

Crafted Over a Decade: An Interview with Shi Deliang, Author of Dream of the Mustard Seed

Wang Zuyou^δ

ABSTRACT

Shi Deliang (史德亮), Ph.D., is both an accomplished engineer and a distinguished writer. He was awarded the "Best PhD" accolade by the American Institute of Chemical Engineers and holds permanent membership in the Chinese Writers Association of America. His magnum opus, *Dream of the Mustard Seed* (《芥子梦》), is a 100-chapter historical novel exceeding 800 pages and comprising over 600,000 words. Spanning the period from 1900 to 2000, the novel chronicles China's profound transformations during this era, encompassing pivotal events such as the late Qing dynasty, the Xinhai Revolution, the Anti-Japanese War, the founding of the People's Republic of China, and the Reform and Opening-Up era. Dr. Shi devoted more than a decade to meticulously crafting and revising this work to ensure its historical accuracy and narrative depth. The novel's title draws inspiration from the philosophical concept of the mustard seed, symbolizing how something small can encapsulate vastness—a theme that resonates across both Eastern and Western philosophies. This metaphor underscores the novel's ambition to encapsulate a century of Chinese history through the lens of a single family's experiences.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Wang Zuyou (hereinafter referred to as "Wang"): Hello, Dr. Shi, it is a great honor to conduct this written interview on behalf of the editorial board of the Journal of Translating China. Your

distinguished achievements in both engineering and literature serve as an inspiration to many.

I understand that you hold a Ph.D. in Engineering and have been bestowed with the Best Ph.D. Award by the American Institute of Chemical Engineers, one of the most prestigious accolades in

the field. Additionally, you are a permanent member of the Chinese Writers Association of America and the author of the acclaimed 600,000-word novel *Dream of the Mustard Seed*, which was awarded the “Film and TV Literature Award” at the 2nd World Chinese Film & TV Festival. Your work has also attracted significant attention from prominent media outlets, including interviews with Phoenix TV’s America Channel and the People’s Daily Overseas Edition.

Achieving excellence in both engineering and literature—fields often regarded as distinct—is indeed a rare and remarkable accomplishment. Could you kindly introduce yourself and share the insights behind your exceptional success across these diverse domains?

Shi Deliang (hereinafter referred to as “Shi”): First and foremost, I would like to extend my heartfelt gratitude to Professor Wang and the editorial board of the *Journal of Translating China** for granting me this opportunity to share my experiences.

I was born and raised in China, where I developed a deep-rooted connection to my cultural heritage. Subsequently, I pursued my Ph.D. in Chemical Engineering at the University of Pittsburgh. Upon completing my doctoral studies, I embarked on a career as a global engineer with a multinational corporation, which provided me with the invaluable opportunity to travel extensively and collaborate with colleagues from diverse cultural backgrounds.

These international experiences have significantly broadened my perspective, fostering profound reflections on my Chinese heritage and its role within the global cultural landscape. The contrasts and intersections between Chinese culture and those encountered abroad inspired me to explore these themes more deeply.

Motivated by this introspection, I resolved to channel my insights into writing a novel that examines cultural dynamics. Although I lack formal training in literature, my passion for articulating the intricacies and complexities of cultural identity and exchange has driven me to undertake this endeavor.

Wang: Composing a 600,000-word novel without formal training in literature is indeed a remarkable achievement. Could you elaborate on how you managed to accomplish this feat?

Additionally, had you published any literary works prior to this novel?

Shi: Prior to the publication of *Dream of the Mustard Seed*, I had not released any significant literary works. My academic pursuits in Chemical Engineering required a steadfast commitment to research. During my Ph.D. studies, I concentrated extensively on scientific investigation, engaging with technical literature, and publishing research papers. At that time, I authored six peer-reviewed articles, which honed my writing skills—albeit in a scientific rather than literary context.

I am convinced that the clarity and structure inherent in my research papers played a pivotal role in their acceptance by high-impact journals, ultimately earning me the Best Ph.D. Award from the American Institute of Chemical Engineers. Intriguingly, the rigorous academic training I underwent left an indelible mark on my novel. Readers may observe a certain precision in the writing style, which reflects my background in technical research.

Although I do not professionally work in the literary field, I have always harbored a profound passion for literature. Since childhood, I have been an avid reader of classical Chinese works, including the Four Great Classical Novels, as well as Western literary masterpieces. Over the years, reading has remained my most cherished pastime.

After transitioning into the corporate world, my company discouraged the external publication of technical papers. Nevertheless, the writing habit cultivated during my doctoral studies persisted. Consequently, I redirected my creative energies toward literature as a new outlet for expression. Initially, my intention was to compose something concise. However, as ideas continued to emerge, the work naturally expanded in scope. Ultimately, it evolved into a 600,000-word novel.

Wang: I understand that you dedicated ten years to writing this novel—an exceptionally long period. Were there moments when you considered abandoning the project?

Shi: When I embarked on this journey, my initial plan was to create a brief and straightforward piece. At that time, I did not contemplate the duration required. I simply wrote whenever I had spare moments after work. After about a year, I realized that the novel was developing into a much

more substantial work, and I still lacked clarity regarding the total time needed for completion.

To make further progress, I engaged in a discussion with my wife and sought her support. I explained that I would require a more focused commitment to writing over the subsequent two years. She graciously agreed and assumed additional household responsibilities and childcare duties to accommodate my dedication to the novel.

However, as the writing extended into the fifth year without a foreseeable conclusion, her patience began to diminish. She started to vocalize her frustrations, and eventually, she expressed reluctance to see me working on the novel at home. This marked a particularly challenging period for both of us.

Even amidst these challenges, I never seriously entertained the idea of abandoning the project. Instead, I revisited our arrangement and assumed greater responsibilities at home—sharing household chores and chauffeuring our children to their activities. I continued writing whenever possible: at the badminton court, during swimming lessons, in waiting rooms—every available moment became an opportunity to advance the novel.

Wang: It appears that the writing process was both protracted and demanding. How did you maintain your motivation throughout?

Shi: As I progressed with the novel, I gradually came to realize that I occupied a truly unique position in telling this story—and this awareness became a significant source of motivation for me. I viewed it as both an honor and a responsibility.

Firstly, the novel is not merely a work of literature; it also integrates elements of science. Within the context of modern Chinese history, science has arguably played a more pivotal role than literature in shaping the nation's destiny. The Western powers compelled China to open its doors primarily due to their advancements in technology and science. However, traditional Chinese literature rarely addresses scientific themes. While there are numerous classical Chinese novels, very few explore scientific topics. Given my background—a Ph.D. in Chemical Engineering—I considered myself uniquely qualified to meaningfully incorporate science into a literary narrative.

Second, the narrative spans both China and the United States. I was raised in a profoundly

traditional Chinese household and did not leave my home province until attending university. My upbringing was entirely steeped in Chinese culture—its traditions, history, music, art, and folklore. America once appeared to me as a distant and abstract concept. I formerly believed that Chinese and American cultures were fundamentally incompatible. However, after residing in the U.S. for over two decades and visiting 40 of its 50 states, I have developed an intimate understanding of American society. I am as familiar with my neighborhood in Chicago as I am with my hometown in China. This bicultural experience enables me to authentically represent both worlds.

Third, the book extends beyond merely Chinese and Western cultures. It also delves into Indian, African, Latin American, and Native American traditions. In China, when individuals refer to “Western culture,” they often exclusively think of the U.S. and Europe, frequently overlooking other global cultures. As a global engineer, I have had the rare opportunity to experience many of these cultures firsthand. This novel provided me with the platform to explore and interconnect them, aiming to foster a more comprehensive sense of world culture.

Fourth, I believe I am uniquely positioned to undertake this literary endeavor. Over a century ago, Liang Qichao envisioned a novel that harmonized Chinese and Western cultures. He commenced writing *Xin Zhongguo Wei Lai Ji* (The Future of New China) in 1902 but left it unfinished due to shifting political priorities. Later, Lu Xun aspired to merge literature and science into a grand novel. However, his literary pursuits were constrained by the sociopolitical upheavals of his time, limiting him to writing short stories. In contrast, I live in an era of relative peace, possess a stable career, and can dedicate sufficient time to writing. If I encounter challenges in this endeavor, I can only imagine the far greater obstacles faced by others in the past.

With these motivations, I felt I was creating something meaningful—something that could resonate with and benefit a wide readership. This sense of purpose sustained me, regardless of how long or arduous the journey became.

Wang: Why did you choose the title *Dream of the Mustard Seed* for your novel?

Shi: The title *Dream of the Mustard Seed* emerged after much contemplation. This novel encompasses a vast array of cultures—both ancient and modern, Eastern and Western. I reflected on what could serve as a convergence point for such diverse elements.

The “mustard seed” is an exceedingly small object, yet it embodies profound philosophical concepts. In ancient times, the Song dynasty poet Xin Qiji wrote, “Do not speak of Sumeru in a mustard seed; observe the great roc soaring.” Today, modern science reveals that the universe originated from a singularity—a point of infinite density and infinitesimal size. This singularity, despite its minuscule nature, contained the potential for the entire cosmos, much like the symbolic mustard seed.

In Chinese Buddhism, there exists the concept of “a mustard seed containing Mount Sumeru,” which illustrates the idea that the immense can reside within the infinitesimal. Similarly, in Christianity, the mustard seed represents faith: “If you have faith as small as a mustard seed...” The Quran also mentions that even deeds as small as a mustard seed are accounted for in divine judgment. Thus, the mustard seed serves as a symbolic intersection across cultures and eras, bridging Eastern and Western philosophies.

As for “dream,” it evokes a realm that transcends the boundaries of reality and illusion, akin to *Dream of the Red Chamber*. The “dream” in my title reflects this duality, capturing the intricate blend of reality and imagination woven throughout the novel.

Wang: Could you provide a concise introduction to your novel *Dream of the Mustard Seed*?

Shi: *Dream of the Mustard Seed* is a sweeping epic that chronicles the lives of five generations of the Yang family, set against the backdrop of a century of profound transformation in China, spanning from 1900 to 2000. This period witnessed a series of momentous events, including the fall of the Qing Dynasty, the Xinhai Revolution, the War of Resistance against Japan, the Chinese Civil War, the founding of the People’s Republic of China, the Cultural Revolution, the Reform and Opening-Up Policy, and the return of Hong Kong to China. Each of these events represents a significant milestone

in China’s 5,000-year history, and this novel portrays them through the intimate lens of one family’s journey.

Much like Feng Menglong’s *Chronicles of the Eastern Zhou Kingdoms*, which recounts five centuries of the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, or Luo Guanzhong’s *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, which spans eighty years of turbulent history, *Dream of the Mustard Seed* seeks to encapsulate an entire century of China’s transformation. To the best of my knowledge, there has not previously been a comprehensive novel that narrates this century-long narrative in its entirety—until now.

This novel does not merely recount historical events; it explores the cultural, social, and personal dimensions of the era, interweaving narratives that embody the resilience and adaptability of the Chinese people. It stands as a tribute to the enduring spirit of a nation and its people during one of the most transformative centuries in their history.

Wang: It certainly sounds intriguing. Could you provide an overview of your novel *Dream of the Mustard Seed* to offer readers a glimpse into its narrative?

Shi: Certainly. This novel chronicles the experiences of five generations of the Yang family, set against the backdrop of everyday life in Shanhe Town. It depicts a century of profound transformation in Chinese society while examining diverse global civilizations.

At the Heavenly Assembly, the Buddha held up a mustard seed to symbolize the vastness of the universe encapsulated within the smallest particle. This mustard seed developed an aspiration to explore the human world, and under the guidance of the deity Guan Yu, it was directed to the Yang family in Shanhe Town, where it was fated to be reborn as Yang Jiezi—given that “Mustard Seed” translates to “Jie Zi” in Chinese.

Although small in size, Shanhe Town functions as a microcosm of China. Its name, which translates to “mountains and rivers,” encapsulates the essence of Chinese civilization. The town’s sixteen households correspond to the first sixteen surnames listed in the classic text “Hundred Family Surnames”: Zhao, Qian, Sun, Li; Zhou, Wu, Zheng, Wang; Feng, Chen, Chu, Wei; Jiang, Shen, Han, and Yang.

Yang Tianjian, after successfully passing the military examination, was appointed to Guangxi for border defense duties. He assisted General Feng Zicai in achieving a decisive victory against the French during the Sino-French War, notably at the Battle of Zhennan Pass. However, when the Qing court ordered the withdrawal of troops from Vietnam, Yang Tianjian voiced his objections and was consequently dismissed from his post. He returned to Shanhe Town on horseback and dedicated himself to establishing a construction enterprise, which would later amass substantial wealth for his son, Yang Jiting.

Yang Jiting inherited his father's enterprise; however, the nation's defeat and subsequent territorial concessions precipitated economic decline, rendering the construction business largely obsolete. During the Boxer Rebellion, Jiang Sheng led the Boxers in attacking Christians. Li Zhiliang and his family were rescued from peril by a drunken Yang Jiting. In gratitude, the Li family arranged for their daughter, Li Youhui, to marry Yang Jiting. Later, while overseeing the renovation of the Guan Yu Temple, Yang Jiting was provoked into overexertion by rival builders, which ultimately led to his death from exhaustion, leaving behind his widow and child.

Following the passing of his father, Yang Fengye's family descended into dire poverty. Despite his intellectual gifts and scholarly potential, the turbulent socio-political climate and his unwavering refusal to compromise hindered his prospects, leaving him unmarried well into his thirties. Zhou Yuzhen, the highly capable daughter of affluent merchant Zhou Shengchang, skillfully managed the family business but remained unmarried due to her large feet—a trait stigmatized by traditional societal norms. Ultimately, she married the destitute yet principled Yang Fengye. This union proved unexpectedly advantageous; during the Communist era, their modest social standing shielded them from political persecution. Together, they had a son, Yang Zhixing.

Owing to financial difficulties, Yang Zhixing left school at an early age. Jiang Gangtie, a principled veteran revolutionary, had a daughter named Jiang Jiajie, who demonstrated exceptional academic prowess but was unable to afford high school tuition due to economic constraints. After leaving school, she married Yang Zhixing. During the reform era, Yang Zhixing worked as a coal miner and survived a catastrophic flood in the mine. Following

this life-altering event, he dedicated himself to studying traditional Chinese medicine, which gradually improved the family's financial situation. Their primary concern, however, remained their son, Yang Jiezi, who appeared to lack intellectual acumen.

Although he appeared to be simple-minded, Yang Jiezi pursued his education with unwavering diligence. He eventually earned a Ph.D. in the United States and traveled extensively across various countries. One evening, while abroad, he was overcome by an intense longing for his homeland and family, which prompted his decision to return. On a high-speed train journeying back to Shanhe Town, he gazed out at the rapidly changing landscape, reflecting on his great-great-grandfather Yang Tianjian's arduous horseback journey home over a century ago. He marveled at the profound transformations that time had brought about.

Wang: You mentioned that you integrated Chinese and Western cultures in your novel. Could you elaborate on a specific example?

Shi: Certainly. In one chapter, I explore the Confucian concept of the Six Arts—rites (礼), music (乐), archery (射), charioteering (御), calligraphy (书), and mathematics (数)—which were fundamental disciplines for nurturing a well-rounded individual in ancient China. I establish parallels between these arts and contemporary university majors, thereby providing a bridge between traditional and modern educational philosophies.

Rites (礼): Comparable to studies in ethics or philosophy, with a focus on cultivating moral conduct and fostering social harmony.

Music (乐): Aligned with music or performing arts programs, emphasizing emotional expression and cultural appreciation.

Archery (射): Similar to physical education or sports science, promoting physical health and instilling discipline.

Charioteering (御): Analogous to engineering or mechanical studies, involving the control and coordination of complex systems.

Calligraphy (书): Associated with literature or fine arts, emphasizing creativity and refining communication skills.

Mathematics (数): Closely aligned with modern mathematics or data science, concentrating on analytical and quantitative reasoning.

By correlating these ancient disciplines with contemporary fields of study, I seek to demonstrate the enduring value of a holistic education and how traditional Chinese educational philosophies can be meaningfully integrated into today's academic landscape.

Wang: Could you elaborate on how you integrated a rigorous, research-based methodology—reminiscent of the process involved in composing a scientific paper—into the development of your novel?

Shi: Certainly. A noteworthy example is my portrayal of the Battle of Niangziguan during the invasion of China by the Eight-Nation Alliance. Historical accounts of this battle differ considerably. Some sources, such as Qing military reports, assert that Qing forces inflicted substantial casualties—up to 1,800—on the Eight-Nation Alliance. Conversely, other records, including Japanese military documents, contend that these figures were grossly exaggerated, with actual casualties being relatively minimal.

To establish a more precise and reliable account, I undertook extensive research, consulting numerous original sources, including the Draft History of the Qing Dynasty, the diary of Alfred von Waldersee—the German field marshal who commanded the Eight-Nation Alliance—as well as reports from the Chicago Daily Tribune dated 1901. Through the meticulous cross-referencing of these varied accounts, I was able to reconstruct the event with enhanced accuracy and depth, thereby ensuring that my narrative remained both credible and engaging.

This meticulous approach is reflective of my engineering background, wherein precision and evidence-based analysis are of paramount importance. I firmly believe that applying such rigor to historical fiction not only enhances its authenticity but also pays tribute to the complexity of the events and the individuals who experienced them.

Wang: As a Chinese individual who has resided abroad and extensively traveled to various countries, how have these experiences influenced your literary work?

Shi: As a Chinese individual residing abroad, I have come to recognize that my literary work is enriched by a unique perspective that serves as a bridge between diverse cultures and experiences. This vantage point enables me to interact more deeply with individuals from varied backgrounds, thereby enhancing my comprehension of their histories and traditions. At the same time, it affords me the opportunity to reflect more thoughtfully on Chinese culture, allowing me to appreciate its uniqueness and resilience.

Prior to relocating to the United States, my understanding of American life was predominantly influenced by Hollywood films, which portrayed images of opulent homes and extravagant lifestyles. However, my experiences in the U.S. have unveiled a far more intricate reality. For example, during my Ph.D. studies, an American classmate once commented, "You're wealthy; I'm poor." Surprised by this statement, I responded, "I am not wealthy. Why do you say that?" He clarified, "Do you have student loans?" Upon learning that I did not, he explained, "That's precisely the point. You completed your education without incurring debt, whereas I owe hundreds of thousands of dollars. In comparison, you are financially better off than I am." He further disclosed that his parents divorced when he was young; his father remarried and had additional children, providing no financial support, while his unemployed mother was unable to offer financial assistance. This conversation profoundly altered my preconceived notions about American affluence.

In another instance, a Colombian friend conveyed his amazement at the level of safety in China. He remarked that in his home country, even driving during the day can pose significant risks due to the prevalence of robberies. He explained how entering certain areas could result in being ambushed by multiple vehicles. He further expressed regret that despite Colombia's rich endowment of resources—such as food, fruits, and minerals—the absence of security, compounded by governmental corruption and control by drug cartels, makes daily life perilous. With a sigh, he stated, "If only our country could achieve safety, it would truly be a paradise."

These narratives have significantly deepened my appreciation of China's achievements and stability. They inspire me to systematically document and disseminate these stories through my writing, with the aim of exploring the intricacies

of cultural identity and the multifaceted experiences of individuals across the globe.

Wang: Do you plan to continue pursuing literary creation in the future?

Shi: Yes, I intend to continue my literary pursuits in the future, though I regard myself as a writer with relatively limited output. On the one hand, I have professional responsibilities that occupy much of my time, leaving writing to be conducted during my limited spare hours. On the other hand, I maintain stringent standards for my work, and only those pieces that have undergone meticulous refinement and with which I am fully satisfied are presented to readers.

Take *Dream of the Mustard Seed* as an example. Over the course of its decade-long creation process, I meticulously revised the manuscript numerous times before finalizing it. At one stage, the fourth draft exceeded one million words in length. Subsequently, I made substantial cuts, deleting over 400,000 words, to ultimately shape the current version, which spans more than 600,000 words. This rigorous and extensive revision process has led many to describe me as someone who “forged a sword over ten years,” a phrase that aptly encapsulates my approach to literary creation and may well define my future endeavors in this field.

Wang: This conversation has been highly enlightening. While there is significantly more to explore, time constraints necessitate that we continue this discussion at another opportunity. Thank you for sharing your valuable insights, and I extend my wishes for continued success in your literary endeavors.

Shi: Thank you, Professor Wang, for your insightful and thought-provoking questions.

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