Mo Yan and the Chinese Mind

Li Jingze

I

Mo Yan has been “canonized.” His huge appetite and tremendous energy, his joy and ruthlessness, his broad horizon and glamorous variety, and even his eccentricity have been the most important spectacles in the past two decades of modern literature written in the Chinese language.

Although he has enjoyed perhaps the highest literary renown and undergone repeated, sometimes even over-interpretation, he is not among the most favored or detested writers. In China, a reader might detest Wang Shuo for the latter’s offensiveness; or he might show his unrestrained admiration for Wang Anyi for she has offered him a way to visualize his experience and existence. However, it seems quite unlikely that he would treat Mo Yan with similar passions. It is true that Mo Yan, born in an era of intense cultural conflicts, has been encountering prejudice, misunderstanding, and determined opposition. But it is hard, for either his protesters or his admirers, to adopt a simple and consistent attitude toward him. Mo Yan’s broad horizon makes any definition elusive.

---

2 Wang Shuo (1958–) is a Beijing school Chinese writer. His works are noted for the presentation of rebellious behaviors on the part of the culturally confused generation after the “Cultural Revolution.”
3 Wang Anyi (1954–) is a Shanghai school Chinese woman writer. She usually gives vivid and detailed descriptions of ordinary city dwellers in her works.
We somewhat restructure our world outlook and define ourselves by means of admiring or detesting some writers. In this sense, a writer helps build the society’s self-awareness and he himself will definitely be classified and revised by social consciousness. This is a Borgesian scene: Books are produced one after another and piled up in a huge, dim library where librarians scurry like apparitions, shredding most of them after a brief glance and shelving the rest through a labyrinth of corridors.

Hence the question: Where should we shelve Mo Yan’s works? This supposed question indicates the complicated relationship between Mo Yan and his time, between his contemporary readers and literature.

II

Mo Yan rarely expresses his views on his own era directly. The novella *Shifu, You’ll Do Anything for a Laugh* is perhaps the most ambitious attempt to catch a contemporary event, which is certainly a failure. In the story, the old laid-off worker has to make a living in a quite ironic manner—to run a small trysting place in a backwoods for dating lovers. This plot construction implicitly transforms the social issue of unemployment into a comedy of desire—excreting (the idea of the love tryst was inspired by a pay toilet), peeping (Shifu kept watch outside the hut, glancing), flesh and cash (the two reinforce each other), center vs. border (to protest at the municipal hall or to survive on the outskirts), lawful vs. illegal (the love tryst may be illegal as it encourages illegitimate desires; it may be licensed—through the bribery of some expensive cigarettes). This series of subplots show that “Shifu tends to do anything for a laugh.”

The novella is, after all, of Mo Yan’s own making. The society has its own schedule, so does a writer. Mo Yan drives, quite willfully, the train of his story onto his own track. He is often arbitrary and willful. He has the self-confidence to handle everything under whatever circumstances. However, in the case
of *Shifu, You’ll Do Anything for a Laugh*, although he has grasped with ease all of the major points, he fails to develop them; as if he were unfortunately trapped in a narrow world and had to squeeze through it to hastily bring his writing to a close. This feeble story is a rare specimen of his works.

A writer’s weakness usually constitutes the lower limit of his power. Once Mo Yan steps out of the love tryst and turns back at the end of a certain century, walking all the way toward the fields and the past, his strength will be regained. I am not talking about his subject matter, but pointing out the fact that Mo Yan’s innate artistic building is of a lofty nature, i.e. his vision is an integrated and panoramic one. He is capable of perceiving what is happening but not why it happens. Such a writer is not to be evaluated in isolation. He needs to be grudgingly given the freedom of ethical and aesthetic judgment. All the human weaknesses, perceptions and experiences come and go like grass in a cycle of flourishing and withering, like the bursts of thunder and lightning, like rain and dew. All the human beings share the equal existence of glory, and defy any outside judgment.

Therefore, although Mo Yan is best known for *Red Sorghum*, he has prepared all the building blocks of his world in an earlier work *The Transparent Carrot*. The novella was seen as a sort of scandal by the mainstream literary circles at that time, but a bold challenge or a raid by the writer and his supporters. Today it presents its tenderness and beauty to us. Only when we are aware of the fact that the boy wandering in the field needs no justification can we realize the danger the story’s truth posed at its appearance—a spirit needs no justification at all.

Similarly, the characters in *Red Sorghum* and *The Way of Dog* do not think; they just perceive and act. Their worlds are presented but not interpreted or judged. The Japanese soldiers in *Red Sorghum* may still be deemed as “evil” in some historical contexts. In *The Way of Dog*, “evil” is just one of the natural forces and attributes. The way of dog is the way of heaven; the way of heaven is the way of human beings. No justification is needed for human's struggling and fighting.
Such an “everything-is-equal” perspective reaches its deepest level in A Long Race Thirty Years Ago. A group of “rightists” took great delight in a race as if they were taking part in a carnival. Their ideology was distilled by the past thirty years, and they entered into some country legend. Each of them became a fictional character from Creation of the Gods, equipped with unique craftsmanship and temperament. A comparison between this tale and the then prevalent narratives about those categorized as “rightists” or the ones about the “Cultural Revolution” will reveal that in the latter there is a presupposed historical logic that can account for each character’s action and provides a pivot for meaningful interpretation, although such interpretation cannot always be applied to each character.

We may have to understand the exaggeration, sentimentality, and simplification in those dominant narratives. Nevertheless, the persistent attempt to justify a person’s action in some historical context indicates and reinforces some bias in the Chinese mind—“A hero is the one who has succeeded while a villain is one who has failed.” The startling joy and hodgepodge in A Long Race Thirty Years Ago demonstrate Mo Yan’s protest against history’s domination over life. Although finally the “history” interferes with this long-distance race—the police come and take some of the racers, it is more like one of the incidents recurring in life, an “accident,” or a wonderful surprise, or a revelation of some secret. Even “history” cannot deprive us of life, joy, rich experiences, and vitality, in which Mo Yan has placed a trust as immense as the great earth.

In this sense, Mo Yan is our Whitman, who with a huge appetite and a great stomach, seems capable of digesting everything. His vigorous, coarse, and sweeping writings demonstrate the broader side of the Chinese mind—one of experience, perception and flesh as well as of something transcendental, and ultimate, beyond one’s ego and the logic of history.

In Joy, the young villager, who has failed the College Entrance Examination several times, roams in the field. He is, of course, greatly depressed and exhausted. We may well take his case for
an investigation into society, history, or his personality. The story can be seen as a psychological file on the interaction between the Chinese examination system and an educated country youth. However, in Mo Yan’s world, a character’s destiny projects itself onto the wild richness and decay of nature, and vice versa. Such projection is not only a poetic metaphor, but also a definite judgment—whether alive or dead, one has to accept or give up everything. This is the truth of life as well as the arrangement of nature. In the world created by Mo Yan, self-pity is the last sentiment a person would resort to.

So our Whitman does have his own limitations. He is after all a writer of myths. (“Myth” was a derogatory term in his time, though.) His works, in their essence, present the vast self-images of the Chinese people. It is hard to decide if the term “myth” is positive or negative. Perhaps Mo Yan does not care. What matters is the transcendence of the anxiety caused by the modernity and history. The Chinese people, while mentally fatigued from such anxiety, can achieve a kind of freedom in these works. The freedom is intended for the good, for the evil, for whatever.

Therefore, Mo Yan is particularly incapable of handling themes like unemployment as it implies moral problems involving various boundaries that modern urban dwellers are confronted with, such as trivialization, complexity, and ambiguity. Although he made an arbitrary attempt to impose his schedule on *Shifu, You’ll Do Anything for a Laugh*, he was doomed to fail when he began to make a descriptive analysis of the hero’s situation, as it brings a world of diverse “justifications” that blow like dust, baffling people’s understanding. This is too much for him. He can digest everything except dust.

**III**

1. *Sandalwood Death* is a great masterpiece. I am fully aware of the weight the word “great” carries and have begrudged all the living Chinese writers the word. Nevertheless, I will put aside my
principle and follow my judgment. *Sandalwood Death* will not crumble under the word.

2. The first sentence of the novel seems a poor one: “That morning it never occurred to my father-in-law that he would be killed by me in seven days.” It echoes too much the first sentence of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. We can see it, so could the writer. But he deliberately put down the sentence as if he were recommending himself by foregrounding his blood tie with hallucinatory realism.

   This is a sign of homage as well as farewell to Gabriel Garcia Marquez. From the second sentence onward to the very last, Mo Yan withdrew himself as far as thousand miles and, on a startling scale and in a revolutionary determination, brought his narration back to his hometown Gaomi, to the ears and lips of the Chinese people, and to the horizon of our great classical and rural tradition.

3. *Sandalwood Death* is the first major Chinese novel of the 21st century. Its appearance embodies the beautiful symmetry of history.

   The 20th century witnessed the modernization of Chinese novels. The Chinese writers learned to think, experience and narrate against a global background. At the same time, either in a joyful or painful way, they payed a price—they cut their own roots and abandoned their own tradition, silencing a voice that had echoed for thousands of years.

   *Sandalwood Death* indicates a major turn. Also against the global background, the Chinese writers begin to engratf themselves onto their roots, recovering their tradition and redefining their everlasting cultural characteristics.

4. Mo Yan claimed that he had written about voices—the voice of the train and *Maoqiang* arias (*Maoqiang* is a local melody that is mainly sung in the eastern part of Shandong Province.) of the local Gaomi opera. *Sandalwood Death* is also a voice of history. Its story took place in 1900 when the Eight-Power Allied Forces (the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Italy, Austria-Hungary, the United States, Russia, and Japan) invaded Beijing. The ancient Chinese
civilization was faced with the greatest crisis of modernization known in Chinese history. In Shandong Province, the Boxer Movement was crushed down by the German garrison with the help of the new army of Qing Dynasty equipped with Western weapons. An appalling, huge execution platform was set up before thousands of villagers.

The scene much resembles a drama. In effect, it is a drama. For the Chinese folk, history is drama and drama is reality. Let us shut our eyes and listen to the voice of the year 1900—a voice loud, enraged, desperate, miserable, vicious, cold, penetrating, and resounding. It is the voice of China. It pierces the hundred years like a sharp dagger.

5. Mo Yan is no longer a novelist, a “talent” indulging himself in “artists’ saga.” He becomes a storyteller, a colleague of those who has told tales to the audience in story-telling houses since the Tang and Song dynasties. This is not because of the fact that the novel has adopted some classical plot construction techniques such as “phoenix head” (an intriguing beginning of an article arousing readers’ interests), “pork belly” (the main body of the article with rich content), and “leopard tail” (a forceful ending); but because of its narrative principles—to resort straight to the ear, allowing voices from the noblest and the humblest to share the same pitch and volume; to resort straight to the narrative, allowing an infinite difference for the plot to develop; to resort straight to readers’ attention, with exaggeration, vulgarity, spectacle, and gorgeousness (even the ritualized execution becomes a spectacle for collective revel). This is one principle in China’s folk aesthetics—a great popular writer rarely writes something vulgar.

6. A storyteller needs training. It is much harder to be an old-fashioned storyteller than a modern novelist as the latter can indulge himself, paying no heed to the fact that his works might scare or infuriate his readers. But the highest principle in the storyteller’s ethics is the presence of audience, without a single absence.

Mo Yan demonstrates his masterly narrative skills in Sandalwood
This statement does not appear to be praise. Which novelist does not think himself as a master writer? However, the majority of Chinese novelists are not skilled at all. They are at best clever or very clever. For they are unable to even make two characters speak in different manners. They consider story writing as a private business, beginning with “I” and ending with “I.”

Once Mo Yan begins to mimic storytellers, he returns to the original ideal of the art of fiction—a novelist does not possess his story or his voice; he has to tell a story as if it had occurred and were known to everybody. The voice in the story is the voice of the world, contained in the narration and awaiting a pair of lips to blow it far and wide.

7. Redirection will be our thinking on the art of fiction and on our own situation in a globalized world. The redirection is manifesting itself in the surge of social, cultural, and literary incidents; *Sandalwood Death* will serve as a strong drive to clarify the obscure and to amplify the muffled. What it presents is our history. Meanwhile it itself will become part of the future cultural and literary history.

IV

The above are the reading notes I wrote immediately after the publication of *Sandalwood Death*. Just two years later I felt some words in the notes were not clear, e.g. “voice of history,” “history is drama and drama is reality,” etc. In the notes, the concept of “history” was not examined and defined. I took history for granted as a thing-in-itself. Now I have to clarify that “history” has to be said. All that has not been said is not history. It is through “saying” that we can figure out and come to believe some historical logic.

The issues addressed in *Sandalwood Death* are among the historical discourse filled with heated debates, bargains, and reluctant compromises. The Boxer Movement may be interpreted as a desperate struggle for survival and a rebellion against imperialism on the part of a nation and a civilization. It can also be
considered as a backward reaction to the progression of “history,” a fight against modernization. On this same event, we take different stands as well as different judgments. The former view on the Boxer Movement is historically justified while the latter, on a historical scale, is not. If we suppose there is logic in history, we will be faced with a predicament—it is very hard for us to reach a unified judgment on the significance of the event. We have to accept conflicting ideas.

The event is a long-standing wound of the Chinese mind. The modern nation of the Chinese people was founded and developed in the bloody pool of this wound, which still rankles and hurts. We are torn between two self-images: one is the impotence and anger resulting from a sense of being offended and deprived; the other is the belief of accepting the logic of the invader and the depriver, which will finally remove our impotence. The two images are, in effect, derived from each other. The anxiety for “competence” lies in both of them. But between the two there is always a space full of confusion and suspicion—the anger for competence will give rise to strength which, however, will affirm and reinforce impotence. The premise for any dreamt competence is to endure impotence.

The circularity of the statements above just reveals the fact that what we confront is not a question about how to comprehend and follow the historical logic, about how to act in line with the goal, or about engineering calculation and game strategy, but a huge mental puzzle. We, like the boy in Thumb Cuff, are confined to the tree of “history,” having no choice but to continue aspiring for freedom. In Grandma’s Incisor, the “competence” shifts between Grandma and the mother, but we cannot tell who is the strong person and who is the weak one. Or are Grandma and the mother themselves both strong and weak?

Therefore, although the bloody yet magnificent spectacle of dismemberment in Sandalwood Death might discomfort those weak readers, the work is a great myth of the modern Chinese mind. It reveals on a human body the tangled and conflicting paths of the “competence” labyrinth. “Competence” comes from outside
or is self-imposed. It is absolutely weak as well as absolutely strong; it is pain as well as ecstasy; it is humble death as well as noble redemption; it is hard law as well as sweet sentiment; it is blood as well as craftsmanship; it is tradition as well as decline of tradition; it is history as well as revolt against history.

In this novel Mo Yan has to choose a narrating standpoint as detached as the great earth, putting aside his own voice, even his own point of view. Before then, the field, memory, and children had altogether constituted the tripod for his narration. Through memory and children’s eyes he could open a broader world. In other words, children’s eyes would reject any choice, while memory with the help of time would equalize everything between heaven and earth. But now, what he needs is nothing but the field, because no voice or point of view can suffice the coverage of the pain, the hardship, the vastness, and the solitude of the Chinese soul.

This is the key to the complicated relationship between Mo Yan and his time, between his contemporary readers and literature. He presents a vision that we find very hard to face, a vision that we try to forget. This vision is the foundation of our world, a world obscured jointly by “history,” by society, by our earnest daily life and everyday experience, and by our literature.

Thus, Mo Yan is much detached from as well as much attached to his time.