

A look at what's on Chinese President Xi Jinping's shelves

Source: People's Daily and Global Times

During his speech at the Forum on Literature and Art in Beijing on October 15, 2014, Chinese President Xi Jinping called for writers to deepen their understanding of the significance of literature and art today. The president's call had a huge impact. The past two years since his speech has seen the publication of a large amount of outstanding Chinese literary works.

It's no secret that Xi has a passion for reading. On many different occasions he has mentioned literature from different cultures and countries. Back in 2013, in an interview with media from BRIC countries he said, "I have loads of hobbies, my favorite one is reading."

Influenced by China's ancient philosophy that to bring peace to the land one must first cultivate themselves, before moving on to manage their families and then govern the state, Xi decided early on in his life that if he wanted to cultivate himself reading would be the best choice.

Although found himself working in mountainous and rural areas when he was 15, Xi went out of his way to find as many books as possible. Xi once said that at the time there was a great atmosphere for reading among his fellows, so they would spend most of their spare time exchanging books with each other. Overseas classics such as *The Red and The Black* and *War and Peace*, and traditional Chinese works from the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties made their way onto his reading list.

"It can be said that, literally, I read nearly all the literary classics I could find during that time," Xi said.

Russian willpower

Considering the huge impact Russian literature has had on an entire generation in China, it should come as no surprise that during an interview with Russian media he was able to wow the Russian people with his knowledge of Russian literature.

According to a People's Daily article examining Xi's reading habits published on Thursday, classics such as *Eugene Onegin* by Alexander Pushkin, *A Hero of Our Time* by Mikhail Lermontov, and *Quiet Flows the Don* by Mikhail Sholokhov and *War and Peace* and *Resurrection* by Leo Tolstoy, all resonated with Xi.

"Dostoevsky is the deepest Russian writer, while Tolstoy is the widest. Comparing the two of them, I prefer Tolstoy," Xi said.

According to Xi, he once was inspired by Nikolai Chernyshevsky's work *What Is to Be Done?*, in which the leading character lives an ascetic life, even going so far as to sleep on a bed of nails to strengthen his will. Inspired, Xi and his fellows tried sleeping on their beds without

mattresses, going outside on rainy and snowy days and taking cold showers to strengthen their willpower.

Germany's deal with the devil

In general , German literature boasts magnificent works created by writers such as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Friedrich Schiller. Xi first came across Goethe's work at age 14 when he read *The Sorrows of Young Werther* .

During his time working in rural China , he walked 30 kilometers to borrow a copy of *Faust* from an educated youth that he knew. Perhaps it was the great lengths he went through to get the book , but he fell in love with it after reading it.

During one visit to Germany , Xi admitted to German Chancellor Angela Merkel and a group of German sinologists that the fertile imagination seen in *Faust* made it difficult for him to understand.

"Even Germans are unable to fully understand *Faust* , let alone you , " came their answer.

The wild spirit of the US

When it comes to the literature of the US , poetry anthology *Leaves of Grass* by Walt Whitman and novel *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain are both on Xi's reading list.

However , his favorite US author by far is Jack London , the author behind *The Call of the Wild* , *The Sea-Wolf* and *Love of Life* , the short story much loved by Lenin.

Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* impressed Xi a lot with its detailed description of the furious storm , huge waves ,small boat , old man and sharks. To better understand Hemingway's spirit , Xi looked for spots where Hemingway wrote the novel each time he visited Cuba. His first trip took him to a trestle bridge and the second to a bar where the author used to write.

"His (Hemingway) favorite drink is called the Mojito. It's made from rum and peppermint with ice and sugar added. The spirit described in *The Old Man and the Sea* is immortal , " the People's Daily article quoted Xi.

France's touching moments

Xi wasn't just charmed by France's rich literature , but also the country's history , philosophy and art. French classic works were some of the earliest books to be translated into Chinese , among these Stendhal's *The Red and The Black* and Honor éde Balzac's *The Human Comedy* caused quite a stir at the time.

However , it was the works of Victor Hugo that left the biggest impression on Xi. Both *Les*

Mis érables and *Ninety-Three* were set among the French Revolution. Xi once mentioned one of the moments that touched him the most was when Bishop Myriel helps Jean Valjean and encourages him to be a better man , "Great works have such a great power to move readers."

Contemporary British culture

During a visit to London in 2015 , Xi praised British culture and literature in a speech at a banquet , mentioning how popular literary greats such as Shakespeare and contemporary British TV shows such as *Downton Abbey* were in China.

According to a report by Phoenix TV , Xi prompted a round of applause when he mentioned *Downton Abbey* .

"Shakespeare , Wordsworth , Jane Austen and Charles Dickens have made Chinese people realize the charm of traditional British literature. Contemporary works including the 007 series , *Harry Potter* , *Sherlock* and *Downton Abbey* are also beloved by Chinese audiences , " Xi said.

"We should respect each other , learn from each other , and abandon all the pride and prejudice. Only by accomplishing this can we develop and flourish together."

Xi Jinping talks about Western literature

"Dostoevsky is the deepest Russian writer , while Tolstoy is the widest. Comparing two of them , I prefer Tolstoy."

"I like Sholokhov very much. His *And Quiet Flows the Don* reflects the changes of the time very deeply."

"The spirit described in *The Old Man and the Sea* is immortal."

"It is true that *Faust* is hard to understand due to its fertile imagination."

"Stendhal's *The Red and The Black* is very influential. But when it comes to descriptions of the world , works by Balzac and Maupassant are the best , for example Balzac's *The Human Comedy*".