

Trading up for a writer's life

By Andrew Moody | China Daily



Adam Williams has combined two remarkable careers: he's both one of the most prominent British business figures in China and a bestselling Chinese historical fiction writer at the same time. [Photo by Zou Hong/China Daily]

Adam Williams has had two remarkable careers: one as a prominent British business figure in China and another as a best-selling author of Chinese historical fiction.

Adam Williams believes it is wrong to impose the values of today on historical figures of the past.

The 64-year-old author and businessman argues that people are very much prisoners of their own times.

"I am a historical novelist. If I am writing about the 1100s, the people then were different. They thought in a different way. They had different standards and the society they lived in had different values," he says.

Williams, who was speaking in his expansive book-lined apartment off Upper East Street in Beijing, has combined two remarkable careers: he's both one of the most prominent British business figures in China and a bestselling Chinese historical fiction writer at the same time.

He says the current trend of accusing historical figures of being supporters of slavery, racist colonialists or of some other beliefs now deemed politically incorrect could render the very process of writing about the past impossible.

"If you villainize every slaver in the United States before the Civil War or in Europe or anywhere else, then the logic of that is that every Roman who ever lived was a villain. There becomes no virtue in anyone from the past," he says.

Williams remains best known for his trilogy, *The Palace of Heavenly Pleasure*, *The Emperor's Bones* and *The Dragon's Tail*, all published more than a decade ago and which fictionalize China's history from just before the Boxer Rebellion in the late 19th century to the "cultural revolution" (1966-76) and beyond. The novels, which feature Westerners living in China, partly reflect his own history since he is the fourth generation of his family to have lived in China, starting with his two maternal great grandfathers - one a railway engineer who came to China in 1893 and the other a medical missionary who arrived three years later.

"My grandmother used to tell tales of their lives here and I thought some of them could be shifted and shaped into authentic characters. I didn't tell their actual stories though. I made up my own. It is probably a good thing that none of them are alive to read the books though," he laughs.

The first one of the series sold 100,000 copies and in bookstores around the world they still hold their positions on the shelves of this narrow genre of Chinese historical fiction written by Westerners.

"China until recently has been rather sort of a specialist interest. There were quite a few writers in the 1920s. You have Robert Van Gulik with his Judge Dee historical mysteries in the 1930s. Various journalists have also written novels," he says.

Williams, who was born in Hong Kong but went to Radley College, the English public school, and then Oxford University, where he read English (where the lecturers there

included Iris Murdoch and WH Auden), began his career as a journalist at the South China Morning Post in the late 1970s.

He quickly switched to business, however, finally ending up as group chief representative of Jardine Matheson, a company inextricably linked to China's history via its associations with the Opium Wars in the 19th century. He stood down in 2015 but remains an adviser.

"It has sort of moved on from firing people for not selling opium on a Sunday," he laughs. "It is a very modern company now, a services conglomerate now into real estate, insurance, hotels, retail and supermarkets. Many of Jardines' companies you know by their other names, like the Mandarin Oriental Hotel, for instance."

Williams, who still holds a number of other corporate positions, has had a ringside seat as China has emerged into a major economic power in the 40 years since Deng Xiaoping launched the reform and opening-up.

"After the recent (19th CPC National) Congress meeting, China in its new era is saying that it has world-class businesses, its own way of doing things and will take its place among the great nations of the world," he says.

Williams believes China's major initiatives such as the Belt and Road offer huge opportunities for the rest of the world to engage with the country.

"China is actually a stable state in the world compared to some others at the moment. There is a huge amount of investment coming out of China, even with the current capital controls," he says.

"I can only think how the Belt and Road could be good for Europe. China's door is open and I am surprised they (European governments) are not taking advantage of it."

Williams was also chairman of the British Chamber of Commerce in China in the late 1990s and now sees huge opportunities for China and his own country, the UK, to do a free trade agreement based around services.

"I remember going to a meeting once with Wang Qishan (now China's vice-president) and he was praising the City of London as being the greatest port in the world, despite not having any ships, docking or cargo going through it. This was because it provides the laws, the insurance and the finance for the shipping industry around the world," he says.

Williams' other big China connection is being the husband of Hong Ying, a very famous Chinese author in her own right.

"We met at the birthday party of a foreign correspondent friend of mine. I'd just had my first novel published and someone told me this woman was interested in writing so I very kindly told her how to write a synopsis, letters to editors and how to get a book going and she listened very politely and then left," he recalls.

"Someone then told me she had written numerous books that had been published in 20 different languages. I just wondered what she might have thought of this upstart."

The couple, who live in Beijing but have other homes in Chongqing (where Hong Ying is from) and in Italy, says they have different approaches to writing.

"She is a much more private writer. When I write something, I want the world to hear my brilliant prose. She keeps it very much inside herself," he says.

"We sometimes discuss our work. She did a wonderful job with the Chinese editions of my books, polishing the translations. The Chinese versions are probably much better than the English ones."

Williams says it took five years to write his first book, which runs to more than 800 pages, at weekends and during holidays.

"I never did it in company time. I used to say that I don't play golf at the weekends so I needed something else to do," he says.

Williams, who has published one other book, apart from the trilogy, set around the Spanish Civil War, *The Book of the Alchemist*, is now working on another novel.

"It is a sort of medieval detective story using some of the back story of the Spanish Civil War book. I was struggling with it but now it is going well," he says.

"I need to be alone and have quiet to write. It is not so much about having the time available but getting into the space where the story is in your mind."