

# THE *Current*

April 2, 2008

[Andrea Estrada](#)

## **New Books by UCSB Faculty Members Examine Aspects of Art and Life in Asia**

Four faculty members at the University of California, Santa Barbara have recently published new books that examine various aspects of art and life in Asia. The books include a memoir focused on the period of Chiang-Kai-shek's Nationalist regime, a social history of artisans in early China, a study of how American literature is enmeshed with that of China and other Asian countries, and the translation of a novel by Chinese author Wang Anyi.

· In "The Bitter Sea" (HarperCollins, 2008), Charles N. Li, a professor of linguistics, explores both the complex relationship between a father and son and the immense gulf that separates the East Asian world from the West. Li, born near the beginning of World War II, was the youngest son of a wealthy Chinese government official. By the time he was 21, however, he saw his family's fortunes dashed when Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalists came to power in 1945, transforming his father from a powerful official to a prisoner jailed for treason. Li survived a year in a dangerous Nanjing slum and watched from his aunt's Shanghai apartment as the Communist army marched in and seized the city in 1948. He experienced both the heady materialism of the decadent foreign "white ghosts" in British Hong Kong and the crippling starvation within the harsh confines of a Communist reform school. In the process, he re-created himself from the dutiful Chinese son seeking love from a harsh,

manipulative father to an independent Chinese American.

- In his book "Artisans in Imperial China" (University of Washington Press, 2007), Anthony J. Barbieri-Low, an assistant professor of early Chinese history, combines historical, epigraphic, and archaeological analysis to study the social history of early Chinese artisans. Early China is best known for the dazzling terracotta figures, gilt-bronze lamps, and other material remnants of the past unearthed during archaeological excavations. Often, however, these artifacts are viewed without regard to the social context in which they were created. Barbieri-Low examines the position of artisans within early Chinese society and analyzes their social status, social mobility, and the role they played in the early Chinese economy. Further, he steps into their workshops to understand their training, their tools, and the workplace hazards they faced. Following their wares to the marketplace, he investigates some of the marketing techniques employed by artisans and merchants, including such startlingly modern practices as family trademarks, rhyming jingles, and knockoffs of royal products.

- Yunte Huang, a professor of English, explores the relationship between American and Asian literature in "Transpacific Imaginations: History, Literature, Counterpoetics" (Harvard University Press, 2008) Huang argues in the book that the Pacific informs American literature more than is generally acknowledged. He begins by addressing Western encounters with the Pacific -- examining Herman Melville's "Moby Dick" as a Pacific work, noting Henry Adams's exclusion of his travels in Japan and the Pacific basin from his autobiography, and comparing Mark Twain to the writer-historian Liang Qichao. Huang then turns to Asian American encounters with the Pacific, concentrating on the "Angel Island" poems, a collection of poetry written by Chinese immigrants on the walls of the Angel Island Immigration Station in San Francisco Bay between 1910 and 1940. He also examines works by contemporary writers Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Araki Yasusada.

- In "The Song of Everlasting Sorrow" (Columbia University Press, 2008), a novel by Chinese writer Wang Anyi, the main character is Wang Qiyao, a young girl raised in the crowded, labyrinthine alleys of Shanghai's working-class neighborhoods. Co-translated by Michael Berry, an associate professor of East Asian languages and cultural studies at UCSB, and Santa Barbara resident Susan Chan Egan, the book follows Wang Qiyao's infatuation with the glitz and glamour of 1940s Hollywood and her quest for fame through the Miss Shanghai beauty pageant. This fleeting moment of stardom offered by the pageant becomes the pinnacle of her life, and Wang Qiyao

spends the next four decades indulging in the decadent pleasures of pre-liberation Shanghai. She emerges in the 1980s as the purveyor of "old Shanghai" -- a living incarnation of a new, commodified nostalgia that prizes splendor and sophistication.

---

## **About UC Santa Barbara**

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.