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Abortion in Faulkner's *The Wild Palms* and Mo Yan's 蛙 (Frog)

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Abstract

In "Abortion in Faulkner's *The Wild Palms* and Mo Yan's 蛙 (Frog)" Lanlan Du explores the two novelists' representations of the historically persistent and socially significant theme of abortion. Faulkner depicts the male protagonist's fear of female fertility and tackles the issue of abortion as a matter of individual choice with the withering of romantic love, wretched poverty, and maternal death corresponding with the popular discourse of a mid-twentieth-century U.S. that depicted abortion as tragic. On the other hand, Mo Yan focuses more on the impact of national biopolitics on women bodies and agonized would-be mothers within China's national birth control policy, which has made abortions legal but coercive, thus exploring the dilemma China faces in pursuit of modernity.

Nearly a quarter of a century before being awarded the 2012 Nobel Prize in Literature, Mo Yan cited the 1949 Nobel Prize in Literature Laureate William Faulkner as one of the chief Western figures who influenced his fictional creations: "Every once in a while I turn the page of Faulkner's books. What he wrote in the books seems unimportant to me now. Up until now I have not gone through any of his books from the beginning to the end. When I read his books, I feel like talking to an old folk in our village. Our talk is casual and random, but I can always benefit from the communication with him" (unless indicated otherwise, all translations are mine) ("每隔上一段时间, 我就翻翻福克纳的书。他在书里写了些什么对我来说已经不重要了。至今我也没把他老人家的哪一本书从头到尾读完过。我看他的书时, 就像跟我们村子里的一个老大爷聊天一样, 东一句西一句, 天南地北, 漫无边际。但我总是能与他的交流中得到教益" ("会唱歌的墙" 193). By referring to Faulkner as one of "two burning furnaces" (Inge 19)—the other being the 1982 Nobel Prize in Literature Laureate Gabriel García Márquez—Mo Yan captures his admiration for and intimate spiritual communication with Faulkner. The two Nobel

Prize laureates have much in common: both have created extensive worlds set in fictional communities very much based on their hometowns, one in Yoknapatawpha County and the other Gaomi Township, Shandong Province. Both use original narrative forms in representing their dominant themes: their works consistently renew the potential of the novel through extraordinary experimentation. In *The Wild Palms* and 蛙 (Frog), respectively, the bravery of the narrative forms Faulkner and Mo Yan employ is matched by that of the narrative topic of reproductive rights in the particular geographical time and space familiar to the authors and challenging to their societies, especially given the social restraints on sexuality and the control of female bodies. In the study at hand, I analyze *The Wild Palms* and Frog and the two writers' representations of the historically persistent and socially significant theme of abortion.

Women characters' pregnancies and their responses

In both *The Wild Palms* and Frog, some women characters are represented as excessively active and possessing a power threatening to male characters. In *The Wild Palms*, Charlotte Rittenmeyer's marriage with her well-to-do Catholic husband Francis "Rat" Rittenmeyer is described as a continuation of patriarchy in her early life: "She had a father and then four brothers exactly like him and then she married a man exactly like the four brothers" (70). Women get married, have children, take care of their husband and children, and then die. Charlotte is apparently unhappy with her marriage and its byproduct, motherhood, so she elopes with her lover Harry Wilbourne, gives up the traditional family, and leaves her husband and daughters behind. At twenty-seven years old and four months away from being a full-fledged doctor of medicine, the impecunious Harry is unable to shoulder the financial burden of his love affair. Rat's financial offer to help represents the impossibility of Charlotte's full break from her traditional female role in her nuclear family.

Charlotte does not fit into the traditional schema of Western romantic love in other ways, as she rather than her male lover is the "subject of the passion" (Gwin 147), she resists the trappings of a traditional marriage, and she pursues her sexual desires. By depicting Charlotte as a woman who has active female desire, Faulkner subverts the traditional binary model of male/active and female/passive sexuality. It is Charlotte who is the virile partner and who strips herself before Harry can do it for her. On the train to Chicago, she takes the initiative to get undressed and "almost rapes him" (Pitay 122). If the flood of the Mississippi river in the "Old Man" narrative of *The Wild Palms* is more a historical fact, then the fluidity of female sexuality in "The Wild Palms" narrative is conveyed metaphorically to denote its overwhelming power upon the male character. Charlotte's excessive sexual desire flows like a flood threatening Harry's sense of safety. Charlotte is not only a sexual aggressor in her adulterous relationship with Harry but also the leader. Because Charlotte is the main breadwinner for the couple for a time, Harry considers her "not only a better

man and a better gentleman than I am, she is a better everything than I will ever be" (113). Her masculinity, particularly her willingness to make money, intimidates Harry, who is "always agonized by his entanglements with economic necessity" (Dobbs 828). Charlotte's assumption of male characteristics, such as shouldering the breadwinning, coordinates with her rejection of other conventional notions of femininity including maternity. Her rejection of motherhood is chiefly because of her belief in the purity of passion. She believes that romantic love will not die as long as lovers live in a perpetual honeymoon-like life and that only those who are unworthy of it will suffer from the deadening of love: "They say love dies, between two people. That's wrong. It doesn't die. It just leaves you, goes away, if you are not good enough, worthy enough. It doesn't die; you are the one that dies" (71).

Charlotte's and Harry's rejection of family routines and the stagnancy of familiar surroundings is mirrored by their geographical wanderings through New Orleans, Chicago, Wisconsin, Utah, San Antonio, and the Mississippi Gulf Coast. Charlotte attempts to maintain their strong passion by telling Harry that children "hurt too much" (182), which lends a sense of foreboding since, because of the use of narrative flashback, readers already know that she undergoes a botched abortion. Her aversion to motherhood makes clear that her later call for an abortion is her own choice. Faulkner's choice in the matter, however, is distinct from his characters'. He utilizes the high risk of maternal death in illegal abortions—the only kind available in the U.S. at the time—and has Charlotte pay the expensive price of death for maintaining the purity of passion. Charlotte is thus a functional character serving the purpose of advancing the male character Harry's development. Harry develops from the weak passive lover who is unable to take the initiative in a sexual relationship, even before his relationship with Charlotte, to a man who undergoes an epiphany after the failed abortion. When Charlotte tells him she is pregnant due to a contraceptive accident (she omits using her douche), he does not pin the blame on her. Then, rather than perform an abortion immediately after her request, Harry initially refuses and initiates their move to Texas so he can gain successful employment to support the child. In Texas, he continues to resist and offers to make whatever sacrifices are necessary for the child; he even considers setting "up as a professional abortionist" (175).

Both Charlotte and Harry are unwilling to welcome the baby because they desperately fear the entire set of parental roles and economic responsibilities. Charlotte's stated motivation to make the choice of abortion is to prevent the baby from experiencing poverty like them. Harry at first refuses to perform the abortion because he abhors the idea of killing his own child, not the idea of abortion *per se*. Therefore he takes the initiative to search for an abortion pill in a brothel, although in vain. He is then unsuccessful in finding a way to support a family. In the grim social reality of the late 1930s, he is lucky to find a job as a writer for pulp magazines. Harry's job is a sacrifice of his and Charlotte's obsessive relationship, as the time and low pay leave him busy and distracted: "Now he knew why he would sit before an unfinished page in the

typewriter, believing he was thinking only of the money" (Faulkner 107). So Charlotte's pregnancy and failed abortion serve as the stimuli for Harry to understand his personal limitations and realize the consequences of their illicit love. No matter how hard he and Charlotte try to escape social confines, they cannot fully cling to their pure passionate love. Yet, late in the novel, after Charlotte has died and he has been accused of murder, Harry refuses to commit suicide and makes the choice to grieve.

Mo Yan's *Frog* depicts Tadpole's second wife Little Lion (Xiao Shizi 小狮子) as a sexually aggressive woman, based on her strong desire to become a mother, as opposed to Charlotte, who so fervently flees motherhood. After the pitiful death of Tadpole's first wife, Tadpole's aunt, Wan Xin, serves as a matchmaker between Tadpole and Little Lion, who mentors Little Lion in their work of birth control. As time passes by, Little Lion finds herself unable to conceive a child and becomes fanatic in her dream of motherhood. She laments her job assisting Wan Xin, a countryside obstetrician-gynecologist whose job is to enact the family planning (计划生育) or One-child policy, including aborting many fetuses. When she sees an adorable mixed-blood baby in a stroller during a walk with her husband, Little Lion expresses such great admiration and intimacy for the child that the child's mother becomes uncomfortable and gives her a hostile look. Tadpole reminds Little Lion of social decorum and asks her to watch out for her behavior next time, which enrages Little Lion: "Little Lion felt very wronged. She first cursed those wealthy people who had more than one child at their own will and those men and women who strived to have as many babies as they could after getting married to foreigners; then she began to be regretful, blaming herself for following Aunt to implement so strictly the family planning policy, which could have caused her infertility because they have disobeyed God's will by aborting so many fetuses that it has incurred God's wrath and hence caused her barrenness; she then wished me to impregnate a foreign woman so as to have many mixed-blood babies" ("小狮子很感委屈，先是骂了一通那些肆意超生的富人和那些与外国人结婚后便拼命生养的男人和女人；接着变自怨自艾，后悔当年跟着姑姑执行严酷的计划生育政策，引流了那么多婴儿，伤了天理，导致老天报应，是自己不能生养；然后又希望我也去找一个洋妞结婚，生一堆混血小孩") (209). Out of her fervent desire, she finally tempts Tadpole to provide his sperm to a surrogate mother, Chen Mei, to bear the child for her. Mo Yan's depiction of Little Lion's aggressiveness seems to reveal more her desire to be a mother rather than its impact on the male protagonist.

If Faulkner's Charlotte rejects traditional motherhood to pursue her own passion, Mo Yan's women characters form a sad collective of women fervently desiring to be mothers. As Michel Foucault argues, the governing of collective human life, health, and welfare has become a key objective of modern states. China is no exception. After the founding of the People's Republic of China, the government actively encouraged mothers to have more children, so there was a drastic population increase in the 1950s, resulting in a problematic imbalance between the population,

resources, and the environment. Consequently, the 1960s and the first half of 1970s saw a tentative and intermittent attempt by the government to reduce the birth rate. Since 1978, birth planning has been a national policy. The One-child policy has been executed compulsively since 1980, gradually leading to a quick decline in fertility. Although the tensions between the government and citizens have eased now because the popular fertility culture since the 1990s began to converge with state birth propaganda, the situation in previous decades was tense.

In the decades before the 1990s, the natural right of Chinese women to be mothers conflicted with national biopolitics and contravened an essentially pronatalist Chinese fertility culture. Moreover, most Chinese families had a deeply rooted mindset about giving birth to a male child to carry on the family line. They opposed the new national birth limitation on the grounds of such traditional fertility ethics. In *Frog*, Mo Yan focuses on the tensions of rural citizens and this form of state intervention. It delves deeply into some rural families' defiance when the state's birth policy was executed with relentlessness. For the female characters in Mo Yan's fictional Gaomi, the greater the adherence to the national birth control policy, the stronger the female characters' desires to become mothers.

Wang Renmei, the first wife of the narrator Tadpole, is deeply influenced by the traditional fertility culture. After giving birth to a daughter, she dreams of getting pregnant again to give birth to a son. She is unable to conceive, however, because Wan Xin inserted an intrauterine contraceptive device (IUD) into her. But she subsequently has her IUD taken out stealthily. As with Charlotte's unintentional omission of contraception in *The Wild Palms*, Wang Renmei's intentional one results in a successful pregnancy. Her pregnancy puts both her husband and Aunt in awkward positions: her husband's military career is jeopardized and her Aunt's job of birth control seems less convincing. While Wang Renmei is a strong character, she capitulates under the extreme pressure by the chief representatives of society to abort her pregnancy. As a resolute practitioner of the birth control policy, Aunt forces Wang Renmei's maternal family to hand her over by intimidating them and their neighbors, threatening to pull down their houses. Wang Renmei gives up her right to second motherhood then pays the expensive price of her life. A very significant point here is that Wang Renmei is ignorant of the fact that she had been implanted with an IUD after the first labor. This lack of consent is a blatant violation of women's right of reproduction. Although birth planning is a way for China to coordinate economic development and population growth, forced contraception, sterilization, and abortion are illegal. *Frog* articulates a strong opposition to these illegal practices through the death of Wang Renmei.

Mo Yan depicts other rural women figures, who, like Wang Renmei, possess a fervent desire to be mothers. They make use of every means available to evade the national restraints on childbirth. Geng Xiulian and Wang Dan are two other rural women characters that lose their lives trying to have a second child. They are chased

down and forced to abort their second pregnancies by Aunt and her followers. The unique characteristics of these women and Little Lion sensitively portray the psychological effects of an exaggerated form of national biopolitics on women in rural China. Unable to conceive a baby for a long time, Little Lion becomes extremely sexually aggressive in her eagerness to get a firstborn, while the sexuality of these two other women characters is not explicitly described. What unifies these women characters' desperate attempt to conceive and give birth is their strong desire to have a male heir for the family, which serves patriarchal ideology more than it does female sexuality. If Charlotte in *The Wild Palms* dies because of her free choice (pro-choice) abortion, pregnant women characters in *Frog* die because of crude physical coercion. Mo Yan focuses more on the impact of national biopolitics on female bodies than does Faulkner, who focalizes individual choice and implied social mores. In some instances, China's national family planning policy has made abortions legal but coercive for millions of women. By depicting their fervent desire to be mothers and the poignant agonies of those Chinese women who have been forced to have abortions, Mo Yan thoroughly explores the dilemma China faces in the pursuit of modernity: the necessity of birth control and its inhumane consequences out of extreme execution of the national policy.

Narratives of male responses to female fertility

The two parallel narratives—"The Wild Palms" and "Old Man"—that Faulkner uses in *The Wild Palms* highlights the theme of male characters' fear of female sexuality and fertility, although from different male vantage points. The often incompetent lover Harry is whirled about so violently in the flood of Charlotte's passion that he capitulates to her will to perform an abortion on her, even though it is illegal and even though he had not completed his medical training, and thus instrumentally contributes to the tragic ending of their romantic love. His final captivity in Parchman Prison in the final chapter of "The Wild Palms" section results from his incompetence in balancing romantic love and social reality. Harry's inability is highlighted through contrast from the protagonist of the "Old Man" narrative of *The Wild Palms*. The unnamed tall convict featured in the "Old Man" narrative struggles actively in his battle against a natural flood that he finds himself in inadvertently. He provides food and shelter for a pregnant woman caught in the flood, but he rejects the notion of romantic love, thus staying out of the control of the mysterious female principle. Harry is apparently less resourceful than the tall convict, given that the tall convict contributes to bringing a new life into the world under highly adverse circumstances. Like Harry, the tall convict displays fear for female fertility, expressed in his view of the pregnant woman's body as monstrous and threatening. The nameless pregnant woman under the tall convict's gaze is reduced to her reproductive organs, too fleshly to be accepted. Terrified by female fertility,

the tall convict willingly returns to prison because he believes it is the safest all-male world without the control of women. He prefers to "return to that monastic existence of shotguns and shackles where he would be secure from it" (130). By depicting both male protagonists' fear of female fertility, Faulkner seems to express the patriarchal dread of female sexuality and maternity. In treating abortion as the dire consequence of female hypersexuality in "The Wild Palms" and the pregnant female body as a dread in "Old Man," both sections have a very clear misogynistic line in relation to women's roles in reproduction.

The "Wild Palms" narrative demonstrates Harry's inability to innovate a new, dominant or equal role for himself within a romantic relationship. He suffers from ennui: "I am bored. I am bored to extinction. There is nothing here that I am needed for. Not even by her. I have already cut enough wood to last until Christmas and there is nothing else for me to do" (96). Faulkner describes two elements that encroach on Harry's relationship with Charlotte: money and respectability. Harry is trapped not only in Charlotte's excessive love but also in the economic struggles of the 1930s. Economic necessities constantly intrude into the realm of their romantic love. Although the lovers try desperately to escape the social confines of life and struggle to enter "a transcendental realm of romantic love" (Dobbs 816), their aspirations always conflict with grim reality. They cannot escape the worldly reality of a capitalist U.S. and are the victims of the economic crisis of the time. Destitute, they drift to the South, and then wander off aimlessly to different places. Although they fanatically fear a settled existence, the problem of feeding and caring for a family mires Harry. While Charlotte works for a time dressing store windows, he is domesticated in his job: he stays home writing stories for pulp magazines, beginning his stories with "I had the body and desires of a woman yet in knowledge and experience of the world I was but a child," "if I had only a mother's love to guard me on that fatal day" (103), and "at sixteen I was an unwed mother" (104). Harry writes his fictional stories as if he were a woman.

The novel seems to attribute Harry's lack of strong masculinity to an underdeveloped state of adolescence. Pliant and immature, Harry does not know how to cope with the active and assertive Charlotte until her pregnancy. The pregnancy initiates the possibility that he may grow up, so to speak: when Charlottes asks him to perform an abortion on her, he initially refuses. His failure in the forestalled abortion, however, indicates the failure of that potential. As Joseph J. Moldenhauer notes, Harry later explains his failure in these terms: "A miser would probably bungle the blowing of his own safe too. Should have called in a professional, a cracksman who didn't care, didn't love the iron flanks that held the money" (297). But the analogy is not an adequate explanation. Harry's dilemma precludes a successful abortion. The reason for the failure lies in his compulsive need to punish himself and Charlotte for their life of what he believes all the while to be a sin (Moldenhauer 312).

In *Frog*, Tadpole is reluctant to have a second baby, despite the prospect of having a boy, because he might be expelled from the army, a state institution that

would frown upon the violation of another state institution, the national family planning policy. At hearing the news of his wife's second pregnancy, he hurries back to his hometown to persuade his wife to have an abortion. Although tortured by a contradictory mind, he still follows his aunt to compel his wife to have an abortion, thus being the instrumental cause of her death during the operation. The familial alliance compounds the force of the pressure for the female figure to agree to an abortion. Like thousands of husbands who are entangled by the national birth control policy, Tadpole is stuck in the plight of whether or not to have the baby, unable to experience happiness in his wife's conception. Afterward, he is riven by guilt. Here Mo Yan highlights the great impact of political intervention on men as well as women.

The performers of abortion

Birth control is often interwoven with issues of love, marriage, and parenthood. In *The Wild Palms*, Faulkner discusses the individual lovers' plight through the popular discourse of abortion at the time as basically dangerous, unnatural, unethical, and above all illegal. Although there was a birth control movement in the U.S. led primarily by Margaret Sanger between the 1910s and 1930s as a cure to the social ills of prostitution, domestic abuse, and venereal disease, abortion in the U.S. at that time was unavailable due to few providers and high financial costs. In the 1930s, only therapeutic abortions were legal; that is, "abortion was legal when it was done by a qualified medical doctor, in a hospital certified by the American Hospital Association, and when it was done to prevent mental or physical damage to the women" (Eldred 144). Charlotte is no exception in turning to illegal abortion and in her physical danger. Perhaps Harry is no exception either as a practitioner of abortions: he performs two abortions, one successful, the other bungled, and both illegal. The first abortion is on Billie Buckner, the mine manager's wife. He bungles the second operation because he cannot make his moral integrity subservient to Charlotte's ideal. After his unsuccessful search for a job, he realizes gradually that "to have the child would be to mock the very fiber of their defiance" (Galharn 143). By violating his moral principle and agreeing to perform the abortion, Harry discards an essential part of himself, "casting away the last vestiges of his personal and professional honor" (Harrington 82). Harry had ruined the Rittenmeyer's nuclear family and in Faulkner's poetic justice he therefore is prohibited from obtaining one of his own. Faulkner's poetic justice is thus not far from the divine justice that Little Lion articulates in *Frog* about her infertility due to her assisting Aunt with abortions.

In *Frog*, Aunt, unlike Harry, shows little hesitation and firmly performs abortions to enforce the national family planning policy. Foucault argues for two basic forms of biopower: the discipline of the individual body and the regulatory control of the population. The discipline of the individual body is exercised on the micro level, supervised by ideological apparatuses such as family, school, church, hospital, and prison, whereas the population is controlled at the macro level by state regula-

tion. In *Frog*, Mo Yan does not narrate on the micro level how Aunt is transformed gradually into a qualified person conforming to the social norms, but rather presents her a part of the apparatus, and a part that goes wrong. As a Party member, Aunt firmly believes in the official discourse of family planning and becomes a practitioner infamous for her merciless enforcement of the One-child policy: "For those who give birth by abiding by the family planning policy, Aunt takes a bath and burns incense to deliver the baby; for those who get pregnant by violating the policy, Aunt never lets the baby survive. Aunt says so while making a chopping gesture in the air" ("对那些计划内生育的，姑姑焚香沐浴为她接生；对那些超计划怀孕的——姑姑对着虚空猛劈一掌——决不让一个漏网" (87). Aunt punishes those who violate the policy: she chases pregnant women despite their fragile physical condition, forcing them to jump into the river, hide in a cellar, drift to other places, or even lose their lives under her severe punishment.

The birth control policy was made at a time when the Chinese government found it difficult to provide decent health care, education, housing, and nutrition for the ever-growing population. It has alleviated the nation's and world's resources. However, the national policy, like any national policy, has loopholes. Mo Yan represents Aunt's inhumane treatment of some pregnant rural women; and in one scene, Tadpole listens to a young man describe some of the dark and unfair realities concerning the family planning policy in contemporary time: "Now the situation is that those who have money pay the fine to have more than one baby; those who do not have money stealthily give birth to more than one baby, with officials managing to let 'second wife' (a modern version of 'concubine') have the baby" ("现在是"有钱的罚着生," "没钱的偷着生", 当官的让"二奶生") (228). As China's population is aging and is heavily weighted toward male children, Mo Yan's story is timely in urging readers to think about the national One-child policy and its loopholes. He does so by forefronting women's vulnerability when their bodies and lives are controlled by the state.

How form links with theme

Both writers adopt experimental forms to support the themes of their novels. The contrapuntal qualities of *The Wild Palms* reveal the two modes of dealing with heart-break: Harry experiences the seamy consequences of illicit love, accepts grief, and finally extracts some meaning of life from his tragic love; the tall convict, after being rejected by his first love, denies the pain of the loss of love by distancing himself from the female world and prefers to stay in the space of all-male confinement to escape any possible female control. Faulkner's alternating arrangement of the "The Wild Palms" and "The Old Man" narratives intensifies the sense of "bewilderment and outright dissatisfaction" (Moldenhauer 305) in some readers, just as it did its first readers in 1939. This can be seen from its complex publication history: "Signet Books, after having published 'Old Man' and 'Wild Palms' in separate volumes, issued them

between one set of covers, but without alternation of chapters, in 1954. Modern Library has ... reprinted 'Old Man' with 'Spotted Horses' and 'The Bear' in one volume. And Malcolm Cowley shared the majority opinion when in his introductory notes to *The Portable Faulkner*, which contains 'Old Man' as an independent selection, he wrote that this story is more effective than 'Wild Palms'" (Moldenhauer 305).

Conrad Aiken "raised his voice in the wilderness when he admired the book's 'fugue-like alternation of viewpoint'" (Aiken 653), and Edmond Volpe avers that the separation of the two narratives "destroys a novel of remarkable depth and startling ingenuity" (213). I agree with them and add that bold innovation in the narrative technique pushes readers' active participation with the narrative, characters, themes, and topics. The interlocking sections of Harry fighting against society and the tall convict fighting against nature complement each other thematically. Themes such as alienation, love, memory, captivity, and freedom are intensified by its central topic of abortion. Frog also employs narrative strategies that require much from readers. Mo Yan uses a combination of epistolary, fictional, and dramatic forms to express his concern with the conflicts between state politics and traditional fertility culture, emphasizing the characters' sense of guilt and the outlets for redemption. The five letters Tadpole writes to a Japanese writer whose father committed crimes as a commander in the 1937-45 Sino-Japanese War serve as guides to the theme of guilt and its redemption. In between the five letters is the legendary life story of Aunt, narrated in combination with some magic realistic elements, most notably her encounter with numerous frogs after her retirement party. On the surface, the ending of the story with a dramatic play being staged is the finished literary product of the narrator, who claims in his first letter that he would write a drama about Aunt. The drama, however, works intertextually. In the play, Aunt is depicted as a conspirator grabbing a baby from a surrogate mother, Chen Mei, for the sake of Little Lion and Tadpole. As such, it highlights the heated matter of surrogacy.

The national and the personal, the macro and micro, are thus intertwined. Aunt's and Little Lion's infertility are symbolic as are Aunt's insomnia and fear of frogs. Both Little Lion and Aunt are barren women. Readers learn of Aunt's infertility from Tadpole's point of view when Aunt is busy chasing down the pregnant Wang Dan:

It suddenly occurred to me that Aunt is now forty-seven years old. Her youth has long passed and she is now walking on the course of middle age, but her face shows the desolate look of an old woman, revealing the fact that she has experienced the vicissitudes of life. It reminds me of my mother's words who has said the following more than once: What is a woman born for? A woman comes to the world to have babies ... A woman who cannot give birth to a baby experiences the most painful pains; a woman who cannot give birth to a baby is not a complete woman. Moreover, if a woman doesn't give birth to a baby, she will become cold-hearted and will grow old quickly. Mother's words are meant to speak to Aunt, but she never speaks these words in the face of Aunt. Does Aunt's growing older have anything to do with having no children?

我猛然想到，姑姑已经四十七岁了，她的青春岁月早已结束，现在，她正在中年的路上行走，但她的饱经沧桑的脸上，已经显出老者的凄凉。我想起母亲不止一次地说过，女人生来是干什么的？女人归根结底是为了生孩子而来 [...] 一个女人不生孩子是最大的痛苦，一个女人不生孩子算不上一个完整的女人，而且，女人不生孩子，心就变硬了，女人不生孩子，老得格外快。母亲的话是针对姑姑而说，但母亲从来没有当着姑姑的面说过。姑姑的老，是不是真的与没生孩子有关？ (173)

Tadpole's mother, a traditional Chinese woman, holds that women's true and natural function is to procreate. She therefore interprets Aunt as unnatural because she devotes her life to the cause of family planning, remains childless after she marries in her fifties, and mistreats pregnant women who violate the family planning policy. Aunt's insomnia and fear of frogs function as additional consequences to the infertility of both Little Lion and Aunt, symbolizing the punishment for their inhumane, heavy-handed enforcement of the national policy. The possibility for atonement comes only through Aunt's marriage to the folk artist Hao Dashou, who is capable of creating vivid clay babies, and their combined efforts in creating the clay babies modeled on the babies Aunt aborted.

The titles of both novels serve the themes significantly. Faulkner's novel was originally titled *If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem*, erased until only recently because of Malcolm Cowley's bowdlerization in *The Portable Faulkner* (1946), which published only "The Old Man" (the 1995 Vintage international edition published the two short stories in alternating ways but still adopted *The Wild Palms* as the title of the whole novel, with the original title appearing in brackets on the cover). Faulkner's original title alludes to the Bible's Psalm 137: "By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion. We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof. For there they that carried us away captive required of us a song; and they that wasted us required of us mirth, saying, Sing us one of the songs of Zion. How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land? If I forgot thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning. If I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth; if I prefer not Jerusalem above my chief joy" (137.1-6). This rich Psalm expresses the agony of imprisonment in a strange land, with the personal ventriloquizing and amplifying a corporate lament. Jerusalem is a symbol of the freedom that the Jewish captives in Babylon lost but one day might regain (King 506). As a way of responding to life's brutalities, the psalmist reminds captives not to abandon any hope of future freedom by remembering what has been lost. The allusion's focus on freedom and captivity is revealed in the attempted escapes and fated imprisonment of Harry and the tall convict. The line "let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth" lends itself to considerations of the authorial drive to voice important matters, as does Faulkner in his novel. Faulkner does indeed use the novel to search for "various possibilities of emancipation from the various prisons of modernism and late modernist culture" (Hannon 134).

Charlotte has no model to imitate, except a culturally inherited idea of passionate love. Deceived by that idea, she ends up with a botched abortion, which for Faulkner is one of the sins drawn from late modernist culture. So too the tall convict is an uncritical consumer of pulp fictions (the very products of the likes of Harry, who works as a pulp writer for a time). He follows the wrong models in such fictions and ends up in prison for a train robbery. Harry, who decides to live with an individual rather than corporate grief over Charlotte's death, also chooses to end up in prison, maintaining the memory of her life and love: "*If I become not then all of remembering will cease to be.—Yes he thought Between grief and nothing I will take grief*" (273). Like the captives in Babylon, maintaining the memory of Charlotte is a way of redemption for Harry after Charlotte's death, which is to say after great loss. Mo Yan's title also serves his work: frog (蛙) is a homophone of children (娃), and with a strong power of survival after transforming from tadpoles, the frog is the symbol of life and fertility in Chinese culture. Frogs are related to human beings in the sense that in their original forms, tadpoles and sperm, are similar. Thus the title "Frog" indicates Mo Yan's concern for reproduction and life, particularly his great reverence for life. The title alerts readers to the equally meaningful naming of characters. Most of the characters are named after a specific organ of the body, owing, according to the novel, to the local belief that "petty, vulgar names secure the long life of the named" ("贱名者长生" [5]). It is the combination of different organs that forms a complete life. Mo Yan's story indicates that no one is justified in killing anyone—himself, herself, any other person—no matter the purported reason, since it is a sin that is impossible to be redeemed. Notably, the narrator Tadpole's name provides a persistent reminder of the fragility and brevity of life.

Many debates on abortion focus on the rights of the fetus and women. *The Wild Palms* and *Frog*, however, demonstrate that society and culture are integral to reproductive rights. The debate of abortion inevitably involves not only ordinary people's attitudes toward pregnancy and motherhood but also national policies and social mores. Although both Faulkner and Mo Yan depict tragic consequences for abortion, they reflect on the social issues concerning reproduction on the basis of different social contexts. Faulkner's discussion of abortion is tightly related to the issues of love, female desire, and personal choice, deeply affected by but not confined to the social framework of marriage. Mo Yan's view on abortion is closely tied to the impact of state intervention. Therefore he discusses abortion in wedlock. Dealing with the same subject matter of abortion, Faulkner asks readers to think about the dire consequences of excessive romantic love, whereas Mo Yan moves them to experience the discomfiting tensions that result from state intrusion on human reproduction. While Faulkner warns readers of the potential risks of falling into the trap of pure passion, Mo Yan appeals for a respect for life. Both do so by highlighting the repercussions on women, men, and reproductive

practitioners, whether authorized or not. Both strive, especially through their use of innovative forms, to engage readers as well. Although written about seventy years apart, *The Wild Palms* and *Frog* represent reproductive issues sensitively and courageously as important and complex matters within societies still lacking a full range of social services such as safe and reliable contraception, protection from sexual and sterilization abuse, sex education, health care, and prenatal care.

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