Mo Yan and China’s “Nobel Complex”

Posted by Evan Osnos

In awarding the 2012 Nobel Prize in Literature to Mo Yan, the Swedish Academy has recognized one of China’s best-known writers, and also fulfilled one of the Chinese government’s most enduring pursuits: a politically tolerable Nobel laureate. The citation says: “Through a mixture of fantasy and reality, historical and social perspectives, Mo Yan has created a world reminiscent in its complexity of those in the writings of William Faulkner and Gabriel García Márquez, at the same time finding a departure point in old Chinese literature and in oral tradition.” Mo Yan, who is as little known abroad as many of his fellow laureates, is a major figure at home, known for novels including “Big Breasts and Wide Hips,” “Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out,” “Wa,” “Sandalwood Death,” “Red Sorghum”—and a range of essays and short stories. (“Red Sorghum” became a popular film of the same name, by Zhang Yimou, which was popular in the West.)

The People’s Republic has sought a Nobel Prize in Literature so avidly and for so long that it became a national psychological fixation—China’s “Nobel complex,” as commentators and television shows often put it. (Julia Lovell wrote a good book about China’s pursuit of the literature prize.)

Achieving it was always seen as a referendum on China’s cultural development, and a measure of authority around the world. For that reason, the Chinese press has exulted
in Mo Yan’s win, hailing this as a “history-making first”—the first Chinese national to win the literature prize.

But the Nobel has given the country fits. In 2000, the Chinese-born writer Gao Xingjian won the prize. He was a French citizen by then, but he had spent fifty years of his life in China, and his work stuck so closely to the subject that at first the Chinese government didn’t know what to make of it.

The Prime Minister at the time, Zhu Rongji, happened to be giving a press conference the day it was awarded, and he congratulated the laureate: “I am very pleased that a literary oeuvre written in Chinese was awarded the Nobel Prize. Chinese characters have a history of several thousand years and the Chinese language has an inexhaustible appeal.” Except the Premier hadn’t gotten the official line yet: Gao, it turned out, had criticized the Communist Party in the past, and so the government was not at all pleased with his Nobel. The Foreign Ministry spokesperson declared that awarding it to Gao “shows again the Nobel Literature Prize has been used for ulterior political motives, and it is not worth commenting on.” And though some Chinese writers—including this year’s winner, Mo Yan—applauded it, the Writers’ Association said Gao’s win “proves that the committee is very ignorant.” To this day, there are Chinese books on the Nobel Literature prize that simply omit the year 2000 from the history.

Mo Yan ranks among the most widely published contemporary writers inside China (as opposed to émigrés and exiles), a list that also included Yu Hua, Su Tong, and Wang Shuo. Compared to his earlier years, when some of his works were banned, he has become closer to the establishment, and when it became clear he was a contender, some domestic critics lobbied hard against it. After he won, some Chinese intellectuals expressed disapproval; Mo Zhixu said the winner “doesn’t have any independent personality.” The new laureate has shied away from discussing the politics of the award, but he may find himself facing persistent questions about his willingness to stand up for Chinese writers in prison or under pressure.

Mo Yan’s win is significant for China. It recognizes a life of writing in a difficult place to be a writer, and, one hopes, it will combat some of the paranoia and victimhood that some Chinese intellectuals still feel about their stature in the world. But, over time, one hopes that the Nobel will become less important to China. That, after all, would be the sign of a country that is exactly the kind of cultural power that China aspires to be. In 1986, an especially provocative Beijing writer declared the obsession with the Nobel “childish.” He won it twenty-four years later. His name was Liu Xiaobo, and he was awarded the prize for peace, not literature. Today he is serving an eleven-year sentence for “inciting subversion of state power.”

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