

## The vital presence of the past

History is a sensitive issue in China with some of it desperately remembered and some, deliberately forgotten, writes Judith Bruhn.



On 18 April 2012, three Chinese writers took part in a discussion about the state of Chinese fiction at Blackwell's bookshop in Oxford. In the context of the London Book Fair the Chinese author Ma Jian, banned in his homeland and living in exile, joined Li Er who still lives in mainland China, and Geling Yan, to discuss their writings.

Earlier in the week, at the London Book Fair, Ma Jian had protested against the selection of Chinese authors to be present at the fair, and argued that Chinese publishers are the "mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist Party". This is of course not new. [Chairman Mao](#) declared in 1942 that writers should act as the mouthpiece of the party and help in shaping Chinese society. Chinese writers, like their counterparts around the world, play their roles in society, the ones they choose and the ones they are assigned, and all of them struggle against their roles to define their own identities. In China identity is a popular theme explored by contemporary writers.

Identity of the individual and the nation is explored by all three writers in the context of the history of modern China, which is usually thought to start in the 1840s with the [Opium War](#), creating a

complex and multilayered picture. History is a sensitive issue in China. Some of it is desperately remembered. [National humiliation](#) education comes to mind, which serves to educate a nation in the injuries it has suffered from foreigners. Some of the past is deliberately forgotten.

Li Er's book [The Magician of 1919](#) is only a part of a larger work which has not been completely translated yet. Set in Beijing during the [May Fourth Movement](#), one of the first intellectual political movements of modern China, the main character becomes involved in important historical events. Li Er explains that he writes about Chinese intellectuals because, in the modern history of China, it was the intellectuals who brought about changes from the May Fourth Movement to today. They are thus crucial to understanding the past and the present.

By contrast, Geling Yan's [Flowers of War](#) examines the "dark power" in human nature, and simultaneously what brings out the beautiful parts of human nature. Her novel describes a microcosm of moral decision-making, when a priest in Nanjing, during the [Nanjing massacre](#) of 1937, decides to protect a group of schoolgirls in his church. Geling Yan believes the past needs to be brought to the attention of the Chinese people and the world. Memory is suppressed as a defence mechanism, Geling Yan explains, but also as a result of the current political system and ideology. "A nation that does not remember the things foreigners did to them can never be strong," she said. Remembering the past is a key responsibility of Chinese writers. This, too, is not new. It is one of the roles the CCP assigns to writers.

Li Er adds that throughout Chinese history, chaos meant total chaos, wiping away everything. *Luan* – chaos, confusion and absence of order. (One only needs to think of the [Cultural Revolution](#) and Mao's slogan "Smash the old world" to understand the fear of chaos in China.) This is another reason why the government wants to wipe people's memories, he explains. And this makes it the responsibility of writers to remember and retrieve the memories of the nation.

Ma Jian agrees. His novel, [Beijing Coma](#), deals with forgetting the past: "When we talk about history we are all part of it. That is why we need to grab hold of it." This is especially important in China, where history is deliberately forgotten. A country without the memory of its history is in a dangerous state. Inspiration for the book was Ma Jian's own participation of demonstrations in Beijing just before the 4 June [Tiananmen incident](#) in 1989. His brother fell into a coma after an accident so that Ma Jian left Beijing just in time to escape the crackdown. Everyone involved in the protests was forced to write self-criticisms and to forget what happened. Only his brother was able to hold on to the memories. In China writings about the 1989 demonstrations are censored and the interpretations of the event strictly controlled. In response to what other responsibilities writers have, Ma Jian replies "to truthfully express one's feelings about one's self and the society one lives in".

History is a sensitive issue in China, one the writers of China wish to remember. It presents a way for them to express themselves, to explore their own self and identity, and that of their nation. They excavate the past in order to understand the present. In "How to make time real: from intellectual

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history to embodied memory" [Vera Schwacz writes](#) "the public past is one of great monoliths of intellectual history. It has to be chipped away slowly and carefully, for the flesh of living memory lies injured underneath". And so these writers go chipping away slowly, carefully, on some things the constructions of Chinese history wish to forget, and on some things they wish to remember.

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Published on: May 7, 2012