

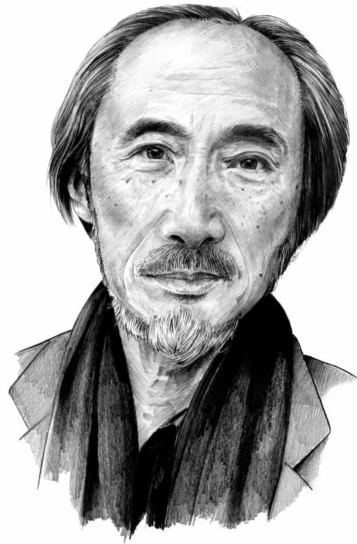
Q &amp; A

## Ma Jian on China's Efforts to Extinguish Memory

The writer talks about life in exile and why he's pessimistic about his homeland.

BY JAMES CHATER — JANUARY 31, 2021

*Ma Jian is an acclaimed, Chinese-born writer who lives in exile in London. His debut novella, [Stick Out Your Tongue](#), published in 1987, led to the permanent ban on his books being published or sold in China. Since then, he has written four collections of stories, essays and six novels, including *Beijing Coma*, winner of the Index of Censorship Book Award. After the 2012 publication of *The Dark Road*, he was barred from visiting China. Ma was born in Qingdao, in northeast China, and early in his career, performed in a theatre troupe and worked as a painter and photojournalist. His most recent novel, *China Dream*, was published in 2018. He lives with his partner Flora Drew, who translates his novels into English, and their four children. This interview with him was conducted in Mandarin and translated into English.*



Ma Jian  
Illustration by Lauren Crow

### Q: How did you first become interested in writing?

A: I remember one evening, when Mao Zedong initiated the Cultural Revolution, I was out on a street collecting all kinds of leaflets distributed by the Red Guards. I was about 13 years old, and I came across an old man who asked me for a few copies. I didn't want to give them to him and asked what he wanted with them. I said they could be folded into paper guns or you could wipe your buttocks with them. He replied that he was from the history museum, that these leaflets were part of history. After I heard him say that, my mind was shaken. Whatever you do, the eyes of history are always behind you, watching. From then on, I developed a passion for literature and writing. Years later, after the police had ransacked my home and art studio, I remember looking at the oil paintings I had created from my childhood to the age of 30

and thinking the colorful contours were too romantic. It was really from that moment that I gave up painting and began writing.

**You have been a vocal critic of the Chinese Communist Party, but some Chinese commentators say Beijing's response to the pandemic demonstrates the superiority of the Chinese political system. How do you see it?**

People are freer to move about in democracies, and that has created disorder in the pandemic. When it first broke out, we saw it was difficult for liberal democracies to control their citizens. However, that does not mean that totalitarianism or autocratic rule is the only

way the virus can be controlled. Taiwan is not authoritarian nor is Vietnam or New Zealand, and they've all successfully contained the pandemic.

The pandemic revealed a big problem within China. It was only after the virus had become widespread that we realized the autocratic system of governance already confined people to their homes, to their work units, or to the housing communities where they live. The set-up of autocratic systems is much like that of a prison; everything is controlled and if you move anywhere, you have to report it yourself. So, when the pandemic escalated, from the perspective of Xi Jinping, this wasn't just a virus, it was "wartime" (战时). When that "war" began, the government could mobilize the strength of the entire military and people. It was easy for Xi Jinping to confine people to specific places because he had designated it as a war. In a pandemic, authoritarian leaders often have an advantage controlling the spread of a virus because they can suppress and arrest citizens. In London, that could not happen.

**How do you think recent events — from the West's handling of the pandemic to the rioters storming the Capitol in Washington — will impact perceptions inside China of the West and democracy?**

In China, there are some who hope Xi Jinping will get along well with Biden and rehabilitate U.S.-China relations. But others hope China will throw caution to the wind and take this opportunity of global disorder to attack the U.S. and perhaps also Taiwan, in a similar way to how they have dealt with Hong Kong.

Information in China is limited so people are a bit like a "frog at the bottom of a well" (井底之蛙); sometimes the hole is a little bigger, sometimes smaller, but ultimately, their purview is similar to that of being stuck in a well, looking upwards at the sky; you can't see a situation in its entirety and you can't draw comparisons. The opinions people form from this position can be observed, but they don't have a lot of value. All perspectives in China, including those on the virus, hinge upon what Xi Jinping says. Health officials are lying; there isn't a single one that is telling the truth about the pandemic. The ones that have been truthful have died, are in prison, or have disappeared; in a sense, they no longer exist. When the W.H.O. [World Health Organization] officials visit China, they'll only see the artificial successes created by Xi Jinping.

**There are many who say that China's actions in the past year — for example, in Hong Kong and Xinjiang — have forced the West to 'wake up' to the reality of China's leadership. How do you view this?**

Yes, over the past year we've seen through [Trump's Secretary of State Mike] Pompeo that the United States has started to wake up. But it's not just in the United States. In the U.K., there's the broader question of dependencies on China — such as with heavy and light manufacturing, chemical products, and medical products. Would you still say that the U.K. is a country? I'd almost say that the U.K. has become a mere trading post of Chinese companies. Last weekend, I went to B&Q [a British home improvement retailer] to get a few bits of gardening equipment, and I ended up buying some masks — all of which were made in Wuxi, China. The U.K. has become a country that cannot produce its own basic medical equipment. Strictly speaking, we shouldn't even call the U.K. government a government anymore, we should call it a trade department. And in this trade department, all the trade is done with China, and all the power rests with China. If you ask people that work in finance, in the City of London, they'll tell you that a third of the City has already been bought out by China.

When you're facing a situation like this with a weak government, you naturally hope some big changes can be made. But the British government's inability was evident after the

BIO AT A GLANCE	
AGE	67
BIRTHPLACE	Qingdao, Shandong, China
WORK	Novelist
PERSONAL LIFE	Partner is Flora Drew, who translates Ma's novels into English

National Security Law was passed in Hong Kong. It became clear they were using Obama-era approaches: say a few words in protest, express dissatisfaction with the decision, sense the Chinese government will protest a little too, then a week later, it's over. It's still the same method, and is different from the one used by Pompeo. It's got to be said clearly. There is no special administrative region. It's very simple.

Inability like this has eroded British people's belief in their government. Eventually, it adds up, and the government won't mention Hong Kong. They won't mention Taiwan. They won't even mention some of China's more troubling economic approaches. For the U.K. itself, there are currently two major problems. The first is that it has separated from Europe; the second is that it can't separate from China. If the U.K. divorced both, who's to say that its quality of life, quality of industry, quality of military would not reach an all-time low? We just don't know.



Ma Jian (right) with the late writer (and future Nobel Peace Prize winner) Liu Xiaobo (left) and Zhou Duo (center) at about the time of the Tiananmen Square massacre.

*Courtesy of Ma Jian*

**Still, whether it's on Hong Kong or Huawei, some would argue that the U.K.'s stance on China has hardened over the past year. Has it impacted your own life?**

Of course, but this so-called change of the British government is in fact very small, especially when you compare it with that of the U.S. and Australia. Out of these countries, the U.K. has changed the least. Now, in a year, maybe two years, or maybe even in a shorter amount of time — one or two months — the U.K. will become more and more like the U.S., with people increasingly dissatisfied with Xi's leadership. That might stimulate some change in the U.K., but it will be difficult to do anything because of the interconnected nature of its relationship with China. This has deeper implications. The "Thousand Talents Plan [China's government backed program to attract scholars from abroad], for example, is definitely not happening solely in the U.S.; it is without doubt happening in the U.K. too. In the U.S., they began to check the scientists that had returned to China as part of the plan. But in the U.K., we have no idea who they were. In this environment of suspicion, it's easy for racism to emerge. Because people dislike Xi Jinping, because people dislike the CCP, they take out their anger on ethnically Chinese people. So this definitely impacts our lives.

**Memory is a central feature of your work. How do you think the 2020 of China will be remembered? I imagine you would make a distinction between the memory of those in China and those outside?**

There is a big difference. In China, memory is a luxury. Indeed, the idea you'd want to preserve memory is a really difficult thing for many people to understand. If you say that you remember the Cultural Revolution, or that you remember Tiananmen, your friends will laugh at you. I really don't know how, when these people's parents passed away, they could believe that simply forgetting all this pain would make them happier. That habitual concealing of memory in China has rendered its people prone to amnesia. From conversations with students and friends, it is clear that no one has any interest in discussing events that happened a year ago; to them, it has already gone. But because I live in the U.K., these memories continue to exist. I continue to remember what has happened, which artists and poets have died, which people have disappeared. For me, this is the greatest benefit of living in London: my memory can be preserved. I can compare history. I can, with the perspective of today, look at things that happened two years ago and see them for what they are.



*Ma Jian as a young boy.  
Courtesy of Ma Jian*

I remember SARS. At the most severe point of that epidemic, I was traveling with my mother in Guangzhou. We travelled to many places — Zhuhai, Shenzhen — but we had no idea we were in the midst of an epidemic. It was only a fortnight later when we were back in Beijing that we realized how dangerous it all was. By then, all the foreign journalists had been warned against reporting on it, so I personally went to watch how journalists and W.H.O. officials would observe what was going on. In Beijing, they would take the patients from their hospital beds one-by-one to ambulances waiting outside, shut the door, and then wait until the W.H.O. officials had gone inside. The officials would say, “Oh, everything seems good” and leave, after which they would bring all the patients back in.

Now, what happens if you don't preserve memories? Or if you don't have museums to preserve history? There's a danger that if you forget it, and it will happen again. Take the Cultural Revolution. In many places in China today, you will hear people singing songs from the Cultural Revolution, and saying how great the Cultural Revolution was.

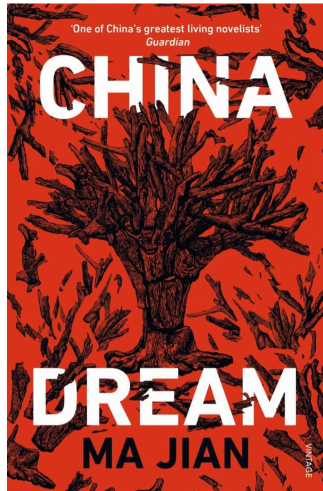
I want to record this history and not let it repeat itself. Of course, there's no opportunity to express all this in China. Consequently, after a few years, history really does repeat itself. Except with this pandemic, it is much worse. When it comes to this virus, they really don't think they have done anything wrong. They believe that lies can conceal the facts, and after that, the facts don't exist.

**“ That habitual concealing of memory in China has rendered its people prone to amnesia. From conversations with students and friends, it is clear that no one has any interest in discussing events that happened a year ago; to them, it has already gone. ”**

**And then the lies become “history”?**

Yes, it has already become history. Apart from the two citizen journalists who have disappeared, writers, poets, lawyers — people of intellect and thought — none of them have written anything about the virus. In China, if you have information, understand history, and preserve memory, it is a difficult place to live.





Ma's *China Dream* (2018).

**Your novel *China Dream* is often compared to Orwell's *1984*. You've previously said that it's a sequel to *1984*. Is there anything about the current Chinese government's actions that has already surpassed what you describe in *China Dream*?**

When I'm writing a novel with a strong connection to real events, I will often leave a gap of two or three years between events happening and the writing. In that time, I slowly begin to see the outline of the work, and once that outline is clear, I'll begin to write. When Xi Jinping began to speak of his "China Dream," I began thinking about the exact meaning behind this phrase. In simple terms, its goal is to extinguish memory; it's designed so that people won't mention failed policies of the CCP [Chinese Communist Party], which the CCP can then use again. At heart, the goal of Xi's "China Dream" is to use the CCP's ideology to slowly expand control.

At the outset, they didn't rely on these political slogans, but on much more tangible methods like economic incentives. Now our fate is deeply interwoven with thousands of Chinese companies, and it seems like we don't care. Online too, how many people have been arrested for simply writing a few words? It's too easy. Using technology to realize an authoritarian dream has become extremely easy. The information obtained by surveillance cameras in Beijing has far surpassed that known by Orwell's Big Brother. Now, in this environment, I hope people can see through to the essence of the "China Dream," which I believe, apart from brainwashing, is about lies. They continuously instrumentalize lies to conceal the truth and achieve their ultimate goals.

**You've said before that it wasn't until you left China that you truly understood it. Can you elaborate?**

Right, if I'd just been away from China for four years, I might just be like a student who had studied abroad. If I went back to China, I might continue to watch CCTV, use Chinese social media and have no opportunity for comparison. But here, it's different. Not only, for example, can I watch Joe Biden, but I can also watch Donald Trump, and I can compare the two. I can also think about the underlying reasons why someone might vote for Trump, such as unemployment in the former industrial heartlands. Here, you're able to recognize that behind one problem, there is always a deeper problem. In China, you can't do that. It's like you are in a mountain cave; you can see the opening, a few trees, maybe a pavilion or road, but you cannot see the mountain's shape, you don't know how high you are, you don't know whether the surrounding area has any animals, or whether it is dangerous or not.

**And this image is much clearer since you left?**

Yes, it's clearer. You understand more clearly the true value of things, and how things have changed. Becoming an exiled writer was obviously painful to begin with; you can't avoid that sense of loss. But as soon as the authorities outright forbade me from returning, it became a different sensation entirely. You want to return even more. In the years since then, I've slowly understood and accepted it, and tried to psychologically separate myself from that land. You don't have to present yourself with a fixed definition of Beijing; I can become a citizen of a second country, become a second Ma Jian, even a resident of a second Beijing. Being able to access so much information now online, I've found this sense of loss has lessened.



Ma outside of his home in Beijing.

*Courtesy of Ma Jian*

**Do you think your role as an exiled writer has changed?**

No, in fact, if anything, a benefit of being an exiled writer is that your determination for freedom becomes even stronger, your thought more open. If I was still in China, I might be like all the other writers who are unable to even mention the virus. Here, I can. But more importantly, through being exiled, you slowly begin to see yourself more clearly; an independent person, with independent character and independent thought. Indeed, it's only through developing that independent thought that you can become integrated with Chinese tradition and culture. From Confucius to Qu Yuan, from the Tang and Song Poets to the Qing Dynasty, many Chinese writers, poets and painters have all spent time in exile. So, in a sense, being in exile is a way to realize oneself in full, to become a part of the country's traditional culture. If you are not an independent person, then you don't have a relationship with your generation, and just become a product of it; once the generation has passed, so will you. It's only through becoming a person of independent thought, creating your own stories, remembering history, that one becomes united with traditional Chinese culture. This is the true meaning of being in exile; liberating oneself, becoming a complete person.

**A number of foreign journalists were expelled from China in the past year. Do you think the ability to “understand China from the outside” will become increasingly important in the coming years?**

Your question makes me immediately ask whether you really think international journalists or writers that are in China have had any effect? Have they really been able to report on Liu Xiaobo or Fang Fang? I really don't think journalists have had much of an impact. When they arrive in China, many journalists can only report more simple stories. Those more willing to dig for the truth get arrested very quickly. A journalist that visits North Korea or Iran might worry about being killed. But a “benefit” of being in China is that everything on the surface looks highly developed, so it is difficult to see the darker stories that lie behind. As a result, I think journalists can only really report on questions that the Chinese government believes are quite small.

Now, think of all the foreign professors that work in Chinese universities. Every Chinese university will have a specific department for the study of Marxism. And in each of those departments, there is usually a Western professor or expert. Just think how many foreign experts there are in China. Have you ever heard them revealing “the truth” about China? I don't believe they have. I personally haven't derived any sense of “truth” from them. I believe, at this time, the best we can do is make our own judgements.

“ It’s only through becoming a person of independent thought, creating your own stories, remembering history, that one becomes united with traditional Chinese culture. This is the true meaning of being in exile; liberating oneself, becoming a complete person. ”

**In this kind of stifling environment, do you think it is possible for artists in China to create critical art?**

The CCP have raised a group of cultural officials with very acute noses. Before an artist has even begun the act of expression, they have already infiltrated your thought process, which causes self-censorship. If they think you pose a threat, they can arrest you, stop your activity or close your gallery. In an authoritarian society that has already been repressed to this extent, there will always be one or two people that develop independent thought — just like Winston Smith does in [Orwell’s] *1984*. But most artists now don’t have the determination for freedom I mentioned earlier. They’ll create artworks that contain a bit of satire or criticism. As long as they don’t get arrested, they can criticize to an extent, but it doesn’t have much meaning. They will satirize the Cultural Revolution, satirize Mao Zedong, but they wouldn’t dare say a word about Xi Jinping. In this kind of atmosphere, it’s not impossible for people to develop critical art, but it’s very difficult.

MISCELLANEA	
BOOK RECS	<a href="#">The Plum in the Golden Vase</a> by Lanling Xiaoxiao Sheng, <a href="#">1984</a> by George Orwell, <a href="#">Don Quixote</a> by Miguel de Cervantes, <a href="#">Divine Comedy</a> by Dante
FAVORITE MUSIC	The requiem — Faure’s and Britten’s War Requiem
FAVORITE FILM	<i>Cold War</i> , directed by Pawel Pawlikowski
PERSONAL HEROES	Freud & Ming En Fu (明恩傅)

**If that’s the case, then what role can artists play in Chinese society today?**

In the eyes of the CCP, this role does not exist; it is an illusion. A goal of the CCP is to extinguish all forms of independent thought. Literature and art can exist, but they must be created in service of the CCP. There will be exceptions, there are examples of artists that are able

to express some criticism and pain in their work, but they are in the significant minority. I don’t believe those thousands of previously exiled artists, painters, poets, and professors will produce works of art born of independent thought after they have returned to China. Once you return to the country, become a part of the country — in other words, part of the Party — it becomes extremely difficult to create that kind of intellectually critical work.

**Are you a pessimist or an optimist about the future of China?**

I’m a pessimist. If I were an optimist, I might not have become a writer. To an extent, this pessimistic mentality is the reason that a writer writes. Even in a good or supposedly perfect society, a writer can still identify flaws. It is by adopting this mentality that you become an independent thinker. China may become an economically rich nation, but it is a richness that has no relationship to culture; it is weak. From my position as an exiled writer, I feel very pessimistic, because there is no one thinking freely to communicate with, no one with whom I can form a group or movement. That is what makes it very hard for me to think of this current China, the “China Dream” generation, and not feel pessimistic. We may eat, dress and play well, but it has come at the cost of too many people.

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James Chater is a journalist based in Taipei. His writing on politics, foreign affairs and culture from Taiwan has appeared in *The Guardian*, *New Statesman*, *The Spectator* and *Los Angeles Review of Books*. He is currently completing his masters in Modern Chinese Studies at Oxford University. Between 2017-2018, he also studied at Harvard as the Michael von Clemm Fellow. [@james\\_chater](#)

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