

Summary of Chinese literature in 2020

By LIANG HONGYING

In 2020, an unusual year, Chinese writers made remarkable literary achievements. Vitality can be found everywhere, from novels, reportage literature, poetry, and prose, to children's literature, the Chinese ethnic minority literature, and translated literature. These works play a unique role in meeting people's spiritual needs.

Two major themes

Good literary works always have their finger on the pulse of the people and are in touch with social reality. The united efforts and determined will of the Chinese people in combating COVID-19 were recorded in reportage literature. When COVID-19 was rampant in China, writers including Li Chunlei, Li Zhaoquan, Ji Hongjian, Pu Xuan, and Zeng San, formed a representative team of the China Writers Association and went to Wuhan to conduct interviews and write on the front line. In such a special context, they completed several works, such as *Zhang Dingyu: The "Iron Man"*, *A Volunteer Named Dalian*, and *Willingness*. These works, together with *Zhong Nanshan: The People Are Above All* by the writer Xiong Yuqun, and *Dr Zha's Diary of Fighting COVID-19* by Zha Qiongfang, a doctor from Shanghai that came to the aid of Wuhan, witnessed China's response to the epidemic and shared those touching moments with readers.

The author Li Di passed away in 2020. In the last year of his life, Li travelled around the country, visited rural areas, and wrote about China's anti-poverty efforts. Li was not the only one who did this. Many writers have begun to focus on "why write" rather than "what to write." Some excellent literary works on poverty alleviation were published in 2020, such as Li Di's posthumous *Eighteen Stories of the Shibadong Village* and Guan Renshan's *Taihong Fertile Soil*. These works explored the reasons for poverty based on rural culture



A Late Bloomer by Mo Yan Photo: XINHUA

as well as historical context, and gave a detailed account of how rural people tackled poverty nationwide through their talents and hard work.

Writers of different generations

In 2020, writers from different generations have contributed to a prosperous scene in Chinese literature. The Chinese novelist Ma Shitu, who was born in 1915, published *A Sequel to the Records of Evening Chats* in 2020. It is a collection of short stories written in Sichuan dialect that recount people's interesting experiences in the "Old Society." Wang Meng, at age 86, launched the expanded version of his novel *Smiling Wind*, which depicts the joys and sorrows the Chinese people experienced over the decades of changes and social development.

The young writers also did well in 2020. Their works were deeply refreshing, such as Li Hongwei's novel *A Brief History of the Man in Gray*, and Lin Sen's novel *The Island*.

Exploring human nature

The Chinese novels of 2020 stood out from the past few years.

Eight years after he won the Nobel Prize in 2012, Mo Yan released a new publication, entitled *A Late Bloomer*, a collection of twelve novellas which portray changes in the people and the environment of the narrator's hometown from a contemporary perspective. He introduces a deeper level of thought into the witty and humorous creation of fiction. Another renowned author, Jia Pingwa, published his 17th novel, *Sit For A While*, which presents difficulties encountered by a group of middle-aged women in a city when pursuing economic independence and spiritual freedom, and tracks the complexities of humanity in difficult situations. Wang Anyi's novel *A Knife, Thousands of Words* starts with the middle-aged life of Chen Cheng, a master chef of Huaiyang cuisine, who migrated to Flushing, New York, and explores the complex bonds among individuals, kinship, times, and history.

In his novel *The Artists*, the author and artist Feng Jikai unfolds the lives and creations of a group of artists spanning more than half a century, fully presents their spiritual world, and allows readers to get a glimpse of the development and changes in their artistic careers and social environments. Liu Qingbang's *Portraits of Female Miners* takes the vicissitudes of female miner Hua Chuntang's life as the main storyline, while also revealing the different destinies of many other female miners. Their vigorous youth, longing for love, and mixed feelings on fate are thought-provoking.

Documentary literature

The wildlife activist and writer Hu Donglin passed away in 2017. His diary, written between 2007 and 2012, a period when he lived in the Changbai Mountains in

Northeast China, entitled *Notes from the Mountains and Woods* was published in 2020. It presents the marvelous creatures in the Changbai Mountains that inspired the author, reflecting Hu's enjoyment and celebration of nature and the human world, as well as his enthusiasm for maintaining harmony between man and nature.

In his documentary literary work *Zou Taofen in Wartime*, Huang Guorong depicts the life of Zou Taofen (1895–1944), a well-known Chinese journalist and media entrepreneur, who developed *Life Magazine* into a pioneering media outlet that mobilized strong resistance to Japan's invasion during the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression. *A Record of Vicissitudes of Jiangnan Area*, a collection of essays by Xu Feng, reveals that the Jiangnan area, or the land to the south of the lower reaches of the Yangtze River, is more than idyllic water towns, bridges and rivers—this land has experienced hardship and suffering. The folk culture depicted in this book speaks directly to the people in the Jiangnan area.

Children's literature

The year 2020 also witnessed the prosperity of children's literature. *Bright Black Eyes* by Zhao Lihong is made up of 25 letters to young readers, themes of which range from patriotism and family bonds, to encouragement and growth. Zhao tried to nourish children's inner worlds with stories which combine his own experiences and feelings while reading classics.

Lu Mei's new book *A Fantast named Lao Shengen*, together with her previous books *As Free as a Butterfly* (2016) and *The Hydrangea* (2019), focuses on the psychological and moral growth of girls from youth to adulthood, calling children to listen to the rhythm of life and to immerse themselves in nature.

In her novel *Elephant-foot Drums*, the author Yin Jianling focuses on the lives of disabled children. The elephant-foot drum is a traditional musical instrument used by the Dai ethnic people. It serves as a metaphor in the novel, because children who have lost hearing can still perceive the sound through the vibration of the elephant-foot drum. Based on the childhood experience of the famous deaf dancer Tai Lihua, this novel highlights the positive spirit of seeking bliss in incompleteness and creating miracles from ordinary life.

The article is edited and translated from Guangming Daily. Liang Hongying is the editor-in-chief of Literature and Art Newspaper.

CHINESE WISDOM



zhǐ

This character originally referred to the dregs produced during the process of rinsing silk fibre. During the Eastern Han Dynasty, Cai Lun (61–121) improved the papermaking process and originated paper in its modern form. Since then, this character has been used as a reference to paper.

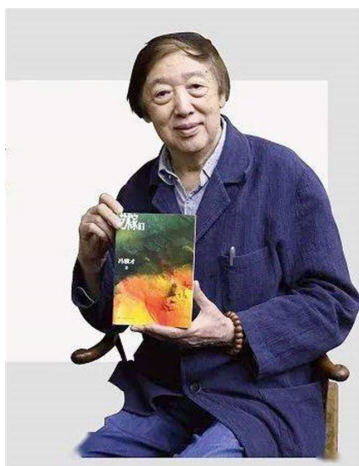
纸上谈兵

zhǐ shàng tán bīng

Zhi refers to paper and *tan* "talk about." *Bing* refers to military tactics. This idiom literally means talking about warfare on paper. It refers to people who engage in idle talk, but are unable to act on their theories. It is usually used to urge people to combine theories with practical knowledge.

This idiom is derived from a story of Zhao Kuo (?–260 BCE), a general from the state of Zhao during the Warring States Period (475–221 BCE). As recorded in *Shiji (Historical Records)* by the Han Dynasty historian Sima Qian, Zhao Kuo was the son of the famous general Zhao She. On the orders of King Xiaocheng of Zhao, Zhao Kuo was sent to replace the previous general, famous commander Lian Po, into the battlefield against the state of Qin. Zhao's mother was worried. She told the king that her son treated a battle like a game of Go, and all his tactics were based on the books he read, so he had no idea what real warfare was like. This developed into the idiom of engaging in "paper warfare." Unfortunately, her advice was ignored by the king. Zhao lost the Battle of Changping, a battle ranked among the most lethal military operations and one of the largest battles in Chinese history (combined troops numbered about 1.1 million). Zhao was killed by the Qin soldiers, and over 450,000 Zhao soldiers were annihilated. The battle reflects a model of total war between states, in which countries use all their human and economic resources in warfare.

This idiom is still popular in recent years, as it is associated with an important concept in state governance: "Empty talk harms the nation, practical action helps it thrive." This idiom emphasizes the importance of strengthening the link between theory and practice. The combination of theory and practice is particularly valuable to state governance. It requires closing the gap between the theory and practice in policymaking.



Feng Jikai and his latest novel *The Artists* (left), *Elephant-foot Drums* (right) by Yin Jianling Photo: SOHU

