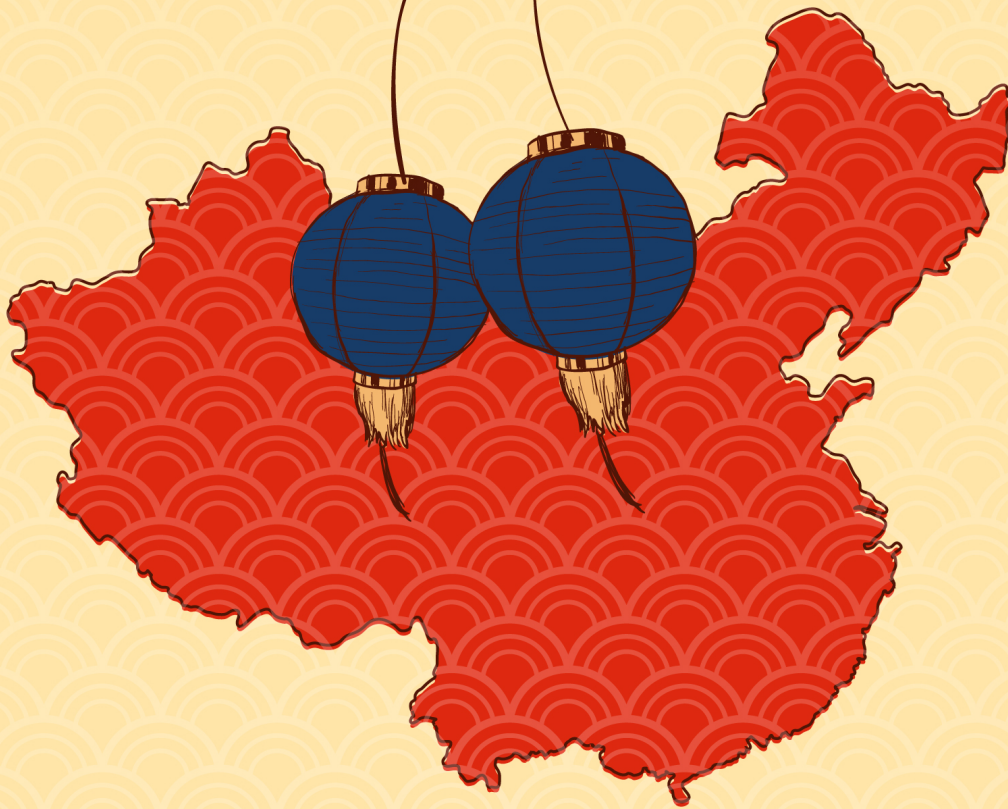


# SUMMARY

## CHINA IN TEN WORDS

YU HUA



# **Summary of China in Ten Words by Yu Hua**

Written by Nicolas Stewart

Author Yu Hua presents ten essays based on the ten words he feels best sum up the modern state of his country, and his own life experience.

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# Introduction

It's often said that there are words in other languages that have no translation. This isn't technically true, but rather it means there are words that have no direct equivalent, but the meaning is not only understandable but often highly useful. Take the Japanese word *tsundoku*, it has no direct English equivalent, but means a person who buys new books before they finish reading the ones they already have. We all know someone like that, and by learning that the Japanese have a word for it helps us understand and relate to their culture in a new way.

There's also a flip side to this, words that translate directly but don't properly convey the differences in how we use them. For instance *shanzai* can be understood to mean "copycat" or "counterfeit", but those on their own don't give us a full understanding of the word, which for the Chinese both represents knockoff iPhones and designer bags, but can also refer to the feeling that China is lacking its own identity in a rapidly changing landscape.

# People

The first word Hua discusses is renmin which translates to “the people”. The author describes this word as an anomaly, simultaneously ubiquitous yet invisible in modern China. The people as a concept was central to the ideological paradigm of the Cultural Revolution. The people are what gave legitimacy to the revolution, the communist party argued. The people were who they served, they said. The people were who Mao Zedong, the leader of the communist revolution, represented. the people were who, well, the people must put before themselves.

In this sense renmin can be thought of as not just meaning people, but also concepts like “the greater good”, the sacrifice of the individual for the collective.

Hua says this was the first word he was ever taught, and that it was the central idea of his cultural identity, as well as the centerpiece of the cult of personality surrounding Mao. That Mao was the people, why did you need democracy if the people were already represented in government by Mao?

The two words, Mao and renmin were inextricably linked. To insult Mao was to insult the people, to fold a picture of Mao so that there was a crease across his face was an affront to the people and the people’s revolution.

The near religious usage of renmin continued after Mao’s death, up until 1989. Most of us have heard the name Tiananmen Square and likely know it was some sort of protest, but that undersells its size and importance. The protests were centered in Beijing and, much like protests going on in other communist countries at the time, were a call for a more open and democratic system. The initial catalyst was the death of a prominent political reformer named Hu Yaobang but they spirit and the demands of the protests went far beyond this.

They occurred in 400 Chinese cities, the number of protesters involved is kept secret but the deaths caused by military massacres is thought to be in

the thousands. Martial law was declared and despite protests in response to the crackdown, ultimately the reformist movement was crushed. Hua was himself a participant in the protests, and writes that after them renmin has become a hollow and rarely used word.

Despite what you might expect however, Hua expresses a nostalgia for the concept stating that in this new modern China “where money is king,” ‘the people’ have been “denuded of meaning by Chinese realities”.

# Leader

Even more so than renmin the word lingxiu is associated with Mao. Roughly meaning “leader” it refers not just to the head of a group, but to a symbol, a guide, a teacher. This was how Mao was portrayed and many Chinese genuinely believed it.

For many Mao was indeed a teacher and a symbol, more than just a man. And indeed to them, more than just a brutal dictator. When people complained about corruption in government, it was often from the perspective of something Chairman Mao was fighting rather than someone who was himself corrupt. When they criticized politicians, Mao was said to also be criticizing them as he was of course the people.

Naturally it's impossible to differentiate those who genuinely believed this from those who expressed those sentiments because they had to. But even so Mao was a symbol, an almost mythological figure that provided a sense of unity.

After he died lingxiu fell out of use, and while other heads of state have had varying levels of popularity and power, none have been dictators as Mao was. Much like Stalin and the USSR, China's actual governmental system is a type of oligarchy. The country is ruled by a small group of powerful people. But like Stalin, Mao was a de facto dictator with sole ruling power. There hasn't been this sort of figurehead since then, and many Chinese lament this fact as they view a country without a strong leader as a country without a direction.

These days lingxiu means leader in more or less the same way we use the word in English, simply the head of a group or company or industry. Hua makes a point to mention that polls show a majority of Chinese think the return of Mao would be a good thing, that the perspective of the Chinese is different from our western perspective.



# Reading

China has perhaps the longest history of literacy in the world. It was the first country to develop moveable type and paper books and at certain periods had the highest literacy rates in the world. However this rate waxed and waned, even in the modern day. In 2010 the literacy rate in China was 95%, compared to a rate of only 78% in 1990.

Hua's third word is yuedu, meaning reading, an important subject to a writer and novelist no doubt. Reading under communist rule was often complicated, the government strictly limited education in the humanities and social sciences, viewing them as a waste of time, and like most autocratic societies the list of books that were banned was extensive.

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Though getting your hands on a banned book was hardly an opportunity most concerned themselves with, as any book was a scarce commodity during Hua's childhood. Most banned books had been destroyed and in the eyes of the government the only book outside of technical textbooks that anyone needed were those containing the writings of Mao.

The author describes how, once he got older, occasionally rare copies of banned books would appear circulating among the kids in school. These were usually in very poor condition and the students, like medieval monks, would copy them down by hand and give them to each other.

After Mao's death in 1976 things began to become slightly more open in Chinese society. Many books were allowed to once again be printed and circulated, the Chinese public was starving for literature and a deep culture of reading began

The author ends this chapter with a lamentation however, stating that this love of reading has seemingly died out in modern China.

# Writing

The author says that by the late 70's when he was working as a dentist, his dream was to live "a loafer's life in the cultural center". This is his pithy way of describing his desire to become a writer. The government controlled all elements of the economy in China, including its art, so if you wished to be a painter or writer you had to send pieces to the Cultural Center hoping to be hired.

Hua had been writing in any way he could since he was young, which is why this chapter's word xiezuó is possibly the most personal of the book. In school Hua wrote plays and propaganda posters, and upon reaching adulthood he, like so many aspiring writers around the world, began sending stories off to literary magazines in hopes of being published.

His early writings were darkly surreal, often reminiscent of Kafka. An early short story of his, *On the Long Road at Eighteen*, tells the story of a young man on walk with no destination in mind but simply an overwhelming feeling of needing to get somewhere. On his journey he hitchhikes with a truck driver carrying a load of apples, when the truck breaks down a swarm of people on bicycles descend upon the truck, stealing the apples and stripping the truck bare.

Eventually he was published, and in 1983 joined the Cultural Center as a writer.

# Lu Xun

Hua's fifth word isn't technically a word at all, but rather a name. Lu Xun was the pen name of a writer named Zhou Shuren, who lived from 1881 to 1936. Lu Xun's writing was deeply influential after the 1919 May Fourth Movement, a series of protests by the Chinese public against the Japanese occupiers in Shandong and the Chinese government's overall weak response to the Treaty of Versailles. It was out of this movement that the communist revolution really began.

Because of this Lu Xun was one of the few writers that was widely available to read during the Cultural Revolution. And much like Che in Cuba, if one wanted to criticize the government or others in an argument you had to couch your argument in terms such as "Lu Xun would never agree with this".

However Hua didn't come to appreciate Lu Xun's writing until much later in life. Ironic considering the number of similarities between them, they both satirize and criticize Mandarin culture, they both have dealt with censorship, and they both have an almost paradoxically deep love for their country.

# Revolution

Hua relays the story of seeing his elementary school teachers revealing that one of the other teachers was the daughter of a landlord. This utterly destroyed her career and Hua recalls the sick feeling he felt observing how gleeful these adults were about tearing down another.

Geming means revolution, but it also refers to instability, to risk taking, and to exaggeration. Getting ahead requires geming, the government making exaggerated claims about the economy is related to geming, and Hua tells us how disturbing he finds it that revolution seems to involve such little solidarity.

Despite its ostensibly collectivist ideology the Chinese government, and economy, have always involved immense infighting. Exaggerations about one's own results, accusations about another's, officials refusing to sign or seal documents other officials need.

Even the government as a whole does this, despite the famines of the mid-20th century the communist government regularly claimed it was producing record breaking amounts of food. This continues even today, there are entire cities that are virtually empty, created purely to artificially boost the construction industry and create the appearance of prosperity.

More millionaires exist than any other country, yet tens of millions of people, including college graduates, are unemployed. Geming can also mean instability, and it seems that instability, and the illusion of stability, are central themes in Chinese society.

# Disparity

Despite the communist revolution being about the poor rising up against the rich, chaju meaning disparity is a central feature of modern China. It may have the 2nd most billionaires of any country on earth, but the per capita GDP is only \$16,000, compared to \$91,000 in nearby Singapore.

This degree of poverty has given rise to extensive black and gray markets, where both legitimate and stolen goods are sold illegally without proper permits. And while the economy is bigger than ever, the wealth disparity today is much larger than during the Maoist era. Hua himself comments about how despite living through eras of literal famine he sees much more desperation, and much less cooperation and solidarity, among people in China today.

In this environment one must wonder what the purpose of all the new wealth and abundance is, if it doesn't actually benefit society as a whole.

# Grassroot

In English the word grassroots tends to refer to bottom up social and political movements. Movements that start organically at the lowest levels of society.

In China caogen, which literally means the roots of grass, refers more to the concept of social mobility. Someone who has come from peasantry and becomes an entrepreneur or other self-made success.

While this is a familiar story to us in the west, the level of the lowest peasant is far poorer than we're used to, and the things you have to do to climb the ladder might often seem troublesome or even bizarre. China has many stories of wealthy success stories who made their fortunes by buying and selling blood, engage in shady business practices, or find ways to turn trash into valuable commodities.

In many ways this isn't a new story in communist China. While in the modern era people become rich due to private enterprise, in the Maoist era it was via raising through the ranks of government.

Though this distinction is not quite as different as it might appear at first. The government is still deeply involved in the economy and the rich tend to often be involved in politics, and the politicians often use their positions to become rich. For instance Ma Huateng, the richest man in China, is also a delegate in congress.

And much like the Maoist era, these meteoric rises are often accompanied by rapid falls. Fan Bingbing, the highest paid celebrity in China, went missing for 3 months before announcing she was being fined over \$100 million for tax evasion.

# Copycat

The word shanzhai means copycat, it is used to refer to people, like the term is in English, and also used to refer to knock off and counterfeit products. But it doesn't necessarily have the same negative implication as in English. Knock off products are a major part of the Chinese economy as the Chinese government doesn't prohibit or punish companies manufacturing products that use the IP of foreign companies. It provides access to clones of iPhones and computers and so at a much cheaper price.

It is common and completely ordinary to hear phrases like "Shanzhai iPhone kanguo ma?" – "Have you seen my copycat iPhone?". Though shanzai goes beyond just products, it can refer to doing a job without proper qualifications, it can refer to plagiarism. And generally even these are accepted, maybe not endorsed but tolerated.

Hua makes a connection to this and the general rhetoric of the revolution, if you have the ability to back up your shanzhai with power then it doesn't matter. He also says this push in the economic world to shirk government regulations and make being fake a socially acceptable means of getting ahead is itself a new form of revolution.

Hua has even practiced this himself, neither he nor the dentist he originally worked for had any formal dental or medical training. They'd learn through trial and error and were closer to 19th century barbers that pulled teeth than they were doctors.

Much of the book is concerned with the lack of identity in China, and for Hua shanzhai is integral to this problem. Being fake, being phony, is so pervasive and creates a culture that is nothing but a facade lacking any authenticity.

# Bamboozle

Huyou is a verb, its literal translation refers to shaking or swaying, such as a tree in the wind or a ship at sea. However in modern China it has come to mean exaggerating and overselling, similar to the word bamboozle.

Not dissimilar to the philosophy of sideshow promoter and legendary conman P.T. Barnum with the notion that “a sucker is born every minute”, the philosophy of huyou is about saying whatever you need to get ahead and Hua describes it as the most relevant term to describe modern China.

Coined in its modern form by Chinese comedian Zhao Benshan who used the metaphor of selling crutches to a healthy man who doesn't need them by bamboozling him into thinking he does, huyou embodies much of the zeitgeist of the New China.

Hua relays the case of a business owner who lied in order to secure ad time before the 7 o'clock evening news, only to turn around and demand the network run the ad for free lest he reveal they had given ad time to a conman. It worked and despite being obvious fraud and coercion it was seen as simply being an example of what it takes to get ahead.



## Final Summary

Hua himself sums up his thoughts on modern China by stating “Here, where everything is tinged with the mysterious logic of absurdist fiction, Kafka or Borges might feel quite at home.” He contemplates that perhaps he should “write such a story myself. Bamboozletown might be its title.”

Modern China is an exercise in contrasts, an ostensibly communist nation in which everyone is encouraged to exaggerate, copy, and bamboozle in order to benefit themselves as individuals. Hua often seems to view the largest issue as being the end of empathy, of a country that is no longer a community. Wherein disparity and rising from the grassroots of society are justified by, and used to justify, creating copycats and ripoffs, bamboozling, and forgetting the people.



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