

THE FIRST CHINA-RECOGNIZED NOBEL PRIZE WINNER: HIS LIFE AND WORKS

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ABSTRACT

Of the 111 years that the Nobel Prize had been established, to date, only 11 individuals that have connection, directly or indirectly, to China have been awarded. Some deny any linkage to China, while others are denied by the country. Of these awardees, only Mo Yan recognizes linkage to China and vice versa. As to what this means and what this implies for the country and the international community is a point to ponder. This discussion focuses on the foregoing.

Keywords: *Mo Yan, Nobel Prize for Literature, China and Nobel Prize*

Chinese Poetry in Southeast Asia

The Nobel Prize has been established and in existence for more than a decade already. What is the Nobel Prize? What does it have that merits the respect and prestige accorded to it by people of different races and cultures?

The Chinese, to be sure, are not immune to the charms of the Nobel Prize. There are discussions, however, that for these people, the Nobel Prize symbolizes something else. How do the Chinese view the Nobel Prize? Do they also covet the title?

For the first time in the history of the Nobel Prize, the 2012 Nobel Prize for Literature was awarded to Mo Yan, a Chinese. What does this mean for the Chinese?

Due to the novelty of this topic, most of the information gathered for this study is culled from internet sources such as news online, media interviews of the awardee himself as well as literary analysts and Chinese scholars, reactions of netizens and bloggers' sentiments on this issue.

Brief Historical Background: China and Nobel Prize

What is the Nobel Prize? The Nobel Prize is an award established pursuant to a testamentary will of a Swedish gentleman, Mr. Alfred Bernhard Nobel.

On November 27, 1895, Alfred Nobel signed his last will in Paris. When it was opened and read after his death, the will caused a lot of controversy both in Sweden and internationally. He left much of his wealth for the establishment of a prize! His family opposed the establishment of the Nobel Prize, and the prize awarders he named refused to do what he had requested in his will. It was five years later, in 1901, when the first Nobel Prize was awarded ("The Will", n.d.).

The Nobel Prize as established is divided into five categories, i.e., physics, chemistry, physiology or medicine, literature, peace, and later in 1969, economics. Regardless of race or culture, the Prize

was supposed to be conferred to individuals who have contributed the greatest benefit to humankind in these areas.

In a span of 111 years, commencing in 1901 until 2012, 835 individuals and 21 organizations, or a total of 863 individuals and organizations, have been awarded. Of this number, how many are Chinese or have linkage to China?

Table 1 provides a summary of Nobel Prize awardees that have linkage to China.

Table 1. *Nobel Prize awardees that have links to China*

Name	Year of Birth	Birthplace	Nationality	Year & Prize
Mo Yan	1955	Shandong, Gaomi	PROC	2012 Literature
Liu Xiaobo	1955	Jilin, Changchun,	PROC	2010 Peace
Charles Kuen Kao	1933	Shanghai	UK, USA, HK	2009 Physics
Qian Yongjian	1952	NY, USA	USA	2008 Chemistry
Gao Xingjian	1940	Ganzhou, Jiangxi	France	2000 Literature
Daniel Chee Tsu	1939	Henan, Baofeng,	USA	1998 Physics
Steven Chu	1948	St. Louis, Missouri, USA	USA	1997 Physics
Yuan-Tseh Lee	1936	Xinzhu, Taiwan	USA, Taiwan	1986 Chemistry
Samuel Chao Chung Ting	1936	Ann Arbor, Michigan, USA	USA	1976 Physics
Chen Ning Yang	1922	Anhui, Feihe	Taiwan; USA	1957 Physics
Tsung-Dao (T.D.) Lee	1926	Shanghai	Taiwan; USA	1957 Physics

Source: All Nobel Prizes. (n. d.)

Notably, while there are more than ten China-linked Nobel Prize awardees, only one, that of the recently awarded literary prize to Mo Yan, can really be considered Chinese. Not only is Mo Yan a Chinese national, he also recognizes and is recognized as such by the government.

This is unlike the circumstance of the other previous awardees.

For instance, the 1986 Nobel Prize winner for Chemistry, Yuan-Tseh Lee, (李远哲), was really an American, who only later acquired Taiwan citizenship. The 1998, 1997, and 1976 Physics Prize awardees, Daniel Chee Tsu (崔琦), Steven Chu (朱棣文), and Samuel Chao Chung Ting (丁肇中), on the other hand, are all US citizens.

Also, both 1957 Physics awardees, Chen Ning Yang (杨振宁) and Tsung-Dao (T.D.) Lee (李政道) were both Taiwanese Americans. In addition, 2008 Chemistry awardee Roger Tsien (钱永健), and 2009 Physics awardee Charles Kuen Kao (高锟), are citizens of both Great Britain and USA.

More controversial are the 2000 Nobel Literature prize awardees, Gao Xingjian (高行健), who publicly denied his being Chinese, claiming himself to be of French citizenship, and 2010 Nobel Peace awardee, Liu Xiaobo (刘晓波), ("The Nobel Peace Prize", 2010), who was denied by the Chinese government ("China Defends Imprisonment", 2012).

Another individual worth mentioning is not included in the list. Tenzin Gyatso, the 14th Dalai Lama, was awarded the 1989 Nobel Peace Prize. However, at the time he was awarded such, he was a stateless person.

Taking the fact that it is only with the recent award to Mo Yan of the Nobel Prize that the Chinese are “truly” considered to be represented in the long line of awardees, it behooves the public therefore, to take some interest in how the Chinese look at the Nobel Prize and what this award to Mo Yan means to the Chinese and the international community.

Nobel Prize: In the Eyes of the Chinese

The standards espoused by the Nobel Prize are internationally recognized. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that experts in their respective fields covet the Nobel Prize awards.¹ The Chinese are no exception.

For the Chinese, aside from being a representation of the high standards that have been attained by an awardee, the Nobel Prize is testament to the whole world of China’s entrance in the international arena. The Nobel Prize is also symbolic of the reception of the “outside world” of everything Chinese, and vice versa. It is representative, as well as a measure, of the attainment of a certain standard that is internationally recognized.

Prior to Mo Yan, China never had one. Mo Yan is the first Chinese Nobel Prize awardee. Supposedly it could have been the 14th Dalai Lama (1989) and Liu Xiaobo² both for the first and second Nobel Prize for China, but for some reason the Chinese government did not acknowledge them.

In general, China is a nation of a solid patriotic culture. The stand of the government is actually the majority stand of the people. Since the previous two Nobel Peace Prizes were granted and received by the awardees but with political controversy, and were denied by the

country, the Nobel Prize was a proposition “so near yet so far” – loved yet hated. A Nobel Peace Prize awarded to a person who is “anti-government” is actually an insult to the government. For China, the “Peace” award to them was ironic.

2012 Nobel Literature Prize: Mo Yan

The 2012 Nobel Literature Prize, therefore, was a welcome award to China. Because of his works, which were characterized "with hallucinatory realism merge[d] [with] folk tales, history and the contemporary," Mo Yan was awarded the Nobel Prize. To quote the Swedish Academy Award (2012):

Through the 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 Garcia Marquez, at the same time finding a departure point in old China literature and in oral tradition.

Mo Yan: His Life

Guan Moye (管谟业/管謨業) is better known by the pen name Mo Yan, meaning "don't speak" in Chinese. In an interview with Jim Leach, chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities, he explained that the name comes from a warning from his father and mother not to speak his mind while outside, because of China's revolutionary political situation from the 1950s, when he grew up. Coincidentally or not, this pen name also relates to the subject matter of Mo Yan's writings, which reinterpret Chinese political and sexual history.

Mo Yan was born on 17 February 1955 in Gaomi County in Shandong province to a family of farmers, in Dalan Township (which he fictionalized in his novels as "Northeast Township" of Gaomi County). He is a Chinese novelist and short story writer.

Mo was 11 years old when the Cultural Revolution was launched, at which time he left school to work as a farmer. At the age of 18, he began work at a cotton factory. During this period, which coincided with a succession of political campaigns from the Great Leap Forward to the Cultural Revolution, his access to literature was largely limited to novels in the socialist realist style under Mao Zedong, which centered largely on the themes of class struggle and conflicts.

At the close of the Cultural Revolution in 1976, Mo enlisted in the People's Liberation Army (PLA), and began writing while he was still a soldier. During this post-Revolution era when he emerged as a writer, both the lyrical and epic works of Chinese literature, as well as translations of foreign authors such as William Faulkner and Gabriel García Márquez, would make an impact on his works. In 1984, he received a literary award from the *PLA Magazine*, and the same year began attending the Military Art Academy, where he first adopted the pen name of Mo Yan. He published his first novella, *A Transparent Radish*, in 1984, and released *Red Sorghum* in 1986, launching his career as a nationally recognized novelist. In 1991, he obtained a master's degree in Literature from Beijing Normal University.

He has been referred by Donald Morrison of U.S. news magazine *TIME* as "one of the most famous, oft-banned and widely pirated of all Chinese writers, and by Jim Leach as the Chinese answer to Franz

Kafka or Joseph Heller. Mo Yan is best known to Western readers for his 1987 novel *Red Sorghum Clan*, in which the *Red Sorghum* and *Sorghum Wine* volumes were later adapted for the film *Red Sorghum*. In 2012, Mo was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature.

Mo Yan: What He Means for the Chinese

The Nobel Prize for Literature is the most objective, authoritative and influential awarding body recognized worldwide. This award definitely is a dream worth achieving for the Chinese people, primarily, the Chinese writers. They look forward to this award, not only for the prize and recognition, but also as an international platform for them to have a dialogue with other nations.³

Definitely, the Nobel Prize to Mo Yan was good news for China. This award brings positive encouragement for the Chinese. After all, the Nobel Prize is a prestigious prize that is not awarded to any and all. Now that Mo Yan has been awarded this coveted prize, the Nobel Prize is no longer just a dream.

Mo Yan, therefore, serves as a first step for China to further explore and develop its expertise in different fields of study. The Chinese scientists would be inspired and would continue in pursuing their dreams.⁴ The Nobel Prize for the other categories would be more up-for-grabs for the Chinese. For academic scholars Professor Guo Guang Chan and Wang Jiangyun of China Science and Technology, this award to Mo Yan will serve to open a window or door of hope and opportunity for the Chinese, to encourage them to continue their pursuit of scientific studies and their search for originality.

From a cultural standpoint, China hopes that this 2012 Nobel Literature Prize will serve as an educational eye -opener for the rest of the world, one that is currently needed. Professor Chen mentioned that in terms of culture, it seems that the Chinese know more about the West, than the West knows of China. Mo Yan's receipt of the Nobel Prize would open an exchange and dialogue between the two cultures.

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Editor's note

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¹ 袁毅, 诺奖焦虑与梦想, 2010-10-08 武汉晚报

² Dec. 25, 2009 found guilty of inciting subversion of state power. Sentenced for 11 years of imprisonment. 2010 was awarded Nobel Peace, "for his long and non-violent struggle for fundamental human rights in China".

³ 2012.10.10 上海《新民晚报》记者朱凌的采访北京大学中文系陈晓明教授 PKU Prof Chen Xiaoming

⁴ Keji Ribao 《科技日报》, 20101023