

# China's Nobel Prize Complex, circa 1946

By **Christopher G. Rea**

Department of Asian Studies, University of British Columbia

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This week, as the Chinese outcry about today's awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to Liu Xiaobo reached a fevered pitch, the news from Beijing was that a newly invented "Confucius Peace Prize" was to be bestowed upon Lien Chan, the former vice-president of Taiwan, who made a much-publicized "peacemaking" tour of the mainland in 2005.

To be awarded a day before the Oslo ceremony, this new peace prize was meant to undermine the prestige of the Nobel and arrogate for China the right to define "peace." (Whether or not by design, the new peace prize, like the Nobel, ended up being awarded in absentia.)

Is such infantile petulance unique to the Chinese Communist party? Is its whiff of farce detectable only to the foreign nose?

Hardly.

Shortly after the end of World War II, a young Chinese writer nailed his countrymen's Nobel Complex to the wall, where it has hung and oozed resentment for 64 years. Born 100 years ago last month, his name was [Qian Zhongshu](#), and he might be called the best Chinese writer you've never heard of.

In Qian's 1946 story "Inspiration," the Chinese government (then run by the Nationalist party) commissions a panel of experts to translate an author's masterworks into Esperanto, so that he can win the Nobel Literature Prize. The candidate is known simply as The Writer, his celebrity being so deafening that it drowns out his real name. Nevertheless, he is passed over, which "plunges the entire Chinese population into a righteous wrath." Fellow writers who had been prepared to attack his Nobel recognition as unwarranted now make loud lamentations.

In one editorial, the Swedish Academy is chided for having “forgotten its origins,” since Alfred Nobel had made his fortune on munitions — and hadn’t gunpowder been invented by the Chinese? In another, *The Writer* is congratulated for now qualifying as a “wronged genius.”

Yet it is a third fictional editorial that makes Qian Zhongshu today seem even more clairvoyant than he did in 2000, when [Gao Xingjian](#) (a naturalized French citizen born in China) won the Nobel Literature Prize, setting off a wave of Chinese critical caterwauling:

“In order to recapture the respectability our country has lost, we should establish China’s own literary award as a protest against the Nobel Prize, and to save the right to criticize from falling into foreign hands.”

The editorial goes on to suggest that eligibility would be restricted to Chinese dialects (including “English as spoken by residents of Hong Kong and Shanghai”), and predicts that “once this prize is established, the Nobel would cease to be a unique attraction” and would motivate foreigners to learn Chinese, such that “China’s 5,000-year-old culture would penetrate the West.”

Sound familiar?

While *The Writer* in Qian’s story dies from the shock of not winning the Nobel Prize, China’s Nobel Complex seems to be alive and well. As the Chinese government tries to extend its “soft power” through Confucius Institutes in foreign countries, this new prize by and — despite its international list of finalists — for the Chinese perhaps comes as no surprise. (Earlier this year, China’s high-budget propaganda film *The Founding of a Nation* made a similar overture to Nationalist Taiwan through its noble portrayal of Chiang Kai-shek.)

What is often obscured by the spectacle of an angry China, however, is that the indignation is not, and never was, shared by all of its citizens. Nor, as Qian’s story reveals, does the problem originate with the Chinese Communist party, which has done so much to exacerbate cultural chauvinism. The roots

of the problem are deeper than politics, even if they are readily ascribed to that most superficial of clichés about China: face.

*Christopher G. Rea is assistant professor of modern Chinese literature at the University of British Columbia and editor of **Humans, Beasts, and Ghosts: Stories and Essays**, by Qian Zhongshu, published this month by Columbia University Press.*