

# Arts & Architecture

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## ARTS

The arts scene in Běijīng has come a long way in the past two decades, with a once underground arts movement now firmly established above ground. Following alongside China's dizzying social and economic transformation, Běijīng artists are riding a wave of creative energy that's putting many of them on the international map. With its excellent cinema, theatre, music and visual arts venues, the capital serves as the most important meeting place for artists in China and is an excellent place to see for yourself the enduring vitality of Chinese traditional and contemporary arts.

## LITERATURE

Běijīng has been home to some of China's towering literary figures, including such heavyweights as Lao She, Lu Xun, Mao Dun and Guo Moruo. Over the past 100 years, Běijīng writers have penned their stories of sorrow, fears and aspirations amid a context of ever-changing trends and political upheaval. Nowadays, with the explosion of the internet and popular culture, there's an enormous flurry of literary activity, ranging from politics to pulp, from blogs to porn. Běijīng remains one of China's most important literary centres, with a dynamic group of writers, many young and upcoming, who are turning the Chinese writing scene on its head.

Contemporary Chinese literature is commonly grouped into two stages: pre-1989 and post-1989. After China came under the control of the communists, most writing in 20th-century China tended to echo the Communist Party line, with dull, formulaic language and humdrum plotlines. Writers were required to fill their work with stock phrases such as 'the great, glorious, correct Communist Party' and create cardboard characters that embodied political ideals. Writing was banal and unimaginative, with little allowance for creative embellishment.

After Mao's death in 1976, Chinese artists and writers threw off political constraints and began to write more freely, exploring new modes of literary expression. Western books began to appear in translation, including works by authors such as Faulkner, Woolf and Hemingway. The Chinese also developed a taste for more mainstream fare like Kurt Vonnegut and even Jackie Collins. This deluge of Western writing had a great impact on many Chinese authors who were exposed for the first time to a wide array of literary techniques and styles.

An important writer to emerge during this period is Zhang Jie, who first drew the attention of literary critics in the late 1970s with the publication of her daring novella *Love Must Not Be Forgotten* (1979). The book challenged the traditional structure of marriage with its intimate portrayal of a middle-aged woman and her love of a married man. Chinese authorities disparaged the book, calling it morally corrupt, but the book was extremely popular with readers and won a national book award. Zhang went on to write the novels *Heavy Wings* (1980) and *The Ark* (1981). *The Ark*, about three women separated from their husbands, established Zhang as China's 'first feminist author'. Shen Rong was another talented female author to appear during the 1980s. Her novella *At Middle Age* (1980), tells the plight of a Chinese intellectual during the Cultural Revolution who must balance her family life with her career as a doctor.

Several literary movements appeared during the late 1970s and 1980s, including a movement called 'Scar Literature', in which writers for the first time dared to explore the traumatic events of the Cultural Revolution. Another literary movement that also emerged was called 'New Realism', which explored issues that were previously taboo, such as AIDS, party corruption and other contemporary social problems. One of the most controversial novels to appear in the 1980s was *Half of Man is Woman*, by Zhang Xianliang and translated into English by Martha Avery. The novel gives a candid exploration of sexuality and marriage in contemporary China and Zhang's book became an international bestseller. Another of Zhang's works that has been translated into English is *Getting Used to Dying* (1989), about a writer's new-found sexual freedom, also translated by Martha Avery.

After the tragic events of 1989 the desire for a more 'realist' type of literature grew in China, paving the way for a new group of writers, such as the now internationally recognised 'hooligan author' Wang Shuo, a sailor turned fiction writer, who has become known for his satirical stories about China's underworld and political corruption. Wang's stories, which are dark, gritty and take jabs at just about every aspect of contemporary Chinese society, have made him none too popular among Chinese authorities, who believe him to be a 'spiritual pollutant' and a bad influence on his readers. One of Wang's most contentious novels, *Please Don't Call Me Human*, first published in 1989, was written after the events of Tiananmen Square and provides a mocking look at the failures of China's state security system. Wang's works appeal to a broad spectrum of Chinese society, despite being banned. He has written over 20 books as well as screenplays for TV and film. Books available in English include *Playing for Thrills* (2000) and *Please Don't Call Me Human* (1998), both translated by Howard Goldblatt.

The literature that came out of the 1990s was certainly a far cry from the Maoist tracts of earlier years. The 1990s saw an explosion of experimental writing, with many works probing the boundaries of risky and often controversial subjects. Wang Meng, former minister of culture, became famous for his stream-of-consciousness style of writing and his satirical take on everything from politics to Chinese medicine. His collection of short stories, *The Stubborn Porridge and Other Stories* (1994), translated by Zhu Hong, is a smart, scathing look at modern Chinese society. The composer, playwright and author Liu Sola, who began writing in the mid-1980s, became internationally recognised a decade later with her novel *Chaos and All That* (1994), translated by Richard King, about a Chinese woman in London who writes a novel about growing up in Běijīng during the Cultural Revolution.

## BĚIJĪNG BOOKSHELF

- *Diary of a Madman and Other Stories* (1990) – by Lu Xun, translated by William Lyell. Lu Xun is considered the father of modern Chinese literature and this classic was the first of its kind to be written in a first-person narrative. The story is a criticism of Confucian repression in pre-revolutionary China. *Diary of a Madman* was also the first short story written in *baihua* (colloquial speech) apart from its first paragraph.
- *Camel Xiangzi* (1981) – by Lao She, translated by Shi Xiaoping. A masterpiece by one of China's most beloved authors about a rickshaw puller living in early-20th-century China.
- *Blades of Grass: The Stories of Lao She* (2000) – translated by William Lyell. This collection contains 14 stories by Lao She – poignant descriptions of people living through times of political upheaval and uncertainty.
- *Beijinger in New York* (1993) – by Glen Cao, translated by Ted Wang. The author's own immigrant story about a young Běijīng couple in New York and their difficult transition to life in the West.
- *Black Snow* (1993) – by Liu Heng, translated by Howard Goldblatt. Liu Heng, author of the story that formed the basis for the film, *Ju Dou*, wrote this compelling novel about workers in contemporary Běijīng. A superbly written book and a fine translation.
- *Empress Orchid* – Anchee Min (2004). Historical novel about Empress Cixi and her rise to Empress of China during the last days of the Qing dynasty. Good historical background of Běijīng and entertaining to read.
- *Peking Story: The Last Days of Old China* (2003) – David Kidd. This is a true story of a young man who marries the daughter of an aristocratic Chinese family in Běijīng two years before the 1949 Communist Revolution. The writing is simple, yet immersive.
- *Beijing: A Novel* (2003) – by Philip Gambone. A well-written account of an American working in a medical clinic in Běijīng who falls in love with a local artist. One of the few books out there to explore in depth the intricacies of Běijīng gay subculture.
- *The Noodle Maker* (2004) – by Ma Jian, translated by Flora Drew. A collection of interconnected stories as told by a state-employed writer during the aftermath of Tiananmen Square. Bleak, comical and unforgettable.
- *Sounds of the River: A Young Man's University Days in Beijing* (2003) – by Da Chen. A humorous account of the author's life as a student in Běijīng. The writing is lyrical and uplifting.
- *Lake with No Name* (2004) – by Diane Wei Liang. An intelligent memoir of a young woman's involvement in the events leading up to 4 June 1989. The author writes movingly of her relationships with many of the activists involved.
- *Foreign Babes in Beijing: Behind the Scenes of a New China* (2005) – by Rachel Dewoskin. An easy-going account of a young woman's five years spent in Běijīng during the mid-1990s.