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 Lilac Theater (Het liliethetoer, 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 (Brieven aan mijn lezers, 1998), The Tender Child (Het tedere kind, 1999), The White Feast (Het witte feest, 2000), The Lilac Dream (Zeringendroom, 2001), The Red Feast (Het rode feest, 2004), 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 willi- nilke 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 socialising 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 only 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. Lone-liness forced me to acquire a sense of humour – it’s essential to survival. My first piece was a stand-up comedy writ- ters when I was 12. My teacher couldn’t believe I wrote it, but when I showed her the book 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 liv- ing from writing, while I had no career, success- ful 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 stu- dent at Beijing University, my passion for creative writing stole time from my M.A. thesis. Then ‘Iyes’, 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 a ‘B’ 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 out- side a boot. You can’t express yourself fully; it’s like dancing with chains on. To write in your mother tongue is conven- ient, but convenience doesn’t guarantee excellence. There are advantages to work- ing 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 sta- tus in the Netherlands. I’m a new for- eigner writer, but my writing is included in a Dutch high school reading list for lit- erature and history, which wouldn’t hap- pen if I wrote in Chinese. Three, because Chinese and Dutch people react differ- ently to similar situations, the behavior of my characters has a shock effect on Dutch readers. For example, my charac- ter 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 writ- er? 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 a 2 to 4 pages, stop, and rewrite. I stop again after 20 to 30 pages to rewrite, and then after again 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 any- thing 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. Close to 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 favourite 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 Hem-ingway’s For Whom the Bell Tolls, Salin- ger’s The Catcher in the Rye, Maugham’s The Lilac Dream, Lü Lü’s short story *Sad Love*, Zhu Qingning’s essay *Moon- light on the Lotus Pond*, and Xu Zhi- mo’s poem ‘Sayanma’. I read them as warm-ups in the past, but not so much now. I don’t like them.”

TY: How has the writing you cite influenced your style?

LW: Not so much in the past, but more recently. I was interested in art for art’s sake and tried to make every word a jewel. My style was baroque – lav-ishly descriptive. As I grow older, how- ever, I feel ‘less is more’. Also respect- ing the taste of my western readers (who sometimes complain that I’m redundant) I try to be more succinct. Hemingway is my model. He’s model is beauty. 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 goose 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 – Lü Lü is one, but he learned a lot from the West.

TY: Opinion 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 sinolo- gists are ignorant of it.

TY: Are you ever annoyed by their igno- rance?

LW: I blame the Chinese. It’s their fault that they don’t communicate their cul- ture to the West. It’s like a beautiful woman who doesn’t pronounce. What blame to nobody pays her any atten- tion? China should be open to the out- side world culturally as well as economi- cally.

TY: How is culture clash in your experience?

LW: Religion. Christianity is dogmatic and I don’t like being told what to do. I have never felt that I can’t; I can; I have nuclear weapons, but I can’t. It’s not fraud – it’s the sincere conviction of the world’s police.

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

LW: Of course. My latest novel explores it in order to introduce Chinese philoso- phy 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 Chines- e classic poems, but in Dutch.

TY: How would you react to the state- ment, ‘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 publi- shing 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.

Tao Yue

LW: I studied English language and liter- ature at Fudan University, Shanghai, and social sciences at the University of Amster- dam. She currently works as an Inter- national Programmes Officer and China Specialist at Leiden University International Office. Her interests include comparative literature and intercultural communication.

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Research

Fiction is philosophy: interview with Lulu Wang