the rest of the herd, to grow fat and be slaughtered. He rebels against a life that's planned for him, by jumping over and escape all kinds of chase, and lead a free life. And he would go to the village to mate with pretty pigs rather than these other pigs that he's supposed to be mating, to grow fatter.

41:22: It has a humorous tone, and well written. He has a whole collection of essays like that, and another collection called *My Spiritual Homeland*, which talks about his secret reading during the Cultural Revolution, of reading like all the — *Metamorphosis* and other Western works, again, from his home library, and how that is the source of his education. And then a lot of essays also makes a very eloquent but accessible style, argument for these so-called universal values. And so, you know, writers like that, I mean, he was not co-opted. The Writers Association refused to accept him as a member. Mainland publishers published him. But many of the official critics were very much against him. But he was embraced by this whole generation of younger writers, who then went on writing in that style, in that spirit, for about a decade, until, of course, they were also, under Xi Jinping, censored or, out of self- protection, stopped writing and went into other things. So it's a very disheartening circle we're seeing.

42:35: **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** Disheartening, and yet there's a certain resilience and desire to try to get around the restrictions and the barriers. You've both touched on censorship and dissent. And I had wanted to ask you something about that anyway. Am I right that you were both at the Tiananmen protests?

42:55: **PERRY LINK:** I was in Beijing at the time, but I didn't go very much to the square.

MARY KAY MAGISTAD: And Jianying, were you there the night of the crackdown?

43:03: **JIANYING ZHA:** Yes. I was on the corner of Tiananmen. So I was an eyewitness of the actual massacre, at least in that section, when the army opened fire. I was there, not far from the People's Revolutionary Heroes Monument. So I saw, actually, people being shot down, about a dozen of them, in front of my eyes. I'd been visiting the square, almost every day for weeks before that, just as an individual, I wasn't involved in any other way in any organizational way with the students movements, but I was an eyewitness. Yeah.

43:45: **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** You've both written and spoken extensively about dissent in China and suppression of it — this being an extreme example. Perry, you were a co-editor of *The Tiananmen Papers*. And you've both written eloquently about the desire for more freedom and openness in China, and how the Party has responded to it in different ways over time, Perry with *Evening Chats in Beijing* probing China's predicament, your book that came out in 1992, you shared the frustrations and yearnings you were hearing in people who had to speak sort of official speak during the day but could talk differently in private at night.

And Jianying, in *China Pop*, in your book that came out in '95, and was both playful and quite serious, about that era of rapid cultural as well as economic and to some extent, political change, you wrote in this, I had this underlined in my copy that I first got ahold of, I think, in early '96:

"Educated Chinese have learned a great deal from the follies of history in the past 40 years. Most of all, they have learned about fear, not merely fear of power and persecution, but also fear of responsibility, fear of questioning, fear of thinking independently."

You just described ways in which writers in China over time have found ways around the barriers, have taken risks. And I guess a question for each of you is, in this era that we're in now, are you still seeing that? Does it feel like this is qualitatively different? Or does it feel like it's just another one of those times when there is a particular squeeze, and something will come out of it — people, writers, people who want to be able to engage with what they're seeing in their society will find a way to express it and to share it within China and outside as well?

Perry, do you want to go first?

45:40: **PERRY LINK:** I'm guardedly optimistic on that score. I see the role of daily life and ordinary, what I would call garden values, as continuous in China all the way from the '30s and '40s and through the revolution. That is, what people worry about and think about are food, clothing, shelter, children's education, medical care. They don't wake up in the morning and stretch their arms and say, "my goodness, what am I going to do about the Dalai Lama's splittism or the Falun Gong's evil cult?" And this — I think of it as a seam between daily life and the State-sponsored values that come down from above. The seam between those two realms has always been there. And of course, there's push and pull, and there's comings and goings. But the power of daily life and ordinary garden variety Chinese values is there. And yes, it will, it will survive.

46:40: **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** Jianying?

JIANYING ZHA: Well, for many years, I think I've described myself as a cautious optimist, hoping against hope that this reformist, gradualist kind of approach will change China, slowly but steadily. But I must say today, I feel, and this has been for a few years now, I'm less optimistic — at least about the near future, of the chance of major change, especially if we talk about political reform.

47:21: Because — take the example of the fight against censorship. It's true that there's been this guerrilla war against the official censors for many years, and it really shows the Chinese creativity in all sorts of ways of — one account gets shut down, you open another account — WeChat, for example. Or you keep on shifting your platforms, right?

47:45: But I must say, now under Xi Jinping, the pace of repression has intensified since he consolidated his power. So civil society has been nearly decimated inside China. Even though people — some people — can still use VPN, they're becoming such a small minority. And so many courageous and creative writers have been silenced and shut down.

48:20: And people have a sense that the sort of public they were hoping to reach or to educate or to share freer information, it seemed to be smaller. And the official propaganda network has a greater impact than expected, and have also adapted to new technology, which they have more control of. So you have have, at this point at least, a situation where in the Chinese phrases, the monk grows taller by one inch, but the monster grows taller by one foot.

49:00: The official crackdown, through all kinds of means, has become even more widespread and efficient thanks to the pandemic. The controlling apps and all these ways, I think, has been so ruthless. And the sort of nationalist brainwashing education has had its effect on such a large swath of the population.

49:30: So I think in the near future, it's a pretty grim scene. It's hard for me to say, "we'll always fight back." Yes, we will. Some of us. And there will be never-ending, the sort of individual rebels that that will come out of under the most ruthless, brutal circumstances, as you can see in the recent years — like the citizen journalists and these people like Xu Zhiyong, who openly post essays naming Xi Jinping. But then the price is so deep. Xu Zhiyong is sentenced for 14 years, and then there are people who are sentenced to even more.

50:10: I think it's really hard to see a groundswell of freeing up of, whether it's writing or civil society, in the near future, unless there is an unexpected economic unraveling or something horrible happened to Xi Jinping, because this system is such — it's one man makes a wholly big difference. You know, a few years ago I re-read all these Chinese old classics, and I wrote one essay about the Legalist influence on Chinese governance. All of that sort of compounded, I must say, my feeling of pessimism about ground-up movement to change China. I feel unfortunately, the moment like the 1980s where you have a convergence of top-down and ground-up, the whole country, including the government, had a motivation to change. Unless that happens, I think it's very hard to see some real meaningful great change in the political and cultural sphere in the near future.



Under Xi Jinping many courageous and creative writers have been silenced and shut down



—*Jianying Zha*

51:27: **MARY KAY MAGISTAD:** So, what does that mean for you as a writer?

51:31: **JIANYING ZHA:** For many years, almost all of my English writing was banned in Mainland. This is the fourth book that was banned in China and published only in Hong Kong. But now that my editor in Hong Kong has quit, and I think Hong Kong has basically fallen as a free sort of haven for banned Mainland Chinese, publications, the space of the so-called resistant writing in Mainland China has been decimated — personally, I feel fortunate that I'm able to write in English, which I have been, but I never thought will come to a day where my second language will become my main language of writing and publication. Unfortunately, I think I've reached that point where I no longer plan to write and publish in Chinese, in the near future, at least. I hope not forever. But, you know...

(Music)

MARY KAY MAGISTAD: Many Chinese writers are now facing tough choices — write in exile, write something non-controversial or even pro-Communist Party, stop writing, or write something risky — and risk time in prison.

Still, as Jianying said, it's rarely been easy in China to be a writer who tells stories that make the leaders uncomfortable. Moments come when more is possible. Often it comes as a surprise — like the creatively rich period in the 1980s between the end of the Cultural Revolution and the 1989 Tiananmen crackdown — but that was just a decade. Maybe another will come. Hard to know when.

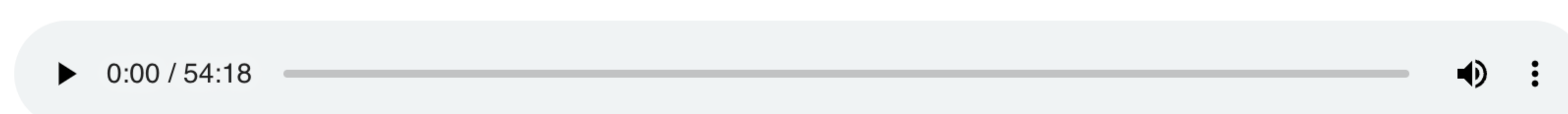
Meanwhile, many thanks to Zha Jianying and Perry Link for joining me on this first episode of the China Books podcast. You can find more information on them, and on all the writers and books they mentioned in this episode, on the China Books podcast page of the China Books Review. Again, that's chinabooksreview.com.

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Look for a new episode of the China Books podcast on the first Tuesday of each month — and subscribe, on your favorite podcast app, so you don't miss a thing. Next up — a look at how American journalists have covered China over time. See you then.

(Music out) ■

MP3 audio





Mary Kay Magistad is deputy director of Asia Society's Center on US-China Relations. An award-winning journalist, she lived and reported in East Asia for more than two decades, including in China for NPR (1995-99) and PRI/BBC's *The World* (2003-13). She has created two critically acclaimed podcasts, *On China's New Silk Road* and *Whose Century Is It?* She is host and producer of the China Books podcast.

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Oct 12, 6:30pm

Come to our launch!

Join us at Asia Society in New York next Thursday, to celebrate our launch. "Three Generations of China Writers" will be on stage, to talk about how the nation has changed from the 1960s to today: Zha Jianying interviews Orville Schell and Winston Lord; David Barboza interviews Ian Johnson; and Jiayang Fan interviews Yangyang Cheng; followed by Q&A and cocktail reception. Registration is required, click for more information

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