

# DARKNESS VISIBLE

State censorship is not the greatest threat to a writer's progress, says leading Chinese novelist **Yan Lianke**. The tyranny starts from within

True writing is a full and free expression of the heart and soul: the measure of the author's emotional and spiritual experience. While I am not well travelled and everything I know about foreign countries and their authors I have learnt from my limited readings in Chinese, I have still been able to identify two types of writing.

One is born of freedom of spirit and the power of the imagination. Looking at the last century, we have Kafka, Marquez and Borges; in the US, Faulkner, Eliot and Heller, along with the writers of *On the Road* and *Howl*, Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg. Look to Europe, and in the British Isles we have Woolf, Joyce, Orwell and Dylan Thomas. In France, we have the authors of the *nouveau roman*. Going beyond these brightest of stars, we could list the greats of each country – those whose writing brought light to the literary firmament of the 20th century.

But we should not overlook a second type of writing, produced when the spirit and imagination are constrained, but break free. Authors of this type whom I hold in esteem include Russia's Solzhenitsyn and Pasternak; in the US, the early works of Henry Miller and Soviet émigré Nabokov; in Britain,

D H Lawrence; and in Latin America, Mario Vargas Llosa – and again, we could list many more. Their ability to create masterpieces is due to their imagination overcoming the constraints, inhibitions and injury they suffered during their lives. The energy this produced gave brilliance to works written in the dark.

In China, the decade-long Cultural Revolution was just this kind of dark time, but regrettably, China has not produced authors of equal stature in the ensuing years. Now, after three decades of reform, opening up and economic growth, social consciousness has cast off that darkness. China's authors do not enjoy unimpeded freedom, but nor are we – as many in the West believe – trapped in the darkness of the Cultural Revolution. We do not face oppression and nor are we caged. But we do suffer from constraints and a weakness of imagination.

After writing my novel *Serve the People*, which was banned in China, I came to realise that this arises from three factors. First, the 'regulation' of the publishing sector. Second, the constraints authors place upon themselves. Third, a complete loss of the force and imagination of the spirit.

China today operates under socialism, at the core of which lies a standardisation and moulding of the spirit – which requires publishing to be regulated to submit to discipline. We often say, 'In writing, we have freedom, but in publishing we have discipline.'

Take *Serve The People* as an example – I can honestly say that nobody tried to stop me writing it. But the regulation of the publishing industry prevented its publication. This is a huge contrast with the situation two or three decades past, when I would not have been allowed to even write the book, let alone publish it, even overseas and in translation. To even read a book like that in secret would have placed you in mortal danger or facing imprisonment.

Today things are different. You can write freely – but your works will face limitations in publishing. Again, I can honestly say that since the banning of *Serve the People*, I have lived in peace. I remain free to write at will. But the directors and editors of the literary magazine *Huacheng*, which published an extract, have suffered severe penalties, leaving me wracked with guilt and feeling I have wronged these colleagues of mine.

So it is not just restrictions on publishing that influence my work – I am troubled and ashamed by the consequences my 'bad book' has caused, and these emotions will have a major impact on my writing in the future.

And this brings me to my second point – the controls writers place on themselves. This restraint is to blame for modern China's failure to produce



*Yan Lianke*  
Credit: *Philippe Picquier*

any authors or works of global stature. We must admit that generations of writers, including myself, working under varying levels of control, have come to accept this as natural over the decades. Thus we have lost our identities, our independence of expression and of thought and writing. We unconsciously self-regulate our thinking.

In the same way a prisoner becomes accustomed to his cell, or Kafka's hungry artist became unwilling to leave either his cage or the state of his hunger, China's writers are imprisoning themselves. This reluctance and conditioning are their greatest enemies. Since writing *Serve the People*, I have long struggled to decide if I should break out of my self-imposed cage and it still limits my writing today.

So speaking honestly, it is not publishing restrictions that limit my work; it is the 'self-regulation' of my thinking that has formed over a decade and more; the habit and tradition of self-constraint of two generations of authors. It limits the content and ideology of a work, and also the pursuit of artistic style and innovation.

To a certain degree, this artistic constraint will also limit the way an author thinks about China, and further, his honest and free written expression. And in the long term, this becomes the third factor influencing writing: after years of self-constraint, the author loses all spiritual force and imagination.

This loss does not take place overnight – it is a steady and unconscious erosion. This has been the case for every Chinese author, both of my generation and my parents' generation. I think of this with regret and the anguish of helplessness, as we have lost our best tool for comprehending reality both past and present.

When this is lost, an author's work stops at the surface of reality, going no further than the levels of craft and technique. This is the case for many authors in China, and I am sure elsewhere also. I myself have been through this, and have the books to show for it.

*Serve the People* may not be my best work, but it is one of my most important. Unlike other Chinese literary works, it is born of force and imagination. The message of the book comes from the expression and portrayal of emotions that transcend time. I am not proud of having written it. I only worry if in my subsequent writings I, as a man from the most ordinary of backgrounds, can retain my dignity and character as an author.

I am a contentious figure in China. Since the banning of *Summer Sunset* in the early 1990s, through to the publication of the novels *Hard as Water* and *Enjoyment*, to the investigation of my two recent novels, *Serve the People*

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and *Dream of Ding Village*, I have faced constant criticism and controversy. But thankfully, because China has reformed and opened up, because it is no longer the place it was 30 years ago, my works have been in large part accepted by society and my readers.

So, even today, I still write. I still have the freedom to write. This experience of being banned, investigated and criticised, yet still being able to write, makes me clearly aware of the circumstances under which I work. The awareness of this and of publishing restrictions inevitably influences my writing.

But still, the most significant influences are the internal ones. Can I continue to strive to be an author of integrity? Can my pen continue to write courageously, wisely, artistically and with conscience? Can I, as an author, facing China's present and its past, bear the responsibility of writing as an independent individual? Can I break through my self-constraints and stand guard against the threats to my spiritual force and imagination? □

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**Yan Lianke's** novels include the political satires *Serve the People* (Constable) and *Dream of Ding Village* (Constable, 2009). He has received many literary prizes, including the prestigious Lu Xun in 2000