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Mo Yan in Context

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Part One

Leaves

A Mutually Rewarding yet Uneasy and Sometimes Fragile Relationship between Author and Translator

Howard Goldblatt

Abstract

In "A Mutually Rewarding yet Uneasy and Sometimes Fragile Relationship between Author and Translator" Howard Goldblatt discusses the literary merits of Mo Yan's works to situate his selection as the 2012 Nobel Prize in Literature laureate. The account is text based, a task done with significant knowledge since Goldblatt is Mo Yan's translator to English. Text based means understanding the process of translation, respecting reader reception and authorial intent, and referring to the work primarily, but not limited to Mo Yan's latest novels published in English, establishing his bona fides as a master storyteller. This method contrasts with some media responses directly following Mo Yan's selection and reviews, some of which are, in turn, reviewed.

I have heard talk in recent months that the author of those internationally acclaimed novels we have been hearing about was in reality a US-American, Howard Goldblatt, and that he is, in fact, the real Mo Yan. I categorically deny that. Mo Yan is a Chinese novelist who received three gold medals, US \$1.2 million, and a handshake from King Carl XVI Gustaf of Sweden. But wait a minute. Which Mo Yan are people referring to? That Chinese author of a dozen or so novels, many of which were labeled hallucinatory realism by the academy? Or maybe the Swedish Mo Yan, who lives most of her life as Anna Gustafsson Chen? Or how about the Japanese Mo Yan, an engaging fellow otherwise known as Tomio Yoshida? Then there are the two French Mo Yans, Noël Dutrait and Chantal Chen-Andro; a Norwegian Mo Yan who wrote to me as Brith Sæthre; and even an Italian Mo Yan, Patrizia Liberati. I'd be remiss if I did not at least give a shout-out to the American Mo Yan ... well, we are back to the original rumor.

In December 2012 the newly elevated Chinese Nobel laureate invited those several avatars to join him at his expense in Stockholm for the annual conclave. Beyond the excitement of actually dressing up for this most celebratory of ceremonies

and participating in the week-long festivities surrounding it, we less famous Mo Yans were given an opportunity to compare notes, discuss issues of fidelity, literariness, and even marketing in relation to our versions of such novels as *Red Sorghum*, *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, and more. It did not quite pan out, in part because all those unfamiliar tongues kept getting in the way, and because we saw the experience more as play than work. Much has been written in China and elsewhere lately about how Mo Yan's translators actually earned the prize for the Chinese novelist. I am sure that cannot please him, and he has reason to be unhappy. The novels for which he was nominated and selected for the prize are his creations. Or are they? He once responded to a question of mine in regard to one of his translations with something like: "Do what you want. I can't read what you've written. It's your book." See what I mean? We know that only one Swedish Academy member reads Chinese, so they had to rely on other Mo Yans to determine the Chinese Mo Yan's worthiness for selection. But this cannot be the first time. How many Italian readers were there among them when they selected playwright Dario Fo? Russian for Joseph Brodsky? Hungarian for Imre Kertész? Chinese (again) for Gao Xingjian? I do not mean to diminish the accomplishments or qualifications of any winners of this coveted prize; rather, I want to acknowledge the critical role a writer's translators play, especially when the talk rolls around to "language."

Some writers have a cordial, rewarding relationship with their translators and some do not. Mo Yan has never been especially vocal in his support or disapproval of those of us who not only love but also translate his novels into many languages, yet he has referred to some of us publicly and seems to be friendly with most. He has insisted that a writer must not write for the translator—unfortunately that happens—and, to his credit, he does not. I imagine that, like many writers, he would be happier if a decent Google translation program could put us "stylists" out of business, but if that were the case, then only Scandinavian writers would win Nobel Prizes from here on out. We do not want that, despite the pleasure we get from reading Henning Mankell, Jo Nesbø, Håkan Nesser, and, of course, Tomas Tranströmer, the Swedish poet who actually did win the prize the year before we—I mean, Mo Yan—won. I imagine that most people who are not translators do not think much about the role of translators in literary production generally, or about the individual translators of works they read. And why should they? We are supposed to be invisible. There really is no compelling reason to be concerned about whether or not the translator gets his or her due, since the beauty of a translated work, it seems, accrues to the original author and the warts to the translator. Sometimes, of course, that's not true. The renowned translator of Spanish and Portuguese literature Gregory Rabassa was complimented by Gabriel García Márquez, who is reported to have said that the English translation of his *One Hundred Years of Solitude* was superior to the original, a revelation that may or may not have pleased the translator (see Rabassa 96). Here I am reminded of a

comment by the humorist James Thurber, who, when told by a French reader that his stories read better in French than in English, replied: "Yes, I tend to lose something in the original" (*The World of Translation* 151).

Why the spotlight on translators? Because I am one and because my peers and I make foreign writing available to new audiences. How we do that, both in terms of method and results, is a hotly debated topic in some circles, although all will agree that while translation is an imperfect way to gain accessibility to writing from other cultures, it is *a* way and almost always *the* way a writer gains an international reputation. Now to the laureate himself. By now everyone knows that Mo Yan is a fifty-nine-year-old novelist living and writing in northern China. But back in 1987, he was a peasant-born, largely self-educated member of the People's Liberation Army and a modestly published writer of considerable potential. That year, he published five linked novellas, which were subsequently released as the novel 红高粱家族 (*Red Sorghum Clan*). Then came a cinematic adaptation of *Red Sorghum* by the then-unheralded director Zhang Yimou: it won the Berlin Film Festival's Golden Bear Award, was nominated for an Oscar, and Mo Yan was on his way to becoming an international celebrity.

In 1989 I was a newly transplanted and largely unknown professor of Chinese at the University of Colorado. I stumbled upon a Taiwanese edition of *Red Sorghum Clan*, read it, and knew at once that it needed to be available in English. In 1993 Viking published my translation of *Red Sorghum*. I was confident that Mo Yan's writing would have propelled him into the top ranks of Chinese writers at any time, but appearing as it did, at the height of an introspective historical moment in China, about a decade after the nation-crippling Cultural Revolution, it captured that zeitgeist as no other had. For Mo Yan and his peers, reeling from a quarter-century of incessant political campaigns, a three-year famine, a couple of wars (India and Vietnam), and an economy held hostage by politics, the future held out little promise; it was a minefield, for which only the past offered a roadmap.

The British historian C. V. Wedgwood has written that "history is lived forward but is written in retrospect. We know the end before we consider the beginning, and we can never wholly recapture what it was to know the beginning only" (35). While that might make sense to you and me, to a novelist, I suspect, it is merely a challenge. By reimagining the space in which history occurs and then imposing his or her own understanding of behavioral norms, the historical novelist, who re-creates the past from below, becomes the chronicler of that other history, the one not written but lived. For the post-Cultural Revolution generation of writers, who dug into China's past, ancient and recent, a sense of mission was at the heart of their historical re-creations, almost a quest for national salvation. In pondering the excesses of the Cultural Revolution, in particular, young intellectuals agonized over the question: How could so many ordinary people have been so caught up in blind revolutionary fervor, which caused them to have done so many bad things to each other, family

and friends included? Was it an aberration or was there something in the Chinese character that so easily turned millions of people into bloodthirsty mobs? The search for answers to these questions drove scores of budding young novelists to the far reaches of rural China to examine the "roots" of the national character. What they found was often unsettling: the ritualization of cruelty, a façade of benevolence and caring that often masked a deep-seated distrust of others, and a patriarchal system that stifled originality, among others. The biggest loser in the quest was the sanctity of recorded history, a corpus of materials that seemed out of step with the perceived realities of this scarred generation, whose members would surely agree with Voltaire's observation that "a fair-minded man, when reading history, is occupied almost entirely with refuting it" (Voltaire qtd. in Fusilier 51).

Prominent among this group of writers was, as we have seen, Mo Yan, whose re-creations of early twentieth-century Chinese history, then and now, but especially the war years, evoke a powerful sense of futility and loss. *Red Sorghum* merges myth and reality, biographical and historical incidents, heroic and mundane activities. This ambivalence makes a case for cultural degeneration while drawing attention to the way the past is reconstructed. It is a novel of family, myth, and memory, centering on the dark days of war with Japan in the 1930s, yet moving backward and forward in time via compelling omniscience by the first-person narrator. It is a work that embraces contradictions, dwelling on the author's northeastern homeland that stands as a metaphor for all of China, both its virtues and its defects. Here is how the narrator of *Red Sorghum*, Mo Yan's alter ego, describes his feelings for his birthplace: "I had learned to love Northeast Gaomi Township with all my heart, and to hate it with unbridled fury. I didn't realize until I'd grown up that Northeast Gaomi Township is easily the most beautiful and most repulsive, most unusual and most common, most sacred and most corrupt, most heroic and most bastardly, hardest-drinking and hardest-loving place in the world" (4). *Red Sorghum* ushered in a new era of literary endeavor in post-Mao China. It was also groundbreaking in its modernist narrative technique, one of constant defamiliarization. A novelist of a different order, Amy Tan, stumbled upon the work and wrote that Mo Yan's "imagery is astounding, sensual and visceral. His story is electrifying and epic" (back cover of *Red Sorghum*).

There is, some have said, a bit of a ghoulish streak in Mo Yan, who often finds no better vehicle for his rich, colorful (literally; see Huang), imagistic language than disturbing scenes. Here from *Red Sorghum*:

Full purple lips, like ripe grapes, gave Second Grandma—Passion—her extraordinary appeal. The sands of time had long since interred her origins and background. Her rich, youthful, resilient flesh, her plump bean-pod face, and her deep-blue, seemingly deathless eyes were buried in the wet yellow earth, extinguishing for all time her angry, defiant gaze, which challenged the world of filth, adored the world of beauty, and brimmed over with an intense consciousness. Second Grandma had been buried in the black earth of her hometown. Her body was enclosed in a coffin of thin willow covered

with an uneven coat of reddish-brown varnish that failed to camouflage its wormy, beetle-holed surface. The sight of her blackened, blood-shiny corpse being swallowed up by golden earth is etched forever on the screen of my mind. (307)

Purple, blue, yellow, black, reddish-brown, golden, all in a single thought. *Red Sorghum* was only the beginning. In the novels that followed, Mo Yan continued to reinvent and recast the art of historical fiction, frequently echoing the view of Edward Gibbon, who, in *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, wrote, "History ... is little more than the register of crimes, follies and misfortunes of mankind" (105). As the 1980s came to a close, although the demons of China's recent past had not been fully purged, her people in general and her writers in particular had at last begun to turn their attention to the road ahead. Just in time for the 4 June 1989 blood-letting at Tiananmen Square, one of those historical moments, like the 4 May 1970 massacre at Kent State in U.S. history, when public dissent became a capital offense! By then, Mo Yan had witnessed how China's past had infiltrated its present, as the brutalities of landlords of earlier times were replaced by a worse brutality practiced by former peasants newly elevated to positions of power and influence.

The actual event that led to Mo Yan's next novel, 天堂蒜薹之歌 (*The Garlic Ballads*), was an uprising in the Shandong countryside by peasants who had been cheated out of their garlic crop by corrupt officials. The novel is often magical, disturbing in the story told yet magnetic in the means of telling. Passionate and angry, panoramic yet brilliant in its specificity, the novel was kept out of distribution by a government fearful that its publication would be too incendiary during the growing unrest in the days leading up to 4 June 1989. Considered by some to be an essentially ideological novel, *The Garlic Ballads* is unambiguous evidence that while Mo Yan may not be one who believes that a work of fiction can by itself bring about public or personal improvement, he does believe in the humanistic power of art. Set in fictional Paradise County, the novel is tied both to rural China and her literary traditions by a blind minstrel's ballads, which not only open and foretell developments in each chapter, in much the same manner as premodern novels and stories, but also, through the involvement of the balladeer in the story, highlight the tragic consequences of the characters' sometimes heroic, sometimes inexplicably reckless, actions. And in a reprise of the lament in *Red Sorghum*, that is, in the author's own words, a "nagging sense of our species' regression," the balladeer articulates a sense of despair over a growing impotence, either natured or nurtured, of the Chinese peasant: "Paradise County once produced bold, heroic men, [he sings]. / Now we see nothing but flaccid, weak-kneed cowards / With furrowed brows and scowling faces: / They sigh and fret before their rotting garlic" (143).

This is a novelist for whom narrative power easily accommodates the grotesque and the fantastic. When, for instance, the leader of the uprising, Gao Ma, discovers the corpse of his pregnant lover, who has hanged herself, we share in the grisly scene:

After clambering unsteadily to his feet, Gao Ma toppled over again, just as seven or eight gaily colored parakeets flew in through the open window, made passes above and below the roof beams, then playfully hugged the walls, brushing past Jinju's hanging corpse. The silkiness of their feathers made them appear bare-skinned. Jinju's body swung gracefully, causing the doorframe to creak ... Clutching the doorframe, he straightened up slowly, like a bent tree reaching for the sky ... The sight of her sagging belly made the sickeningly sweet taste in his throat stronger than ever. Mounting a bench, he fumbled with the knot in the rope—shaky hands, feeble fingers. The strong, acrid, and garlicky smell of her body hit him full-force; so did the sickeningly sweet taste in his throat. He could discern a slight difference between the smell of her blood and his. A man's blood is blazing hot, a woman's icy cold. A woman's blood is clean and pure, a man's dirty and polluted. Parakeets flitted under his armpits and between his legs, their malicious squawks making his heart skip a beat. (175)

From there, Gao Ma and the pregnant corpse of his lover embark upon a dialogue that precedes a scene of raw blood and gore, as Gao Ma slaughters the strangely situated parakeets. Written over a month-long explosion of energy, passion, and rage, the novel underscores the author's own admission that "I may look like a writer, but deep down I'm still a peasant" (Kakutani <<http://www.nytimes.com/2002/04/19/movies/books-of-the-times-tale-of-a-tibetan-clan-told-by-an-idiot.html>>).

The Garlic Ballads was followed by a metafictional novel that attacked China's vaunted Epicureanism by linking it to cannibalism; 酒国 (*The Republic of Wine*) is easily the most incisive and trenchant social satire any modern Chinese writer has created. For readers, *The Republic of Wine* packs a real wallop, like the colorless liquor distilled in Mo Yan's home province. Few contemporary works have exposed and satirized the political structure of post-Mao China, or the enduring obsession of the Chinese with food, with the wit and venom of this explosive novel. None approaches its structural inventiveness. Nothing in the previous novels prepares readers for the surprises to be found in this cornucopia of comedy, ingenuity, and technical dexterity (see Huang and Duran). Mo Yan's purpose dawns upon us gradually as we discover a fictional structure unlike anything we are likely to have seen before, perhaps Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* offering the closest parallel. In the end, it is a complex allegory not only about the Chinese character but also about the larger issues of how we define truth, reality, imagination, and creativity. And, oh, that little matter of cannibalism, recalling Jonathan Swift's *A Modest Proposal*. Here is how Mo Yan's protagonist, a hapless special investigator named Ding Gou'er, reacts to the sight of what he assumes is a cooked little boy at a welcoming banquet at the official residence of the local boss in a mining community where, reputedly, children are being raised as food for the jaded palates of corrupt officials:

Ding Gou'er's ... eyes blurred and the lovely butterfly that had returned to its cocoon began to squirm again. Feelings of dread pressed down on him like a boulder, weighing heavily on his shoulders until he felt that his ...

skeleton could crumble at any moment. He was face-to-face with a bottomless, foul-smelling cesspool that would pull him down into its obliterating muck and keep him there forever. But ... the boy gushing perfume, a tiny son joining ranks with his mother, sitting amid a fairy mist the shape and color of a lotus flower, raised his hand, actually raised his hand toward me! His fingers were stubby, pudgy, meaty and so very lovely. Wrinkles on his fingers, three circular seams; the back of his hand sporting four prominent dimples. The sweet sound of his laughter wound round the fragrance hanging in the air. The lotus began to levitate, carrying the child along with it. His round little belly button, so childish and innocent, like a dimple on a cheek ... The cooked little boy smiled at me. You say this child is actually a famous dish ... I hear the piteous wails of little boys in the steamers. I hear them wailing in crackling woks, on chopping blocks, in oil, salt, soy sauce, vinegar, sugar, anise powder, peppercorns, cinnamon, ginger, and cooking liquor. They are wailing in your intestines, in the toilets, and in the sewers. They are wailing. (78)

You get the idea, although the scene continues for a while, with an encyclopedic litany of accusations that keep readers spellbound.

As the novel progresses, the disparate sections begin to merge, until "Mo Yan" himself assumes the persona of Ding Gou'er in a Joycean stream-of-consciousness epilogue that recaps the highlights of a physical and psychological odyssey and alludes to a string of political campaigns that have plagued China for decades. Having been ingested into the maw of a cannibalistic society and digested in the twists and turns of its intestinal network, the writer-protagonist is evacuated into the vile porridge of an outdoor privy while an anthropophagian feast takes place on a pleasure boat just beyond his reach. *The Republic of Wine* is a *tour de force* of literary imagination and offers, I might add, about as much fun as a translator can have.

In 1996 Mo Yan published an immense novel of nearly half a million characters, 丰乳肥臀 (*Big Breasts and Wide Hips*), in which he revisits the historical period of his grandfather's generation, focusing on a woman, her nine children (eight daughters, all from different fathers, and a son sired by a foreign cleric), and the men they marry, once again calling into question the official black-and-white histories fed to members of his generation in school. As the title suggests, the book is dominated by a powerful matriarchy of strong, voluptuous women. Mo Yan is unflinching in his portrayal of the clan's struggles to survive poverty through the decades, while writing with a vibrant style that embraces fantasy and surrealism. Resplendent with the grotesque, bristling with black humor, and visceral in its treatment of sex, violence, and death, *Big Breasts and Wide Hips* is a searing vision of rural China.

Big Breasts and Wide Hips was followed in English translation by yet another sweeping recreation of modern Chinese history, 生死疲劳 (*Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*). It is the transmigratory story of a landlord who is executed in 1950 by the rebellious masses in the rural township of Gaomi. Reborn six times via the Buddhist cycle of life and death, samsara—as a donkey, an ox, a pig, a dog,

a monkey, and a boy who turns out to be one of several narrators—he provides unusual windows into the march of progress in contemporary China. With parallel and recollected narratives in typical Mo Yan fashion, the plot moves at a rapid and often hilarious pace toward the ... well, toward the beginning. Honored with two major prizes—the 2008 Honglougong Prize as the best Chinese novel and the inaugural Newman Prize for his achievements in Chinese literature—the novel entertains, educates, and fulfills readers—domestic and international.

While Mo Yan's novel from the early twenty-first century, 四十一炮, was somewhat overlooked in Chinese, its English translation, *POW!*, published in 2012, has proved to be among his most popular and most critically effective in the U.S. As we know, the Chinese like to say they will eat anything on four legs except a table. Mo Yan's *POW!* makes a good case for that. What he did for alcohol in *The Republic of Wine* he does here for meat—its sometimes ghoulish production, its gluttonous consumption, and its obsessive social role. And meat is the prism through which contemporary China and many of its contentious issues are viewed. By turns accusatory, comical, and fantastic, this latest riveting novel by one of China's most popular writers has already further embellished his international reputation. The timing of the novel's appearance in the United States and the United Kingdom was serendipitous, given reports out of China revealing the prevalence of adulterated pork sold on the open market, recently resulting in the pollution of rivers by more than 10,000 dead, toxic pigs. Mo Yan seems almost prescient in calling attention to the cavalier greed of those who will descend to any moral and ethical depth in order to make money via predatory capitalism.

The latest of Mo Yan's novels to be published in English is a terrifying work, 檀香刑 (*Sandalwood Death*), a work in which the now internationally acclaimed author shows both the truly dark side of recent Chinese history (precisely, the Boxer Rebellion of more than a century ago), and, however fragiley, the possibility of love among witnesses to unbearable brutality. Set, as always, in his native Shandong Province, the novel centers on an executioner and the gruesome devices used to torture and dispatch individuals who have offended the court, the foreign invaders, or the rich and powerful. The violence in this and much of Mo Yan's oeuvre is both a representation of twentieth-century realities and a metaphor for the historiographic process. Mo Yan sees not only darkness and evil in China's past, but, like so many of his contemporaries, is wary of the all-powerful "great men" and agonizes over the degenerative effects China's past has produced in her present. A land of heroes has become, in the words of our blind balladeer of *The Garlic Ballads*, home to "flaccid, weak-kneed cowards with furrowed brows and scowling faces" (141).

Sadly, the initial media focus on Mo Yan's selection as the 2012 Nobel Prize in Literature laureate had nothing to do with what actually made him the laureate. The announcement was met with shrill outbursts that his selection was a "catastrophe" by Romanian Nobelist Herta Müller, with the urging of expatriate Chinese dissident

Liao Yiwu, reckless remarks that he is a government "patsy" by Salman Rushdie, who likely has never read a word the Nobel laureate has written, the sophistry of otherwise rational individuals such as China scholar Perry Link, and outsider calls from the likes of the controversial artist Ai Weiwei for Mo Yan to use his newly won leverage as a soapbox to demand change. He was criticized for belonging to the eighty-million-member Communist Party; for his membership in the Writers Association, a government-sponsored guild to which virtually all writers in China belong, and in which he holds an honorary vice-chairmanship; and for only once asking for Liu Xiaobo's release from prison, equating the drumbeat of calls for him to do more, and more, and more with the forced repetition of slogans during the Cultural Revolution. In the weeks and months since, the situation has changed dramatically, in part owing to the excellent reviews of his latest offerings in translation. Virtually every reviewer has referred to the controversy, more or less in passing, and then has concluded that Mo Yan was indeed a worthy recipient of the literature prize. The verbal histrionics and intemperate remarks in op-eds, long articles, and a host of published cheap shots are a reminder that it sometimes makes sense to get the facts before popping off.

In one of the more bizarre criticisms, Mo Yan's muckraking roman à clef *蛙* (Frog), an exposé of the costs of the Party's family planning (计划生育) or One-child policy, has been attacked for its appearance at a time when the Party is reexamining the issue, as opposed to, say, a decade ago, when it was fully sanctioned. Of course, he could not have published the novel a decade ago, when the policy was still in effect; but the more important issue is Mo Yan's critique here not of misguided individuals or the Chinese character but of the formers of national policy, past or present. What critics have called cowardice or accommodation is in reality a bold act.

Mo Yan has been reviled most severely for his views of and statements on censorship (see Chen). For him, censorship, including self-censorship, is part of the system under which he and his fellow writers work and is accepted as such by most, to a greater or lesser extent, so long as it serves the country, and not just bureaucrats and their ilk, and is not capriciously implemented. That may be a hard pill for some in the West to swallow, but not necessarily by writers within China's borders. While there are proscriptions against openly defaming the Party, advocating the overthrow of the government, or calling for Taiwanese or Tibetan independence, writers need not worry about heavy-fisted censors redacting their texts in accord with perceived heresies. Mo Yan writes in a gray area in which he avoids direct, overt criticism of established institutions and policies while revealing social pathologies and what he characterizes as a devolution of attitudes and behaviors in the Party. Although not alone in this, he does it better than most. In the end, he is unapologetic in regard to his stances and statements and insists: "Everything I have to say is in my writing" (Mo Yan, "Nobel Lecture" <http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2012/yan-lecture_en.html>).

With the indulgence of my readers, I shift my attention away from Mo Yan the novelist writing in Chinese for a moment and back toward those of us who deal with him through Western eyes—you, me, and a good number of his critics. Mo Yan's work has often resonated among reviewers with Western models. García Márquez, Sterne, and Borges are frequently mentioned. Others include Pirandello, Rabelais, and, Mo Yan's favorite Western writer, William Faulkner (see Du), almost always in approbation of Mo Yan's art and seldom with the intent of holding him up to Western standards. Until John Updike, that is. In a long, characteristically articulate yet mixed review in *The New Yorker* of *Big Breasts and Wide Hips* and a second novel, *My Life as Emperor*, by Mo Yan's contemporary Su Tong, Updike, choosing not to take either work on its own terms, deplores the facts that "the Chinese novel had no Victorian heyday to teach it decorum," that Mo Yan's metaphors are "abundant and hyperactive," and that the principal characters of both novels are "immature weaklings" (87).

Normally, all I or any of my authors—and there have been more than twenty of them—ask is that they be dealt with on their own terms. No one disputes the view that the act of literary translation creates losses for readers of the translated text. For some, however, the losses in the reception of foreign literature have more to do with what the work itself is not than what it has become in a new language. That, as it turns out, appears to be Mr. Updike's stance. For him, as for other critics, these works are redeemed only when they can be viewed as sociohistorical or nakedly political texts. The "message" in these novels by mature, popular, respected novelists, for Updike, is that "bad societies offer no incentive to grow up" and that "free spirits in China are still short of enjoying free speech" (87). This is fiction as history or screed, not what one would expect from a novelist, at least a good one, much less a prize-winning one.

Much of Mo Yan's language, alluded to by the Nobel Committee as hallucinatory, is a response to the rigid, formulaic, and ideology-bound discourse that monopolized Chinese literary productions for decades in what was called socialist realism; Mo Yan uses literary language in service of his revisionist view of official Communist history and in the dissection of his own race. He is, for instance, convinced of the metaphorical power of depicting sexual acts—which domestic critics often find objectionable and is mischaracterized as gratuitous by Updike and other detractors—that permeate his fictional world. In this, Mo Yan is more rather than less representative of recent creative writing in China. It would be surprising if that were not the case, given the unremittingly violent nature of China's past century. If sex is a powerful fictional metaphor, violence serves as a powerful fictional reminder of the human capacity to inflict pain on other people. Mr. Updike is right when he characterizes Mo Yan's novel as a "stew of slaughter, torture, famine, flood, and, for the peasant masses, brutalizing overwork" (87). It is just that he sees that as something bad! To his credit, Updike reminds readers that this

is translated fiction, that someone else has been involved in making it available outside of China, and if I've seemed whiningly unfair to him or slavishly devoted to the work of a Chinese novelist who has brought me enjoyment and satisfaction, if not fame and fortune, I apologize.

Now that Mo Yan's international visibility has reached new heights, the appearance of his work in many societies will certainly lead to increased attention to the translators and publishers of his work in other languages. So how does the author view the relationship with his translators? In a protracted interview given in China in 2007, published in book form as 说吧, 莫言 (Speak, Mo Yan), available only in Chinese, he deals favorably with the cooperative ventures with some of his translators. In his Nobel Lecture, the only reference to his translators had to do with the title of *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*: "I've been told that my translators have had fits trying to render it into their languages" (<http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2012/yan-lecture_en.html>). That was certainly true in my case, and although both the publisher and I are pleased with the title on several fronts, it must be seen as an interpretation rather than a literal translation of part of a Buddhist phrase that means something on the order of "living and dying are exhausting; desire is born of greed" (see Chi-ying Alice Wang on this and other Buddhist phrases and concepts). I think my fellow translators generally hewed more closely to the original, with less evocative results. But in a speech Mo Yan gave in 2013 to a Chinese university audience, he spoke of the author-translator relationship in greater detail. I quote at length from a translation made in China:

At present, more and more Chinese novels are being translated into foreign languages and disseminated far and wide. This, however, touches upon a problem—the point of departure for an author: Who are writers writing for, really? Are they writing for themselves, or are they writing for their readers? If they are writing for their readers, are they writing for Chinese readers or for foreign readers? In order for a novel to be translated into a foreign language there must be a translator. In this case can't we say the writer is writing for his translator? This trend of writing for one's translator is absolutely unsupportable. Notwithstanding the fact that literature must pass through a translator's translation to reach the world, must undergo their creative efforts, the personal artistic style of an author who thinks of their translator when they are writing is bound to be cheapened, and the eloquence and impenetrability of their work is bound to be simplified for the ease of translation. Therefore, when a writer is writing, they can think of whomever they so choose, but whatever happens they shouldn't think of the translator; they can't forget anyone, but they must forget the translator. It is only when it is thus that he can write novels with his own style, with a Chinese style. (Mo Yan, "Good Literature")

Mo Yan can say that because he does not write for us the translators or us foreign readers. I suspect that, knowing no foreign language or the ins and outs of reading tastes in other countries, he wouldn't know how to do so, even if he were so inclined.

On the other side of the issue is for whom translators translate. Is it our job to please writers who do not know the language into which their translators are working, to stay as close to the original as possible? The answer, of course, is no. The author writes not for himself nor for his translator, but for his readers. And that is for whom we must translate, our readers. Normally, this is not an issue. But sometimes it is, and I have, in the past, revealed instances in which an author was displeased with some of my renderings. I made it clear then, and will do so again now, that so long as I do not err in my translation of a word, a phrase, or something longer, I am duty bound to write in such a way as to faithfully reproduce what the author meant—to be precise, my interpretation of what the author meant—and not necessarily what he wrote. A fine point, perhaps, but an important distinction.

A translator's relationship with his/her author is not always a happy one. Some writers, of course, appreciate and understand the author-translator relationship. The symbiosis between the creator and the re-creator is not well understood by readers of either text. When it is smooth, healthy, mutually rewarding, as, for instance, between Umberto Eco and his Italian translator, William Weaver, the results are exemplary. When the relationship becomes destructive, as with Jorge Luis Borges (who was a translator himself) and the US-American Norman Thomas di Giovanni, it can have a terrible outcome. I have had extraordinarily good luck with most of the novelists I work with, in particular, Mo Yan, who has proved to be supportive and generous in regard to the English translations of his works. He is well aware of the impossibility of one-to-one correspondence between Chinese and English, as well as other languages into which his work is rendered; is forthcoming in revealing obscure cultural and historical aspects of his work; and comprehends the fact that a translation can complement, not supplement, the original. Most authors are happy to place their trust in a translator's hands, for they realize that translation, in Eugene Eoyang's words, "revitalizes a work of the past and makes it part of the present," that it extends the life of a work, and that it can reveal things hidden in the original text (77).

As translators, we are encouraged by words of praise from literary figures, including Borges himself, who has written that "perhaps the translator's work is more subtle, more civilized than that of the writer: the translator clearly comes after the writer. Translation is a more advanced stage of civilization" (Borges qtd. in Wechsler 9). Or Pushkin: "The translator is a 'courier of the human spirit'" (Pushkin qtd. in Barnstone 126). Not all are so generous: in an article about Mo Yan's Nobel, Kevin Bloom wrote referring to Bashevis Singer that the latter said that "'There is no such thing as a good translator,' Singer once said, seemingly oblivious to the likelihood that his readership would have peaked in the low double digits—including friends and family—had this long-suffering literary caste refused to indulge him. 'The best translators make the worst mistakes'" (<http://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2012-10-12-found-in-translation-mo-yan-wins-literature-nobel#.UzA_Pf7qJ9k>). Yes, the relationship between author and translator, while mutu-

ally rewarding, can be uneasy and fragile, but in the end it is the relationship that makes world literature possible and, incidentally, frees the rest of us from having to live our lives as Mo Yan.

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Author's profile

Howard Goldblatt taught Chinese literature at the University of Colorado and the University of Notre Dame. He is an award-winning translator of numerous works of contemporary Chinese fiction by Huang Chunming, Alai, Mo Yan, and others. His translations contribute to giving Anglophone readers insights into contemporary Chinese fiction.