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“Life, it’s been said, is one big book...”: One hundred years of Qian Zhongshu

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By Christopher Rea

“Men of letters love it when someone dies, since it gives them a topic for a memorial essay... ‘Commemorating the First Anniversary of So-and-So’s Death’ and ‘A Tri-Centennial Elegy’ are equally good topics.” — Qian Zhongshu, *Fortress Besieged*

文人最喜歡有人死，可以有題目做哀悼的文章....“周年逝世紀念”和“三百年祭”，一樣的好題目。 —錢鍾書《圍城》

Headlines about China have been looking the same for some time now. “The China story” always seems to be political: labor riots and their suppression; sabre-rattling over Taiwan and cultural erasure in Tibet; catastrophic earthquakes and official ineptitude; internet censorship and jailed dissidents (the latest being Nobel Peace Prize winner Liu Xiaobo). Even ostensibly good news, such as the Chinese government’s investment in wind power, becomes yet another story about how China is going to eat our lunch.

These stories must be told, and the Chinese government’s feet must be held to the fire on many issues. Yet these stories collectively imply a “truth” about China that is equally misleading: namely that in China, politics is life.

This truism has become ingrained in Western views of Chinese culture. I was struck by this not long ago during a Canadian radio interview of the author Yu Hua when the host’s first question was whether or not Yu Hua was a “dissident.” A recent *New Yorker* article about China’s “most eminent writer” and former Minister of Culture, Wang Meng, set a similarly political agenda by asking whether Wang is a “reformer” or an “apologist” of the Communist Party. To be Chinese, as far as the West is concerned, seems to mean being for or against one’s government.



A more detached perspective is to be found in the writings of a man who might be called the best Chinese writer you’ve never heard of: Qian Zhongshu.

One hundred years ago today, Qian was born into a scholarly family in Wuxi, Jiangsu province. Tutored in the classics from a young age, he went on to become modern China’s “foremost man of letters,” in Ronald Egan’s words, accumulating encyclopedic knowledge of Chinese and Western literatures, and putting it to use in his scholarship and creative writing.

A graduate of Tsinghua University, Qian studied European literature at Oxford and the Sorbonne before returning with his family to China in 1938 after the outbreak of war with Japan.

While teaching at various universities in southwestern China and Shanghai during the war, Qian composed a collection of essays, *Written in the Margins of Life* (1941); a collection of short stories, *Human, Beast, and Ghost* (1946); and a novel, *Fortress Besieged* (serialized, 1946-1947), as well as occasional poems and reviews, and a major work of poetry criticism. In 1949 he was recruited to teach at his alma mater in Beijing, and he remained in China after the communist takeover, having turned down several job offers from abroad. In 1953, he transferred to a literary research institute based at Beijing University, which in 1977 became part of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.

Qian Zhongshu's fate in New China was, to a certain degree, similar to that of many Chinese intellectuals. He stopped creative writing, and his research was repeatedly interrupted by political campaigns. Unusually, due to his linguistic prowess, he was assigned to an elite group tasked with translating Mao's poetry into English. He and his wife, the scholar-writer Yang Jiang, nevertheless suffered ideological criticism and, during the Cultural Revolution, were sent to rural Henan province for "re-education" and "reform" through agricultural labor. During the cultural thaw after Mao's death, both resumed publishing and had their long-forgotten works "rediscovered" by the Chinese public.

This biography obscures the talent and self-possession that makes Qian's literary and scholarly output during periods of war and political turmoil so remarkable. Widely read in modern and classical Chinese, English, French, German, Italian, Spanish, Greek, and Latin, Qian pioneered a new model of comparative literature that drew out resonances in cross-cultural patterns of figurative language. In an early essay, for instance, he observes that just as the French word for "happiness" (*bonheur*) suggests that good (*bon*) things last no more than an hour (*heur*), so its Chinese equivalent *kuaihuo* implies that when one is happy one lives (*huo*) quickly (*kuai*). No mere purveyor of precious insights, Qian used such resonances as jumping off points for wide-ranging investigations of the human imagination.

These investigations are particularly striking for their urbane wit and Rabelaisian humor. In a language given to pithy idioms, Qian's epigrams are in a league of their own. Hypocritical moralizing "is like doing business without capital—a veritable art." Prejudice can be explained by the human heart's anatomical position "not actually in the center, but to one side—and, most fashionably, slightly to the left." Gravity accounts for why "lower-class people are so numerous and upper-class people so rare." The English buzzwords a Shanghai businessman sprinkles in his Mandarin are like not gold teeth (which are functional as well as decorative), but rather "the bits of meat stuck between the teeth, which show that one has had a good meal but are otherwise useless." All this from a writer who once dissuaded an over-eager fan by asking: "If you enjoyed eating an egg, would you bother seeking out the hen that laid it?"

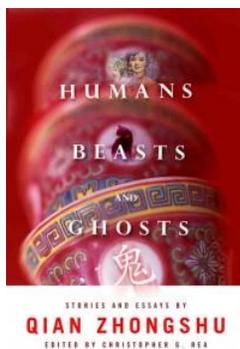
In Qian's fiction, such witticisms punctuate longer explorations of the human comedy. *Fortress Besieged*, one of modern China's greatest novels, tells the story of a young man who, after several years of bumming around Europe, returns to China with a bogus, mail-order degree purchased from an Irishman. Back home, Fang Hongjian becomes entangled with two women, while trying to ward off conflicting demands from his elders, but he ends up alienating all of them and seeking refuge as a teacher at a no-name university deep in China's interior provinces.

At this point, Qian's satire of urban pseudo-intellectuals switches to picaresque adventure. Unlike much wartime fiction, however, our hero's flight from Shanghai is motivated by a romance gone bad rather than the Japanese military threat. As with his later marriage to a colleague, Fang's story is propelled not by the grand events of history but the petty cowardice of an intelligent and witty man who always ends up outwitting himself. Back in Shanghai, the newlyweds' marriage quickly deteriorates and Fang ends up back where he started, bruised and alone. As a symbol of humans' perpetual dissatisfaction with their lot, Fang's fate strikes a deeper chord than the playful French proverb that likens marriage to "a fortress besieged: those who are outside want to get in; and those who are inside want to get out."

While many of his fellow writers were penning anti-Japanese allegories, then, Qian, writing in occupied Shanghai, was depicting modern life as a comedy verging on the theater of the absurd. This detachment served Qian well through the indignities and deprecations of the Mao years. Countless Chinese writers kept their heads down and mouths shut in order to survive; only one completed a massive, multi-volume reappraisal of the Chinese literary canon, which the author self-deprecatingly titled *Limited Views* (1979-1980).

Indeed, if there is one recurring theme in Qian Zhongshu's life's work it is breadth of vision. In an early essay he likened near-sighted critics to flies buzzing from one pinch of garbage to the next, ironically praising them for their ability to find, like Blake, "a world in a grain of sand / And heaven in a wildflower." Qian himself treated life like "one big book" and claimed to be content with merely jotting down "piecemeal, spontaneous impressions" in its margins. In fact, the panoramic vision we find in Qian's "jottings" marks him as one of the twentieth-century's great literary cosmopolitans. If he remains little known in the West, it is mostly because he wrote in Chinese.

Qian's writings thus pose a challenge not just to overpoliticized views of China, but to the presumption that to be cosmopolitan is to play on the West's terms. Living under three governments (Nationalist, Japanese, and Communist), Qian's most "political" act was to establish his own autonomous republic of letters. Worldly and multilingual, he chose to live in China and write in Chinese. This is not to romanticize Qian as an "apolitical" author or, conversely, a patriot. The point is rather that he sustained an extraordinary degree of creative independence from his immediate circumstances. In Qian's works, then, we find one "China" that rarely makes headlines.



Christopher Rea is assistant professor of modern Chinese literature at the University of British Columbia and the editor of *Humans, Beasts, and Ghosts: Stories and Essays by Qian Zhongshu*, which will be published by Columbia University Press in December. He is also the organizer of the workshop "Qian Zhongshu and Yang Jiang: A Centennial Perspective," which will be held at UBC on December 10-12, 2010.

For more on *Fortress Besieged*, see *Xia Shi's* essay, "[From an Elite Novel to a Popular Metaphor.](#)"

Tags: [Fortress Besieged](#), [Qian Zhongshu](#)