

## Ma Jian: An exile's perspective on China

By Uma Anyar

*'There is a saying that the further you stand from the mountains, the more clearly you see them. China is completely lacking in self-awareness and as someone who has stepped outside that society, I have a responsibility to write about it as I see It.'* - **Ma Jian**

Ma Jian is certainly a writer to be reckoned with, not only by the Chinese Communist Government, who banned his short story collection, *Stick Out Your Tongue* (1987), but also by semi-romantic, Western liberal readers like myself, who view all things Tibetan through a hazy mystical lens of awe and wonder. Reading *Stick Out Your Tongue*, without any preparatory contextual mental framework felt like an awakening slap across the face. It's been awhile since a writer has affected me in such a way. Ma Jian's writing is, unadorned; his stories are disturbing, and very compelling.

*Stick out your Tongue*, (and all his other books) was translated by his life partner, Flora Drew, and published in English, 2007 The book's most remarked upon feature was that traditional Tibetan culture was depicted as harsh and often inhuman; Guy Mannes- Abbott, writing for *The Independent*, noted that the "stories sketch multi-generational incest, routine sexual abuse and ritual rape. His writing hums with longings and shrieks, while his ambivalence is unadulterated. The effect is to make events with an almost anthropological distance so urgently real that they make you gasp. This is how Ma transports us to places and times we're unlikely to experience, and why these narratives are winning." And I would add that these are stories that have the power to alter a reader's worldview.

The book was banned in China as a "vulgar and obscene book that defames the image of our Tibetan compatriots." After that, Ma Jian left Beijing, in 1987 for Hong Kong, then moved on to Germany after Hong Kong was returned to China. He now lives in London with Flora Drew and their son.

Ma Jian was born in Qingdao, China, in 1953. He worked as a photojournalist for the state run newspaper. But he became disgusted with his job just as his marriage was falling apart, so he took off and traveled around China for three years in the 1980's. *Red Dust (1987)* was the resulting travelogue, which won the Thomas Cook Travel Book Award in 2002. Some commentators have called *Red Dust* the *On the Road* of China. Ma himself, has written, "I left Beijing because I wanted to be alone and to forge my own path, but I know now that no path is solitary, we all tread across other people's beginnings and ends."

*The Noodle Maker*, (2004) Ma Jian's satirical novel, allows us a humorous, yet profound, glimpse of ordinary Chinese individuals trying to survive under a system that dictates their every move. Extraordinary characters inspire him, their lives pulled and pummeled by fate and politics, as if they are balls of dough in the hands of an all-powerful noodle maker.

Ma has a mission. He talks about a writer's responsibility to truth, human rights, and freedom of speech/opinion. He takes that responsibility zealously as he has been accused of being "going on a rant" by British literary translator Nicky Harman of his speech at a London PEN event. She thought that his statement "Chinese writers can only do three things in China today - collaborate, remain silent or leave the country," unfair to other Chinese writers.

To say that Ma Jian's books are political is accurate, but they are not merely polemical. His characters and their stories are memorable, even haunting.

His latest novel, *Beijing Coma*, (2008) has been hailed a masterpiece. The Financial Times called it "an epic yet intimate work that deserves to be recognized and to endure as the great Tiananmen novel." Briefly, it covers the Tiananmen Square massacre. But it moves into the present through the main character, an activist protester, who was hit by a soldier's bullet and has been in a coma for a decade. He awakens finally when a sparrow lands on his naked chest to discover the new materialistically compliant Chinese world. He finds himself confused by the changes and decides he prefers his inner world of dreams and images to the tawdry reality he has awoken into.

“Already notorious for writing novels banned in his homeland due to their criticism of China's policies on human rights and Tibet, the now London-based Ma Jian here launches his most sustained and intricate indictment of his former country. . . . As novelist, he painstakingly recreates the cycle of idealism, arrogance, confusion and despair that characterized the experience of demonstrators on the ground in [Tiananmen] square.”

— *Toronto Star*

He has been called the Solzhenitsyn of China's amnesiac surge towards superpower status. “When history is erased, people's moral values are also erased,” he says. “It was from a sense of rage at this whitewashing of history that I felt the need to bear witness.” In dictatorships, there must be “a constant struggle between the authorities who want to control history and the writers who want to grab hold of it and reclaim it.” *Ma Jian*

Unlike, Ma Jian's fictional comatose narrator, Dai Wei, in *Beijing Coma*, who functions as a metaphor for the ability to remember and the inability to act. Ma Jian's rage and writings are weapons against political repression and time's amnesiac power to sweep history's atrocities into the dustbin.

In other words, words matter, people's stories matter, History matters.

Perhaps, Ma Jian did not choose his mission. It chose him.

The Ubud Writers and Readers Festival are honored to host Ma Jian and translator, Flora Drew along with other notable writers, October 6-10, 2010.