

Fiction is philosophy: interview with Lulu Wang

Lulu Wang (Beijing, 1960) studied English language and literature at Beijing University, became a teacher at the same university after graduation, and moved to the Netherlands in 1986, where she taught Chinese at the Hogeschool van Maastricht. She spoke Dutch within a year and began to write it soon after, first short stories and then a novel, which took seven years to complete. *The Lily Theater* (*Het lelietheater*, 1997) – based on her experience growing up during the Cultural Revolution – was translated and published in over 20 countries. Then came *Letter to My Readers* (*Brief aan mijn lezers*, 1998), *The Tender Child* (*Het tedere kind*, 1999), *The White Feast* (*Het witte feest*, 2000), *The Lilac Dream* (*Seringendroom*, 2001), *The Red Feast* (*Het rode feest*, 2002), and *Intoxicated* (*Bedwelmd*, 2004), which explores culture clash through a love story about a Dutch economist and a young Chinese woman. Lulu Wang lives and works in Den Haag (<http://www.luluwang.nl/>). Her work has sold over a million copies worldwide.

Tao Yue

TY: When did you first discover that you had to be a writer?

LW: Interesting question. I was an only child, very lonely, and spent a lot of time talking to dolls and pets. The loneliness got worse as I got older. I developed vitiligo and couldn't be exposed to sunlight, so I was home alone all the time, immersing myself in books. As a teenager during the Cultural Revolution, I was separated from my parents. The loneliness stayed with me. Looking back, I realise how much I hoped to communicate with others. That period of my life shaped my personality – I still don't like sociability and prefer to keep to myself – and gave me the drive to write. After coming to the Netherlands, I was again consumed with loneliness, and writing was my outlet. I always wrote out of the need to express myself. Only recently, at a rough spot in my career, did I start to write out of pure literary passion – to discuss life, beauty, and philosophy in my novels. The rough spot was useful to me like sand in the shell of an oyster. I work even harder at writing now than before. My passion for literature keeps growing.

TY: Did you first work in Chinese? What did you write?

LW: When I was a child, I often told myself jokes for entertainment. Loneliness forced me to acquire a sense of humour – it's essential to survival. My first piece was a stand-up comedy written when I was 12. My teacher couldn't believe I wrote it, but when I showed her the books I had read, she not only believed me but also arranged to have it performed at the Children's Day (1 June) school party. My parents didn't support my writing. They both studied literature; my mother also taught it. But they thought it was hard to make a living from writing, let alone a successful career. They encouraged me to be a translator because it was safer. That didn't stop me, however. I wrote a love story when I was 14, but didn't show it to anyone. When I was a graduate student at Beijing University, my passion for creative writing stole time from my M.A. thesis. Then 'Eyes', a piece of prose I wrote, won a prize. I can't tell you how happy I was. I gave up writing Chinese when my third essay got censored, and I didn't write again until I came to the Netherlands.

TY: Why did you decide to write in Dutch instead of Chinese?

LW: I write in Dutch because I live in the Netherlands. My readers are mostly Dutch.

TY: How difficult is it for you to find your voice in an alien language? How much does it hurt? How much does it help?

LW: Writing in a foreign language is like scratching an itch on your leg from outside a boot. You can't express yourself fully; it's like dancing with chains on. To write in your mother tongue is convenient, but convenience doesn't guarantee excellence. There are advantages to working in Dutch. One, many Chinese idioms and clichés become new and unique when I translate them into Dutch. I like playing games with language. Writing in Dutch gives me more room to play than writing in Chinese does, and that excites me. Two, I acquired a special literary status in the Netherlands. I'm a new foreign writer, but my writing is included in a Dutch high school reading list for literature and history, which wouldn't happen if I wrote in Chinese. Three, because Chinese and Dutch people react differently to similar situations, the behavior of my characters has a shock effect on Dutch readers. For example, my character will smile when helpless whereas a Dutch person may cry. Writing in Dutch makes me feel even more Chinese, and I'm proud of the long, rich history of Chinese civilisation.

TY: How do you write when you sit down to write? Do you make sketches first or do you write directly? When you write, do you draft all the way to the end? Or are you a one-paragraph-at-a-time writer? Do you plan ahead or make it up as you go along?

LW: I always have an outline when I sit down to write. I usually write 2 to

4 pages, stop, and rewrite. I stop again after 20 to 30 pages to rewrite, and then again after 70 to 80 pages. The point of stopping to rewrite is to keep on track. I don't like leaving trash behind. I put myself in the situation of my characters, see what they see, feel what they feel, and let them decide what will happen next. The end is sometimes different from what I planned. I can't write anything I don't feel.

TY: Do you let anyone read your work before you submit it to the publisher?

LW: Yes, I let many people read my work. I hope to hear different opinions, especially from those who don't know me or my writing. People close to me often have preconceptions, positive or negative.

TY: Do you care what critics think?

LW: I'm willing to listen to all criticism, but I'm stubborn. I listen, but often accept only what I want to hear or what I can understand. It's difficult to be open to everything. Perhaps I need time to improve on this.

TY: Who are your favorite writers? Do you read them as warm-up exercises when you are writing yourself?

LW: I have no favourite writers, only favourite writing, which includes Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, Maugham's

Of Human Bondage, Lu Xun's short story 'Sad Loss', Zhu Ziqing's essay 'Moonlight on the Lotus Pond', and Xu Zhimo's poem 'Sayonara'. I read them as warm-ups in the past, but not so much now. I have only limited time and energy and I want so much to write, though I still read classical Chinese poetry every day. I'm a novelist who doesn't always like reading novels. What I like is beautiful poetic writing. I aim at being poetic all through my novels. It's not easy.

TY: Has the writing you cite influenced your style?

LW: Not so much in the past, but more and more now. In the past, I was into 'art for art's sake' and tried to make every word a jewel. My style was baroque – lavishly descriptive. As I grow older, however, I feel 'less is more'. Also respecting the taste of my western readers (who sometimes complain that I'm redundant) I try to be more succinct. Hemingway is my model. His beauty is concision. His seemingly effortless style actually requires meticulous rewriting. He presents the end result; we miss the process.

Perhaps the difference of style is rooted in culture. Chinese culture emphasises *yin* and *yang* and is full of antitheses. Everything comes in pairs. When describing a beautiful woman, for example, the idiom is that her beauty makes fish sink and geese fall from the sky out of envy. For a westerner, either fish or goose would be sufficient. To describe something just once is often not enough for me. I have to rephrase and describe it again. I don't say China has no succinct writers – Lu Xun is one, but he learned a lot from the West.

TY: Coming from one of the world's great civilisations with a rich literary tradition, do you think western readers appreciate its cultural capital?

LW: Most western readers except sinologists are ignorant of it.

TY: Are you ever annoyed by their ignorance?

LW: I blame the Chinese. It's their fault that they don't communicate their culture to the West. It's like a beautiful woman who stays home all day. Who's to blame if nobody pays her any attention? China should be open to the outside world culturally as well as economically.

TY: How acute is culture clash in your experience?

LW: I feel it strongly.

TY: What is the main area of culture clash between China and the West in general and the Netherlands in particular?

LW: Religion. Christianity is dogmatic – it stipulates good and evil, heaven and hell, what thou shalt and shalt not do. Look at the Ten Commandments. Western culture is keen to judge others. What *thou* shalt not do is not the same as what *I* will not do. *You* can't kill, but *I* can; *you* can't have nuclear weapons, but *I* can. It's not fraud – it's the sincere conviction of the world's police.

Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism (which merged long ago and are almost indistinguishable now) are mild and philosophical. Reality unites complementary opposites – *yin* and *yang*, good and evil, and so on. Everything is useful, also evil because without evil there wouldn't be good. There are no good or bad things. Is the sun good or bad? It's good where it rains a lot and bad where it's dry. Is a lamp good or bad? It's good for people who need it but bad for thieves. Ditto people – everyone has good and bad sides. Chinese philosophy emphasises self-discipline and caution. 'Think three times before you do anything', the proverb goes. Buddhism has many prohibitions, but Buddhists apply them to themselves, not to others. Very different from Christianity.

TY: Is culture clash a creative influence on your work?

LW: Of course. My latest novel explores it in order to introduce Chinese philosophy to westerners.

TY: Are you purely a novelist or do you consider writing nonfiction as well?

LW: I don't write nonfiction. Maybe I'll try to write poems as beautiful as Chinese classic poems, but in Dutch.

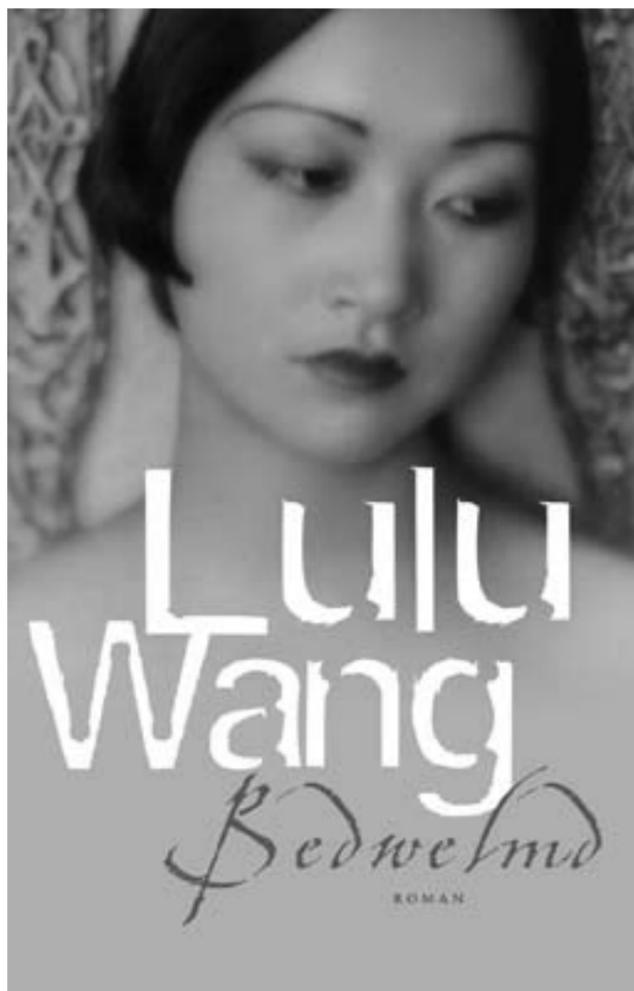
TY: How would you react to the statement, 'In a world like this no wonder fiction is dying.'

LW: I disagree. Fiction is not dying and never will. Fiction is philosophy – a picture or poetic version of life, not life itself. As long as people think about life, they will need art. As long as they want art, fiction will survive.

TY: Do you consider writing and publishing in Chinese eventually?

LW: I don't have any plans at the moment and don't know about the future. Life is unpredictable. Right now I only want to write good Dutch novels. ◀

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