

# An essential expedition

Critics have lauded Adam Williams' novel, *The Emperor's Bone*, as a chance to re-examine a largely ignored period of China's past, writes Mei Jia.

Hong Kong-born British businessman and explorer Adam Williams has two lifelong fascinations - China and writing.

He combined the two to produce a historical novel about his family's experience in the country in the 1920s.

"My family lived through the wars among the Chinese warlords in Northern China in that time," Williams says. "They knew the threats of Chang Tso-lin (one of the key warlords then). My mother used to scare me when I was naughty with 'You'd better watch out or Chang Tso-lin will come and get you', because she was warned with the same words when she was young."



At his home in Beijing, Adam Williams talks about his new release in Chinese, that is based on his family history in China. Jiang Dong / China Daily

And after its launch in Chinese, the novel, *The Emperor's Bone*, caused a buzz among both Chinese critics and readers for presenting the chance to re-examine a significant period that has been recorded only briefly in history books.

"The book caught me because I'm eager to know what China really was like in the 1920s, especially with the stories told from a foreign perspective," says Huang Xiaochu, president of Jiangsu Phoenix Literature and Art Publishing House, the publisher of its Chinese version.

Williams, the 60-year-old Chief Representative of Jardine Matheson in China, is the fourth generation of a family who has lived and worked in the country since the late 19th century.

China and its history have inspired him with a series of three novels, because to Williams, his family history is

part of Chinese history.

"My family lived through all those incidents and was affected," he says. "I grew up understanding a lot about the Chinese history of that period and my family history, too."

One important source for him is stories told at the dinner table by his grandmother and mother, about their life in China. Thus the "umbrella war" his grandmother experienced on a train becomes one scene in his novel. And his characters have the same professions - doctors and railway people - as his family members.

But more important to him, China in the 1920s was a collection of mythological schemes that T.S. Eliot explored in his celebrated poem *The Waste Land*.

"The '20s are nowadays a forgotten period in Chinese history, one of anarchy that preceded the better-known '30s when China was invaded by Japan but they were the crucible years during which all the movements that were later to affect China's history - Nationalist and Communist - were established," Williams writes in the afterword.

"Then, all the seeds for the future transformation were planted, but we didn't know which one was going to hold and be fertile," he says.

In a period when the old system has gone and the new is yet to be established, people get lost and destroyed, as "they go down wrong paths for good reasons", he says.

"That's the wasteland!"

So in the novel, the two female protagonists explore how people go through the wasteland to heal each other and themselves.

British girl Catherine Cabot went to China to seek her father, who was missing, and was caught between love affairs with two brothers. There she met again with her former classmate at Oxford, Yu Fu-kuei, a Chinese girl who was "spying for the wrong man".

The two women's interwoven stories happen with the outburst of historic events including the Northern Expedition and the assassination of Chang Tso-lin, and move on with the tension of a spy story in which Yu is betrayed by her lover, who's also a spy for her enemy.

"This book is poetic and romantic in parts, harrowing and tragic in others. It's not exactly light holiday reading, as it requires a hefty amount of concentration, but persevere when the going gets tough and you'll be richly rewarded," comments the UK's *Heat* magazine.

Williams' great grandfather David Muir came to China in 1895 as a missionary doctor. He was said to have earned a golden dragon medal from the Qing (1644-1911) government for his contributions to defeating plagues.

Muir's experience inspired Williams' novel *The Palace of Heavenly Pleasure*, set during the period of the Boxer Movement, 20 years before the events in *The Emperor's Bones*.

It's a novel about the moral choices of two men, an idealist western doctor and a pragmatic Chinese official, who were enemies but had to cooperate to fight a narrow escape.

Williams is also known for *The Book of The Alchemist*, another historical novel he wrote based on the Spanish civil war in 1938.

His works are well accepted and now translated in 15 countries.

Born to a father who was a leading businessman and public figure in Hong Kong and a mother who had once been a model, Williams says his fondness for writing came very early at age 8. His debut was a play he wrote and directed when he was still in middle school, before going on to Oxford University where he was trained in English language and literature.

After school, he went on expeditions from which he fostered a writing habit.

"I tried to follow the adventurous course and I spent a cold winter trying to sell encyclopedias in North London in a vain attempt to raise money for a camel expedition across the Sahara. I only managed to sell one," he writes.

"And my farseeing father, who had realized the importance of a newly reawakened China, persuaded me that I should return to Hong Kong to learn Chinese," he adds.

He tried journalism and was finally involved in trade like his father, for which he received an O.B.E. in 1999.

In between, he never abandoned his dream of expeditions and in 1995 he organized a camel expedition to the Taklamakan Desert to locate lost ancient towns. He also participated in a 40-day ride in a vintage car rally from London to Beijing in 2000.

Williams, who speaks fluent Mandarin, says he feels very lucky to have lived in China for more than 30 years. He remembers the dim city lights decades ago when he was first there and people having eye problems because of malnutrition.

"The years here in China that my family and I experienced and witnessed is almost like hundreds of years of European history squeezed into a very short period," he says. "Never in world history has there been such changes and growth that also affected so many people and in such limited time." He believes a good country is one that looks after its people.

"To me, the greatest achievement China has made is that its people have an ordinary life, and they're ordinary, boring people," he jokes, adding "that's marvelous."



Williams is always adventurous and once joined a vintage car rally as well as a desert exploration. Provided to China Daily