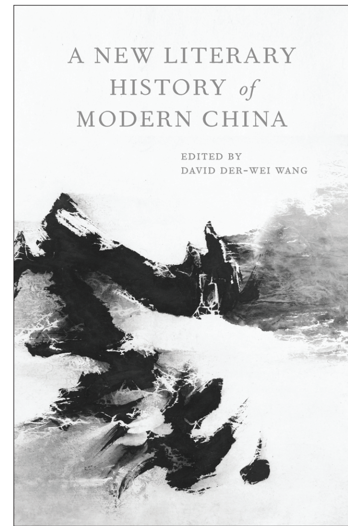
Wenxue

Silencing and destruction in China's literary history

Nicholas Jose



A NEW LITERARY HISTORY OF MODERN CHINA
edited by David Der-Wei Wang
Harvard University Press (Footprint), $110 hb, 1,025 pp, 9780674967915

In his searching introduction to this immense volume, the editor, Harvard scholar David Der-Wei Wang, refers to the 'architectonics of temporalities' by which the project re-maps and re-chronicles Chinese literary history. *A New Literary History of Modern China* follows the model of the provocatively kaleidoscopic slice histories of French, German, and American literatures produced by Harvard University Press in recent years. The title of Wang's introduction, 'Worlding Literary China', signals the scale of the ambition.

There are 160 bite-size essays by 143 contributors that focus on key moments on the timeline that reveal larger meanings. Some are by famous Chinese authors – Mo Yan, Yu Hua, Wang Anyi from China, Chu T'ien-hsin from Taiwan. Others are by leading scholars and thinkers in the field, including Wang himself, whose lineage goes back to Taiwan via Columbia University. Some essays are personal, others are written in what Perry Link calls 'irrefutable academese'. A couple are by Australians, but it is mostly the view of China from North America. An appealing piece by Boston-based author Ha Jin imagines how Lu Xun wrote his first story, 'A Madman's Diary', under the pressure of a deadline in Beijing in 1918, creating a new kind of vernacular fiction and launching the pseudonym that posterity would know him by, all in one night: the story's theme, 'eating people'.

In the official literary historical teleology of the People's Republic of China, modernity begins with the May Fourth movement in 1919, of which Lu Xun is a hero. In the 'counterdiscourse' of this new literary history, that becomes 'the big misnomer'. Stephen Owen, in an essay called 'Utter Disillusion and Acts of Repentance in Late Classical Poetry', pushes the start of Chinese literary modernity back to 1820, when foreign encounters were increasing and the classical language started to fail. 'Chinese poetic modernity,' he writes, '… begins in a profound rift between the literary language … and a new intellectual world.' 'Modern' then comes to cover the last hundred and fifty years or so, which puts 1949, the year of the communist victory, at the heart of this book. For many writers, 1949 was a year of transition, either through awkward accommodation of the new order, the literary requirements of which were floridly enunciated in Mao Zedong's *Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art* (1942), or through withdrawal and exile. For some it was 'the great rupture', as a new diaspora emerged in Taiwan and Hong Kong and other language environments further afield. In her essay, Shuang Shen evokes that time: 'On a certain day in July 1952, Eileen Chang (1920–95) crossed the border between mainland China and Hong Kong and stepped into a new life of exile … facing a momentous personal and historical transition that would eventually make her into one of the most enigmatic and controversial figures in the Chinese worlds for the rest of the twentieth century.' That puts Eileen Chang rather than Lu Xun at the centre of the picture. Shen goes on: 'Around 1949, modern Chinese literary history, yet to be fully integrated into a singular and unified story, further splintered into multiple and competing histories.' That is what *A New Literary History of Modern China* hopes to encompass.

There are essays on film, photography, and popular songs; the definition of literature is as flexible as can be. There is particular interest in minor, unfinished, and trace works: the Angel Island poems, for example, inscribed on the walls of the detention centre in San Francisco Bay by interned Chinese immigrants, or the texts written in her own blood by Lin Zhao (1932–68), speaking truth to power during the Cultural Revolution, before she was taken from her prison bed and executed. The concept of literature itself, *wenxue* in Chinese, undergoes a thorough re-consideration, articulated as fundamentally different from its English equivalent: '*wenxue*, or literature, refers to the art of registering, and being registered by, the incessant metamorphosis, from era to era and from region to region, of forms, thoughts, and attitudes regarding *wen*', which can be understood as 'pattern' in the cosmos or the world, of which literature is manifestation, writes the editor. From this derives the supreme importance of literature in Chinese thought as a medium and measure of civilisational renewal, which proved so costly to many practitioners.

The novelist Lao She is one writer who returned to China in 1949, disillusioned with the United States and keen to participate in the promise of the new start. He drowned in a lake in Beijing in 1966 after being severely persecuted: 'we should always remember the tragedy of his decision', writes Richard Jean So, 'between an unhappy life in America and a tragic death in China'.

'I might not be able to accomplish

such a transformation,' wrote another great writer, Shen Congwen, in the lead-up to 1949. 'Before long, even if I were not forced to, I would eventually stop writing. This is the fate of certain people of our generation.' Shen wrote no more fiction after that transition year, though a case can be made for his research on Chinese costume as the writing of an alternative 'history with feelings'.

As essay after essay recounts the silencing, destruction, or premature death of writers, the tragic pattern of this new history becomes apparent. The great literary translator Fu Lei and his wife took their lives in 1966 at the onset of the Cultural Revolution. 'Anything Chinese about This Suicide?' asks Maghiel van Crevel in an essay about a later year, 1989, when the poet Haizi threw himself under a train. A few years later another poet, Gu Cheng, would hang himself in New Zealand after murdering his wife. Is the long line of violent deaths a consequence of the 'obsession with China' that burdens Chinese writers? The sobering conclusion to this survey of a period in which China struggled stridently for progress is that, in David Wang's words, the winners 'in a fierce competition of new possibilities… were not necessarily the best of those possibilities'.

In seeking to contest and expand orthodox PRC literary historiography, *A New Literary History of Modern China* looks to unexpected corners for creative vitality. There are essays on contemporary writing in minority languages in China, and on the difficult situation of non-Han Chinese writers, such as the 'Tibetan' writer Alai, who write in Chinese about their personal, ethnic experience. I have added Dung Kai-cheung's *Atlas* and Wong Bik-Wan's *Doomsday Hotel* to my reading list from Bonnie S. McDougall's essay on 1997, the year of 'Hong Kong Literary Retrocession'. Another discovery is Malaysian Chinese writer Ng Kim Chew (born in 1967), who makes several appearances, most startlingly in Andrea Bachner's essay on 1899, 'Oracle Bones, That Dangerous Supplement'. I can't wait to read Ng's stories in the English translation by Carlos Rojas. The scope widens further with a persistent transnational framing, as in Q.S. Tong's delightful essay on 'Practical Criticism in China', tagged October 1930: 'I.A. Richards writes to T.S Eliot from Beijing'.

English literary history got off to a good start with Samuel Johnson's *Lives of the Poets*, his sharp critical account of his immediate seventeenth- and eighteenth-century precursors. *A New Literary History of Modern China*, recording the extinction of so many writers, cannot be so happy. But, as Wai-lim Yip suggests, himself an exile from Hong Kong to America, 'the world should appreciate … that which gave Chinese writers the strength to resist power'. This massive book does that grandly and movingly. ■

Nicholas Jose is an author and professor of English and Creative Writing at the University of Adelaide. His most recent book is the short story collection *Bapo* (2014).

A Half-Open Door

A study of David Malouf's early work

David McCooey

DAVID MALOUF AND THE POETIC: HIS EARLIER WRITINGS
by Yvonne Smith
Cambria Press, US$114.99 hb, 304 pp, 9781604979367

Plenty of novelists begin life as poets. Few, though, have managed to maintain their status as poet–novelists quite so impressively as David Malouf. But even Malouf, in his 'middle period', more or less dropped poetry for his 'big' novels – *The Great World* (1990), *Remembering Babylon* (1993), and *The Conversations at Curlow Creek* (1996) – before a late return to poetry, kicked off with *Typewriter Music* (2007). Perhaps appropriately, the last novel that Malouf has so far published, *Ransom* (2009), is based on a poem: Homer's *Iliad*.

All of this suggests that Yvonne Smith, in this welcome study of Malouf's early writings, has picked up on a pertinent theme ('the poetic') to apply to her subject. Smith's study covers Malouf's juvenilia, but is primarily concerned with the first part of his professional career, from his début poetry collection, *Bicycle and Other Poems* (1970), to the collection of autobiographical essays, *12 Edmonstone Street* (1985). The prose fiction of that period ranges from Malouf's first novel, *Johnno* (1975), to the collection of stories *Antipodes* (1985). After something of a slow start – Malouf struggled with the writing of *Johnno* for more than a decade –the late 1970s to the mid-1980s proved to be extremely fertile, with seven books appearing in as many years.

Despite leaving its subject in mid-career (aged fifty-one), *David Malouf and the Poetic* covers considerable ground. While not a biography per se, the book employs considerable biographical detail to good effect. Malouf's background – a Jewish mother with an English family, and an Australian-born father with Christian Lebanese parents – illustrates the long-standing multicultural nature of Australian society. For Malouf's family it was the source of (often unspoken) tensions, and for Malouf (whose paternal grandfather did not speak English) it was a main source – via his mother – of an aspirational Anglophone heritage. Growing up in Queensland during World War II was also a defining event for Malouf. The threat of Japanese invasion was real, while the sinking in 1940 of the SS *City of Benares* by a German submarine, which caused the deaths of seventy-seven evacuated children, was