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# Wei Cheng: From an Elite Novel to a Popular Metaphor

June 27, 2008 in [Uncategorized](#) by [The China Beat](#) | [1 comment](#)

China Beat is a global operation (with posts being written thus far everywhere from Beijing to Boston, Colorado to Cambodia) but it is edited at the University of California, Irvine, and more than a few CB pieces have grown out of casual conversations held on this campus. This post, for example, began when one of us mentioned to Xia Shi, who moved here from Beijing last year to do graduate work in history, that an interesting essay on the novel *Fortress Besieged* had appeared in the June 12 issue of the *New York Review of Books* (alas, [only a teaser](#) for this essay by Pankaj Mishra is available free online if you don't subscribe), and she asked if it had dealt with the old novel's popularity among members of her generation. It hadn't. And her explanation for the 21st century relevance of this pre-1949 work seemed well worth sharing, so we asked her to write about it.

By Xia Shi

*Wei Cheng* (*Fortress Besieged*) has been hailed by some critics as "the most delightful and carefully wrought novel in modern Chinese literature" and "perhaps also its greatest." (See Hsia, C.T., arguably the novel's earliest proponent, *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961) Written by Qian Zhongshu in 1947, it is an acerbic comedy about the hapless hero Fang Hongjian's wanderings in middle-class society. Its 1979-translated English title is based on a French proverb: Marriage is like a fortress besieged: those who are outside want to get in, and those



who are inside want to get out. The British equivalent of this French saying draws a picture of a gilded bird cage with the birds outside wanting to get in, and the birds inside wanting to fly out. Both these versions are mentioned by Qian's characters.

Since its initial publication, the novel's reception in China has swung from early criticism of the book as a product of elite culture to the 1980s and 1990s wide acclaim amid pop culture's frenzied consumption. Nowadays, *Wei Cheng* and Qian are household names. Its canonization process involved not merely "rediscovery," but "reinvention," in a surprisingly diverse number of ways. In 1990s China, "Wei Cheng" was a prominent popular word, ranked alongside "karaoke," "stock market," "privacy," and "MBA." Nowadays, it has been incorporated into common people's daily speech. If you ask an urban Chinese of average education what "Wei Cheng" means, most of the time, the answer will fall within the following four aspects:

First of all, "Wei Cheng" is used as a metaphor for marriage. It denotes the complexities of the institution of marriage. Jonathan Spence in his Foreword for the novel's English version (just [reviewed by Pankaj Mishra](#) in the *New York Review of Books*) regards it as "one of the finest descriptions of the disintegration of a marriage ever penned in any language." When Fang Hongjian deploras marriage as a besieged fortress, Qian clearly conveys an anti-romantic pessimism about marriage.

Considering the ever-increasing divorce rate in big cities, more and more Chinese are catching Wei Cheng's connotation today, as the following typical daily life dialogue on marriage reveals:

Friend A: I am going to get married soon.

Friend B: (joking) Wanna enter "Wei Cheng," huh? Congratulations!

To be sure, ambivalence towards marriage is a universal mentality. However, it could be said that it was Qian who first created the Chinese equivalent of the French "fortress besieged" or the English "gilded bird cage." According to Jonathan Spence, the phrase "Wei Cheng" in Chinese "had been most prominently used by a Chinese poet back in 1842 to describe the city of Nanking when it was besieged by the British after their defeat of China in the first of the so-called 'opium wars.'" Thus, he infers, "shame and national humiliation would have been very much in people's thoughts." However, since Qian's usage, it has gained a new life and it is this new meaning that contemporary Chinese are most familiar with.

Interestingly enough, the phrase "Wei Cheng" in Chinese not only conveys similar meanings to its French or English equivalent, but also has unique national and cultural characteristics. If literally translated, it should be "surrounded cities." If you ask Chinese people what image they conjure when hearing this phrase, many will reply that they picture ancient Chinese architecture—walls in rectangular shape, with four gates, sometimes with four turrets. Even the textures of the bricks of the walls, they will sometimes vividly add, resemble those of the Great Wall (Chang Cheng, literally "Long Walls"). It is absolutely not a fortress or a birdcage or a modern city. However, it should be admitted that it is hard to concisely and precisely translate this layer of distinct Chinese architectural flavor of the term into another language. As Lydia Liu argues, the choice for translatable equivalents between languages always faces the danger of leaving something missing. Nonetheless, "fortress besieged", in spite of bringing to mind "European" castles, can still be regarded as a rough equivalent of Chinese city walls. Qian in his book never give any specific descriptions on what this "Wei Cheng" looks like and thus left a space for individual imagination. In analyzing the varied meanings of Wei Cheng, however, it becomes clear that amazingly similar images can be deployed to represent a common human idea—that of marriage as an imprisonment, of sorts—despite vast national, cultural, and linguistic differences.

More broadly speaking, "Wei Cheng" can also be used to describe the dilemma of perpetual human dissatisfaction. By insisting that the human condition is doomed to dissatisfaction, Qian's attitude toward humanity is outside any particular context. In this sense, it is more often used in the phrase of "Wei Cheng Xianxiang" (the phenomenon of Wei Cheng). A google search will reveal to you an amazing amount of "Wei Cheng Xianxiang" that are currently perplexing modern Chinese society, in the fields of education, investment, or retirement and so on. For instance, you may see a [report](#) on the current fever of college graduates taking the highly selective national examinations to vie for the limited posts of government employees. Here, the "Wei Cheng Xianxiang" the reporter points out is between those who see stability and "invisible but potential" good income offered by government jobs and are thus eager to get in on them, and those ambitious talents who are already in government jobs but soon became bored and thus wanted to quit.

The third aspect of the novel that has entered the Chinese idiomatic lexicon is associated with the fad of studying abroad and fake diplomas. In particular, the term "Carleton University," (克莱登大学) from which Qian's character Fang Hongjian purchased his fake Ph.D. diploma, can be applied to refer to an illegitimate degree qualification or academic institution. Qian scorned the fake diploma as "Adam and Eve's fig leaf," which "could hide a person's shame and wrap up his disgrace." Since China's open and reform, more and more Chinese have been choosing to study overseas so as to return years later with a "gilded" layer. (镀金). Correspondingly, many people soon realize that some of these returned students, like Fang Hongjian, have fake diplomas. As a result, we can see that public discourse on various media soon began to warn employers of removing the scales from their eyes to recognize



those who were back from "Carleton University". However, it should be noted that Qian's satire was not merely limited to those fake degree holders. In his novel, even those characters with real Ph.D. degrees were nothing but pretentious and arrogant intellectuals. In fact, in Spence's view, what Qian was aiming to satirize is the whole "baleful effects of the excessive adaptation of Western literary and aesthetic theories," which had "corroded the integrity of the Chinese." In other words, Qian expressed his doubts that China had to throw off the shackles of tradition and urgently modernize itself in order to be a strong, self-confident nation. He mocked the entire phenomenon of overseas studying as "modern keju" (Imperial Examination System), the alternative of "reflecting glory on one's ancestors" (光宗耀祖). The following words from *Wei Cheng* have been widely regarded in China as the most classic satire of the mentality of those who blindly followed the fever of studying abroad.

"...the studying abroad today is like passing examinations under the old Manchu system...It's not for the broadening of knowledge that one goes abroad but to get rid of that inferiority complex. It's like having smallpox or measles, or in other words, it's essential to have them....Once we've studied abroad, we've gotten the inferiority complex out of the system, and our souls become strengthened, and when we do come across such germs as Ph.D.'s or M.A.'s we've built up a resistance against them... Since all other subjects ....have already been Westernized, Chinese literature, the only native product, is still in need of a foreign trademark before it can hold its own..."

It should be noted that Qian himself received a Bachelor degree on English Literature from Oxford University in 1937. His thesis was about "China in the English Literature of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century".

Last but not least, if you happened to be familiar with the more "vulgar" side of contemporary Chinese popular culture, unexpectedly, you will be amused to find that many *laobaixing* (commoners) like to use "Wei Cheng" to refer to playing Mahjong. It is unclear why and when "Wei Cheng" became a Mahjong nickname. Probably it is because the way playing mahjong is like building up "surrounded walls." As an aside, it is equally interesting to notice that Qian mentioned Mahjong in his novel. When he described bored Chinese students playing Mahjong on the ship home from their overseas studies, Qian referred to it as "the Chinese national pastime," that was "said to be popular in America as well," and sarcastically remarked, "thus playing mahjong not only had a down-home flavor to it but was also in tune with world trends." As early as the 1920s, if not earlier, Mahjong was well known in China for its corrupting influence. In particular, it was often associated with the stereotypical image of the "parasitic and decadent" taitais (wives of upper or middle class men), as you may have seen from the beginning of Ang Lee's *Lust, Caution* or in the descriptions of novelist Eileen Chang (Zhang Ailing), whose works often invoke popular nostalgia for the 1930-40s Shanghai. (Interestingly, she began to receive escalating critical attention almost at the same time with Qian and both of the two writers had been greatly promoted by C.T. Hsia) Therefore, here by using mahjong, Qian actually scorned that China's "bright future" was in the hands of these returning students, representatives of modern "civilization and progress," spending "their entire time gambling, except for eating and sleeping."

All of the above four aspects demonstrate that the degrees to which *Wei Cheng* has permeated contemporary Chinese popular culture. In a sense, it could be argued that *Wei Cheng's* "metamorphosis" from a novel to a phrase or idiom in Chinese daily lexicon provided a new arena for

the expression and elaboration of social phenomenon and mentality on many major fields such as family life, work, and education. It is closely linked to a post-Cultural Revolution China on its road to modernization.

*Wei Cheng's* later popularization was something that Qian could never have expected considering the various criticizing voices he heard after its initial publication in 1947. In spite of the recognized accuracy of the novel's biting social commentary, it was derided by critics as "high class reading," "out of this universe," unconnected with ordinary people's devastating wartime living experiences, and for being apolitical, "not embodying either leftist or anti-Japanese values." As for the majority of the population, they barely heard of it due to its limited circulation.

Half a century later, exhausted from various political struggles and movements, apparently, the Chinese masses have changed their tastes and reading expectations. Caught by its tone of futility, they began to enjoy its apolitical stance, honesty and humor, psychological insights, and the erudite display in its skillful manipulation of language. After its adaptation to a well-received [TV show](#), mass media further led common people to find the rich relevance of this novel to their own lives in 1990s China, a society with a reflective orientation amid its everyday newness. Lacking even one lovable character or role model (including its four heroines), readers nonetheless believe that Qian gave them a sympathetic portrayal of real persons, in whom they found a little bit of themselves. Meanwhile literary critics' lavish praise set a new standard of evaluation, emphasizing the importance of aesthetic criticism and cultural cosmopolitanism, and confirmed the masses of their "high" tastes as well. This criticism raised consumption of the novel from the simple act of reading to the demonstration by its readers of their participation in a "high quality" and cultured lifestyle. Consequently, we see that the dramatic transformation Chinese people and society experienced changed readers' expectation as well as the novel's relevance to society and hence led to its unexpected canonization and its author's apotheosis. In other words, it can be argued that the process of reception to the novel of *Wei Cheng* tells us a lot about China's historical journey in the past half century.

Finally, a question that some *Wei Cheng* scholars have been perplexed and obsessed with for a long time is: Considering the novel's wide influence and status in modern Chinese literature, why is the existing body of English language scholarship on Qian and *Wei Cheng* extremely limited even today? The answer to that question would require another post altogether.

Images

1. Qian Zhongshu
2. A still from the popular television series, based on the book.