Chinese literature professors of Beijing Normal University (BNU) are electric with anticipation as a stream of literary dignitaries enters the conference room located on the seventh floor of the towering university building. Around the conference room, photographs of illustrious former BNU faculty like Lu Xun line the walls. Seated below the photographs are equally distinguished luminaries of China’s current literary world. To my right sit the world-renowned novelists Mo Yan (the author of *Red Sorghum* and himself a former candidate for the Neustadt International Prize for Literature), Yu Hua (whose recent novel *Brothers* is a runaway success and whose novel *To Live* was, like *Red Sorghum* before it, made into a film by Zhang Yimou), Ge Fei, and Li Er (both especially well known for their avant-garde styles). To my right are some of China’s most respected poets, including the legendary Shi Zhi (Guo Lusheng, the first “Misty poet”); and the relative newcomer, Han Yan, whom Zhang Qinghua, China’s premier poetry critic and scholar, handpicked to appear in the special China issue of *WLT* (July 2007). Along with Zhang Qinghua, other renowned critics like Beijing University’s Chen Xiaoming, and BNU’s Zhang Ning and Liu Hongtao, are in attendance as well as respected editors like Lin Mang and Wu Sijing (who are also directors of national poetry associations), among others. As for myself, I am awkwardly situated at the head of the table, but find relief in the knowledge that I am merely a placeholder for *WLT*, with its long history of editors, contributors, and legendary figures like Roy Temple House, who founded *WLT* (then known as *Books Abroad*) back in 1927. And while it is an honor to read a public address by David L. Boren, president of the University of Oklahoma, giving one of the inaugural addresses in Chinese in front of this audience is akin to a dream that you wake from with simultaneous relief and regret—relief that the dream is only a dream, and regret for the same reason. Of course, I am not waking up anytime soon.

The authors, poets, and scholars debate the role of Chinese literature in the world today, the usefulness of the category of “World Literature,” and the challenges world literature faces as a frame for addressing multinational literature as well as voice concerns and predictions about the future of Chinese literature abroad. After the conference portion of the event, the panelists and myself enjoy a decadent meal unique to Beijing culinary culture, where the intellectual debates of the previous hours dissolve into a myriad individual conversations continuously interrupted by...
toasts offered to our BNU hosts, their guests, and their American counterpart (who will toast and be toasted fifty times before the end of the night). The second half of the event moves to an upscale bar in downtown Beijing called Old Story (laogushi) Bar, where a different yet equally impressive gathering of Chinese poets congregate for what is dubbed “The Echo Reading” held to commemorate the China issue of WLT. Like the BNU conference hall, the walls here are covered in old photographs. But here the grainy color and black-and-white photos chronicle China’s revolutionary history from 1949 through the Cultural Revolution. Unlike the photos of the giants of Chinese literature and academia back on campus, these ghosts hover in the ambivalent space between reverence and pastiche. They might be uncomfortable for older generations to look at, but for the younger, affluent Beijing youth, these are “old stories,” hermetically sealed off from the cosmopolitan world of Beijing today.

Comparative literature professor Liu Hongtao and the poetry critic and scholar Zhang Qinghua, along with myself, begin the evening with talks on poetics addressing the unique occasion before ceding the floor to the poet Shi Zhi, who makes a very rare public appearance. The poet’s husky, wise, and empathetic voice brings his enduring poems of the Cultural Revolution back from the turbulent past through the nearly three decades of his public absence. Guo Lusheng, largely known by his penname Shi Zhi, or “index finger,” took this name at the point in his career when the accusatory fingers of persecution turned against any voice that refused to silence the sentient impulse we call poetry. Yet the legend of Shi Zhi is not for the faint of heart, as he spent decades as an inmate at a mental institution where he continued to write in near isolation. His only contact with the outside world came in the form of visiting poets and admirers recalling Ezra Pound’s later years at St. Elizabeth’s. As a young man, his poems were not published in books but passed from person to person in secret notebooks and through the unmarked channels of memory. His poetic innovations and spirit were inherited by many of the Misty Poets (Bei Dao, Yang Lian, et al.) known and loved in the West today. And as Shi Zhi recites his poems, the atmosphere of the Old Story Bar is transformed, as the photographs of Mao, the Gang of Four (especially Madame Mao, who, as legend has it, personally saw to Shi Zhi’s re-education through labor), and revolutionary youths of the era are brought back to life in the living history standing before us. Shi Zhi is followed by a chorus of poets, including Wang Jiaxin, Liang Xiaobin, Che Qianzi, Han Yan, and many more, as altogether more than two dozen poets read from their work.

As Michelle Yeh pointed out in the China issue, poetry in China today is as divisive as it is in the West, and it no longer enjoys the unprecedented popularity it held during Shi Zhi’s early career, but no one present would have guessed that this was true based upon the reading, the preceding conference, and the conversations that reverberate long into the night. The authors, poets, and scholars gathered here to discuss China in World Literature Today (both the magazine and the broad concept) are aware of their own location in world history. They are more than aware of the monumental shifts taking place at the dawn of what many are already dubbing “the Pacific Era.” They know that the present moment, their moment, follows the irresistible inertia of a tumultuous century and a half and is tumbling headlong into the fastest growing free-market economy in history. And not unlike the literary giants of Western modernism gazing down the barrel of the twentieth century, these intellectuals respond with conversation, innovation, and inquiry into the nature of self, nation, and international community.

I had not been back to China since 1995, and Beijing is not the city it was only a short decade ago, but more striking than the massive new buildings and infrastructure are the cultural shifts taking place here. While the shift to consumer culture is visible everywhere, twelve years ago, the Daoist and Buddhist temples were largely populated by sightseers, and yet now they are experiencing a resurgence in popularity (along with Christian churches). Schools dedicated to the teaching of Confucian classics (guoxue) are sprouting up throughout the country, and the fashionable return to classical Chinese culture is even beginning to appear in corporate slogans and the political discourse of the political elite. At the heart of these changes appears to be a wider desire to address the existential problems of identity, both personal and national, in the context of globalization, mass cultural production, and the free-fall rush to capitalism with its increasing class divisions. While perhaps less important than these wider shifts or the intellectual debates within Chinese academia, I found one of the most interesting shifts to be the reemergence of teahouse culture in China.
Beijing, which suffered a long drought through the Marxist era. Twelve years ago, or even six years ago for that matter, one would be hard pressed to find a teahouse in Beijing. When I finally set foot in one this time around, I stayed for over ten hours, won over by the irresistible combination of long conversations with the regular customers and workers as well as the dizzying array of teas and their subtle complexities. When I asked them how long they had been tea drinkers, they invariably responded with, “I have studied tea for under five years,” and it is this balance of rigor and ease (after all, “studying tea” is not goal oriented but a process) that helped me see how the BNU/WLT conference connected to the average person. The people of this great city (and country) are responding to this moment of unprecedented historical changes by drawing upon the past, making new communities in the present, and questioning the pathways ahead by way of conversation. And while the subtlety of pu-er tea may be worthwhile in its own right, drinking tea is, like conferences, or special issues of magazines, an occasion to converse, imagine community, and explore the continually shifting nature of our world today.

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