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## Mo Yan in Context

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## Rural Chineseness, Mo Yan's Work, and World Literature

*Chengzhou He*

### Abstract

In "Rural Chineseness, Mo Yan's Work, and World Literature" Chengzhou He discusses performative acts that Mo Yan employs to create a unique imaginative world of rural China and how Mo Yan's literary works of rural China serve as a means to supplement, resist, revise, or subvert the official discourse of Chinese modernity. The characteristic rural location, the Northeast Township in Gaomi County, a fictionalized place based on Mo Yan's own hometown, is not merely a place, a background of literary writing, but rather a representation of a narrative style, an emotional experience, and an aesthetic. Mo Yan's writings offer not only a personal, local, and unofficial account of an eventful life in twentieth-century China but more importantly his reflections on and criticism of unfolding reality.

The 1990s enacted a "performative turn" in cultural and literary studies wherein the paradigm of culture and literature as text transformed into the concept of culture and literature as event and action. Theories of cultural performativity provide vitality to discussions about literature as cultural components. In his "Culture and Performance in the Circum-Atlantic World," Joseph Roach suggests that the category of literature itself be expanded beyond its traditional sense of a collection of texts to instead encompass a wide range of cultural activities, including oral storytelling, song, mime, ritual, and other such enterprises (45). The theory of performativity originates in the "speech-act theory" of J. L. Austin, whose *How to Do Things with Words*, based on his 1955 William James Lectures at Harvard University, remains a seminal text. Austin distinguishes two categories of utterances: constative utterances and performative utterances. The latter are not true or false but rather perform the action they refer to. An example Austin gives is that of a wedding ceremony: the priest asks, "Do you take this woman to be your lawful wedded wife?" The response "I do" performs the act. The speaker's relationship to the woman is changed by means of the response. But Austin also points out that such a performative utterance may be "infelicitous" or unhappy, if the circumstances are not

satisfactory to make the action happen, for example, if the wedding ceremony takes place on stage or in fiction. Therefore, Austin excludes literature from his theory of performative utterances.

Jacques Derrida and others critiqued Austin's "prejudice" against the so-called "non-serious performatives" in literature. In "Philosophy and Literature: The Fortunes of the Performative," Jonathan Culler encourages scholars of literature to remain open to the various interpretations of the performative and to seek opportunities to read literature and performativity against and in cooperation with each other: "I think that rather than try to restrict or simplify the performative's domain by choosing one strand of reflection as the correct one, we ought to accentuate and to pursue the differences between them—so as to increase our chances of grasping the different levels and modes in which events occur; and I take this to be a project requiring the cooperation—albeit the inevitably contentious cooperation—of philosophy and literature, the thinking of philosophy and of literary theory" (518). To understand performativity, two key connotations of its root word "perform" are especially useful. To perform connotes in equal measure to do and to act; that is, one performs a task or performs for an audience. The concept of performativity keeps both of these senses of performance firmly in view (Wagner 1203). A third term, "performanz," refers to the effects of any social/cultural action. Literary performanz may refer to how literary events influence participants by shaping their emotions, constructing identities, and creating imaginative spaces. Performativity is the characteristics of an object, for instance a literary text or an event, such as a literary recital. These characteristics are apparent in a performance when the object or event is framed, presented, highlighted, or displayed.

To say that Mo Yan performs rural Chineseness, then, means that he both performs a rural literary identity for his audience and readers and builds a literary identity of rural Chineseness in his writings. I argue that the rural Chineseness that Mo Yan has performed in his texts and in literary events functions as a counterdiscourse to resist, revise, and supplement, if not subvert, the dominant grand discourse of modern China in a reflective or corrective manner. Further, I argue that Mo Yan's rural Chineseness is performed on different, interrelated levels: on the textual level through such devices as nativist narratives of storytelling and local opera under the label of an imaginative landscape called the Northeast Gaomi Township in Shandong Province and on the cultural level through the author's performances, such as in the Nobel Prize in Literature award ceremony of 10 December 2012, with his speeches and interviews consolidating his image as an author of and from rural China.

### "A storyteller" from and about rural China

Immediately after the announcement on 11 October 2012 that Mo Yan was the recipient of the Nobel Prize in Literature and again following the Nobel Prize ceremonies in December in Stockholm, there was a rush of articles on and interviews with Mo

Yan across China and the globe in various media. In contrast with the warm reception and praise of Mo Yan's Nobel Prize by Chinese readers and media, the international media engaged in a heated debate over Mo Yan, his literature, and his political views. Most of the negative criticism is not so much literary as political. The criticism is targeted in particular at Mo Yan's position as vice president of the government-run Chinese Writers Association and his participation in an event of copying Mao Zedong's 1942 speech on literature and arts in Yan'an. In June 2012 some Chinese authors joined in a state-sponsored project to hand-copy Mao Zedong's 1942 "Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art" in commemoration of its seventieth anniversary. In "Does This Writer Deserve the Prize?" Perry Link questions Mo Yan's conscious compromises with the regime, although with some reluctance. And he suggests that this is "the price of writing inside the system" (<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2012/dec/06/mo-yan-nobel-prize/>). Herta Müller, the 2009 Nobel Prize in Literature laureate, goes so far to say that the choice of Mo Yan by the Nobel Committee is "a slap in the face for all those working for democracy and human rights" (Müller qtd. in Flood <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/nov/26/mo-yan-nobel-herta-muller>). While Torbjörn Lodén speaks highly of Mo Yan's literary achievements, calling him "a lavish storyteller with roots in century-old oral tradition," he nevertheless expresses doubt over the decision of the Swedish Academy to give the prize to "an author who is so obedient to the regime that he participates in the praise of Mao's Yan'an Speech" (<http://www.dn.se/kultur-noje/kulturdebatt/mo-yans-hyllning-till-mao-forvanar/>; unless indicated otherwise, all translations are mine). Others such as Charles Laughlin and Göran Sommardal defended Mo Yan and launched a critique of the criticisms of Mo Yan. The former poses the rhetorical question, "am I to understand from Mo Yan's critics that unless Chinese writers and artists are more 'politically courageous' and invite imprisonment and exile—or worse—by speaking out directly against their government and political system, their lifetime of artistic labors and achievements will never be worthy of international recognition in the form of a Nobel Prize in Literature?" (<https://www.chinafile.com/what-mo-yans-detractors-get-wrong/>).

I outline this debate not to join it but rather to examine Mo Yan's subsequent defense of his political views and thus address the comingling of politics and aesthetics in the performance of Mo Yan's literature, especially how he reflects on modern and contemporary Chinese history and society and the mainstream representations of them in both his speeches and his texts. First and foremost, Mo Yan has often presented himself and also been presented as a storyteller of and from rural China. The title of Mo Yan's "Nobel Lecture: Storytellers" is a far cry from the grand and provocative title of Harold Pinter's "Nobel Lecture: Art, Truth, and Politics" ([http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/2005/pinter-lecture-e.html](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2005/pinter-lecture-e.html)). Mo Yan indeed told stories in the speech, including those about his mother and his childhood. As an attendee in Stockholm at the invitation of the Swedish Academy, I

found especially touching the story of his mother who died of hunger, disease, and hard work: "After my mother died, in the midst of almost crippling grief, I decided to write a novel for her. *Big Breasts and Wide Hips* is that novel. Once my plan took shape, I was burning with such emotion that I completed a draft of half a million words in only eighty-three days" (<[http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/2012/yan-lecture\\_en.html](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2012/yan-lecture_en.html)>). He also shared that his childhood as a cattle and sheep herder after primary school provided rich material for his writings. He said that he learned through listening to "tales of the supernatural, historical romances, and strange and captivating stories, all tied to the natural environment and clan histories. What I should do was simplicity itself: write my own stories in my own way. My way was that of the marketplace storyteller, with which I was so familiar, the way my grandfather and my grandmother and other village old-timers told stories" (<[http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/2012/yan-lecture\\_en.html](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2012/yan-lecture_en.html)>). Mo Yan's stories in the speech, as in his fiction, are mostly about his family and hometown.

These stories of his rural Chinese upbringing are clearly related to his criticisms. As introduction to the stories of his Nobel Lecture, he addresses the negative criticisms wielded at him and his literature, specifically in terms of performance:

The announcement of my Nobel Prize has led to controversy. At first I thought I was the target of the disputes, but over time I've come to realize that the real target was a person who had nothing to do with me. Like someone watching a play in a theater, I observed the *performances* around me. I saw the winner of the prize both garlanded with flowers and besieged by stone-throwers and mudslingers. I was afraid he would succumb to the assault, but he emerged from the garlands of flowers and the stones, a smile on his face; he wiped away mud and grime, stood calmly off to the side, and said to the crowd: "For a writer, the best way to speak is by writing. You will find everything I need to say in my works. Speech is carried off by the wind; the written word can never be obliterated. I would like you to find the patience to read my books. I cannot force you to do that, and even if you do, I do not expect your opinion of me to change. No writer has yet appeared, anywhere in the world, who is liked by all his readers; that is especially true during times like these." Even though I would prefer to say nothing, since it is something I must do on this occasion, let me just say this: I am a storyteller, so I am going to tell you some stories. (<[http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/2012/yan-lecture\\_en.html](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2012/yan-lecture_en.html)>).

Mo Yan's performance of rural Chineseness and storytelling in his speech may be interpreted as his response to the subset of his "readers," his critics. As he points out, he is first of all a writer who tells stories. What he has written is based on his own experiences, especially from his life in his hometown.

In his prepared speech at the Nobel banquet, Mo Yan calls himself "a farm boy from Gaomi's Northeast Township in far-away China" and he ends with thanks to "my older relatives and compatriots at home in Gaomi, Shandong, China. I was,

am and always will be one of you. I also thank the fertile soil that gave birth to me and nurtured me. It is often said that a person is shaped by the place where he grows up. I am a storyteller, who has found nourishment in your humid soil. Everything that I have done, I have done to thank you!" ("Banquet" <[http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/2012/yan-speech.html](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2012/yan-speech.html)>). Mo Yan's repeated self-portrayal as "a storyteller of and from rural China" for his readers and audiences is deliberate, and it is deliberate for audiences of ever larger concentric circles: his immediate critics, the audience at the banquet, and the posterity of readers who will read his speech. "A storyteller from rural China" is also the image that Mo Yan presented himself to his large local and international audiences at the Aula of Stockholm University on the day before the banquet. There he recited in Chinese his short story "The Wolf" and an excerpt from the beginning of *Life and Death are Wearing Me Out*. Following each of his recitals, a Swedish actor performed them again in Swedish. Both stories are characterized by animal fable, nativist language, and rural Chinese life. After the recitals, a local journalist interviewed Mo Yan before the audience. The following are from the notes I took: "In rural culture there are historical figures, legends, events, and even myths and ghost stories such as a wolf or a rooster turning into a human. The folk elements and oral tradition figure strongly in my books, as they are part of my experiences at that time." When asked about his views on literature and politics, Mo Yan answered, "Any reader is entitled to ask a writer questions about his views of politics. I am not a politician, but my novels are about politics. The major task of a novelist is to create characters, who then express what the author thinks." Mo Yan once again requested his readers and critics to judge his political attitudes based not on what he has said and done in public but on what is written in his oeuvre. Anyone who has read carefully Mo Yan's writings cannot fail to notice how critical he is socially and politically about China and the human condition.

What Mo Yan said and did before, during, and after the Nobel Prize ceremonies suggests three aspects about his performance: first, he is an author from the countryside; second, literature is about politics; and third, he is a writer who does not speak out his views and thoughts verbally or in live social performance but conveys them with his pen.

## The nativist narrative in Mo Yan's novels

In terms of the "Chinese" or nativist aspects of storytelling and narrative, Mo Yan is indebted to P'u Sung-Ling (1640-1715) and his 1680 *聊斋志异* (*Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*). In his article "学习浦松林" ("Learning from P'u Sung-Ling"), Mo Yan tells a story about how P'u might have collected resources for his stories sitting under a big willow tree by a main road at his village; he prepared tea and a smoking pipe for the passersby, who were then requested to tell stories of any kind in return: "Thus, numerous unreliable and fabricated stories became

resources of the book *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio*" (1). In those stories, the boundary between reality and the odd or fantastic is often blurred, and the characters include magical foxes, ghosts, scholars, court officials, and so on. *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio* has been one of the most popular books in China among both old and young, and there have been numerous adaptations across different media in modern times. P'u's hometown is not far from Mo Yan's and both were nurtured by the rich folk tradition of their native cultures in which people express their wishes and fears, their joy and sadness.

In *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* and Mo Yan's other novels and stories, there is a blurring of the boundaries between humans, ghosts, and beasts. *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* is about a deceased man called Ximen Nao, who is reincarnated in the human world six times in animal and human forms: a donkey, an ox, a pig, a dog, a monkey, and a millennium baby. At the beginning of the story, Nao is executed by the local revolutionaries even though he did nothing to harm the community except for being a landlord. Performing as narrator, as well as the first bestial reincarnation, Ximen Donkey reveals to readers that he had been a hardworking and kindhearted landlord and should not have been killed. He once saved a dying child, who later became his tenant, and he treated him well. Thus, as a donkey, he avers, "For that alone, you people should not have shot me with your musket. And, on that point, Lord Yama, you should not have sent me back as a donkey! Everyone says that saving a life is better than building a seven-story pagoda, and I, Ximen Nao, sure as hell saved a life. Me, Ximen Nao, and not just one life. During the famine one spring I sold twenty bushels of sorghum at a low price and exempted my tenant farmers from paying rent. That kept many people alive" (12).

Mo Yan's rural experiences also included religious traditions he learned through listening and observing. As can be noted by the reincarnations of Ximen Nao as animals, *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* is influenced by the Buddhist ideas about the afterlife. In his Nobel Lecture, Mo Yan told another story, this one about how he got his inspiration for writing this novel from a Buddhist painting: "But it wasn't until the year 2005, when I viewed the Buddhist mural The Six Stages of Samsara on a temple wall that I knew exactly how to go about telling his story" (<[http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/2012/yan-lecture\\_en.html](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2012/yan-lecture_en.html)>). "The Six Stages of Samsara" is complicated and it contains strange figures such as a snake body with a horse head and a human body with a dragon head. The images illustrate the basic beliefs of Buddhism on the necessity of suffering, the idea of *karma* or supernatural cause and effect, and so on with the overall message being to do good things during one's lifetime in order to be treated well in future metamorphoses in the afterlife.

In nativist narratives, nature and animals are usually mythologized. During an interview shortly before the Nobel award banquet, Mo Yan spoke about the influence of his childhood life in the countryside on himself and his writings: "firstly,

I was able to establish an intimate relationship with nature. A child growing up in school and a child growing up in the field have different relationships to nature, different feelings for animals and plants. The others were surrounded by other kids and teachers every day. But I was surrounded by sheep, cattle, plants, grass and trees every day. The feelings I had towards nature were so delicate and sentimental. For a long time, I thought animals and plants could communicate with humans. And I felt that they understood what I said. This kind of experience is unique and valuable" (<[http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/2012/yan-interview-text\\_en.html?print=1](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2012/yan-interview-text_en.html?print=1)>). This "intimate relationship" is characteristic of what is called the "magical or hallucinatory realism" in Mo Yan's oeuvre, reminiscent of but distinct from such works as *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel García Márquez. Mo Yan has explained time and again that he has read only a little bit of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and *The Sound and Fury* by William Faulkner and thus he was not familiar with the works' details. Rather, he was interested in how these authors wrote creatively about reality and then drew inspirations from the stories in his hometown's rural culture and in the Chinese tradition of storytelling, such as in *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio*.

Another feature of Mo Yan's narrative is the mixture of local opera with his storytelling. Before television sets became affordable in the Chinese countryside in the 1980s, local opera was a popular form of entertainment and education. In China, there are hundreds of local operas, such as 越剧 (*yue* opera) in Zhejiang province and Shanghai, 淮剧 (*huai* opera) in northern Jiangsu province, and so on. In Mo Yan's hometown of Gaomi, 茂腔 (*maoqiang*) opera is popular. It has a history of more than two hundred years and a repertoire of more than one hundred plays. There are many *maoqiang* opera houses in Gaomi and its neighboring regions. In his "Reading with Ears," Mo Yan defines going to *maoqiang* opera performances as part of his early education—he completed the fifth grade only—and praises opera as "the open school" for rural people (212). In many of Mo Yan's novels, local opera is an intertext that interacts with the main stories, *Sandalwood Death* being the prime example. The beginnings of some chapters in the novel contain a passage of *maoqiang* opera that is suggestive of what is going to happen in the story's plot. Those passages are written in poetic language for the sake of singing. Additionally, some of the main characters are actors of local *maoqiang* opera, and the protagonist of the novel, Sun Bin, is a well-known actor of *maoqiang* opera. His role in the *maoqiang* play mixes with what he is doing in life. His ideas of heroism, for example, are influenced by the heroic characters he plays in the local opera. In Chapter 13, the people who participate in the peasants' rebellion wear the costumes of the local opera. The blending of performance levels takes on a serious level in Chapters 17 and 18 with the executions enacted as if they were scenes of local opera, and the crowds of local people gathering to watch a spectacle: with "Sun Bin, up on the Ascension Platform" the narrator had assumed that "the wail was an expression of torment over seeing the



Maoqiang Patriarch endure such suffering. Once again, I realized my mistake, for the mournful cry was actually a call for the musicians to prepare their instruments, an opening note" (388).

Mo Yan involves multiple levels of performativity especially with the character Zhao Jia. Zhao performs his role as one of the executioners like a great performance for which he will have to get prepared in order to promote his reputation as a high-rank executioner. It is for the occasion of killing Sun Bin that he invents the cruel and bizarre method of execution called "the sandalwood death." What is more, the victims are willing to accept or are forced to accept the kind of role they are expected to play in this show of death. To satisfy the excited onlookers, the victims recite some often-quoted words or even sing a familiar song before the execution. It is made explicit in the novel that *Sandalwood Death* is also a play and the characters in the novel are also actors. The back cover of the novel thus notes that "this is truly a nationalized novel, really from the nativist circles and devoted to the grassroots." This mixture of fiction and traditional opera is one of the author's strategies to revive the tradition of the classical Chinese novel: "To be sure, this return was not without its modifications. *Sandalwood Death* and the novels that followed are inheritors of the Chinese classical novel tradition but enhanced by Western literary techniques. What is known as innovative fiction is, for the most part, a result of this mixture, which is not limited to domestic traditions with foreign techniques, but can include mixing fiction with art from other realms. *Sandalwood Death*, for instance, mixes fiction with local opera, while some of my early works were partly nurtured by fine art, music, even acrobatics" ("Nobel Lecture" <[http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/2012/yan-lecture\\_en.html](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2012/yan-lecture_en.html)>). This kind of blending is essential to modern Chinese literature inclined to learn from both classical Chinese and nonnative, mostly Western, literatures. This is the new literary Chineseness I am contending Mo Yan is etching out. A blending of fiction and Chinese opera can also be found in the novel *Farewell My Concubine* by Lilian Lee, which was made into the internationally successful film of the same name directed by Chen Kaige.

The performativity of Mo Yan's works includes his inscription of a fictional Mo Yan in his fictionalized hometown of the Northeast Gaomi Township. The following example from his 1992 novel *The Republic of Wine* is characteristically self-mocking and satirical:

As he lay in the relative comfort of a hard-sleeper cot—relative to a hard-seater, that is—the puffy, balding, beady-eyed, twisted-mouthed, middle-aged writer Mo Yan wasn't sleepy at all ... I know there are many similarities between me and this Mo Yan, but many contradictions as well. I'm a hermit crab, and Mo Yan is the shell I'm occupying ... There are times when I feel that this Mo Yan is a heavy burden, but I can't seem to cast it off, just as a hermit crab cannot rid itself of its shell. I can be free of it in the darkness, at least for a while. I see it softly filling up the narrow middle berth, its large head tossing and turning on the tiny pillow; long years as a writer

have formed bone spurs on its vertebrae, turning the neck stiff and cold, sore and tingly, until just moving it is a real chore. This Mo Yan disgusts me, that's the truth. (331)

The appearances of the character Mo Yan in other works by the author Mo Yan, such as *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* and 蛙 (Frog), produce multiple effects, which is illustrative of what was referred to earlier as performanz. They suggest that the author's experience of a split between fiction and reality and his enjoyment of the freedom are narrated in the imaginary worlds of his creation. Of special note is that Mo Yan the character does not accord with what Mo Yan the author has done or spoken in public. Paradoxically, Mo Yan the character thus mimes Mo Yan the author's wiliness in his response to the criticisms about his political attitudes. Northeast Gaomi Township as an emblem of rural Chineseness is performed in his texts and in his public performance. At the beginning of his Nobel Lecture, Mo Yan indicates such: "Through the mediums of television and the Internet, I imagine that everyone here has at least a nodding acquaintance with far-off Northeast Gaomi Township" (<[http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/2012/yan-lecture\\_en.html](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2012/yan-lecture_en.html)>). Mo Yan mentions Gaomi eight times in his lecture, and at the end he says that "I hope to make tiny Northeast Gaomi Township a microcosm of China, even of the whole world." Since the Northeast Gaomi Township made its first appearance in his 1984 short story "Autumn Floods," it has become his own land on which he has built his home and with which contemporary readers around the globe formulate their concepts of rural China.

By presenting rich and diverse pictures of people's lives in his hometown, Mo Yan consolidates his nativist identity and position as a writer and distances himself from the official orthodox discourse of history, although he now resides in its political center, Beijing. His literature of rural China provides an alternative discourse of modern China, and this serves for a better understanding of the relationship between aesthetics and politics in his fiction.

## Rural Chineseness as an alternative discourse

Rural Chineseness is intrinsic to Mo Yan's literary image performed through his texts and across media. The discourse of rural Chineseness in Mo Yan's writings challenges, or rather subverts, the dominant grand narrative of Chinese history and politics. Under the name of ruralness, Mo Yan avoids being overpoliticized by his interpreters and critiques simultaneously the social and political reality in modern China. *Red Sorghum* and *Big Breasts and Wide Hips* provide an alternative view of revolution and social progress. *Red Sorghum* does not follow the usual official pattern of narrating a story of how Chinese people fought against the Japanese invaders during the war period (1937-45). David Der-wei Wang and Michael Berry rightly note that "as the story develops, family history and national history gradually merge, climaxing with 'My Granddad and My Grandma's' annihilation of the Japanese in

a guerrilla attack. In this respect, Mo Yan appears to be paying tribute to works of revolutionary historical fiction. But on closer examination, we realize that not only does his revolutionary history fail to deliver the promise of ultimate meaning, but it actually reveals a historical degeneration in which each generation fails to live up to the preceding one" (490). In most Chinese stories about the war against Japan, the protagonists are either Chinese Communist Party members or their supporters, nationalistic and fighting in the name of defending the nation and liberating the people. On the other hand, in *Red Sorghum* Grandpa leads an attack on the Japanese purely out of revenge for the Japanese soldiers killing many villagers. The brave act passed on orally to and inspiring Mo Yan is part of a rural history that supplements, if not deconstructs, the official narrative of history.

*Big Breasts and Wide Hips* constitutes a further challenge to the progressive narrative and patriarchal ideology that are dominant in the official discourse: "The reason why I think *Big Breasts and Wide Hips* is a great Chinese novel is that it represents the beauty and poetry of the traditional society in the countryside. To put it simply, this novel can be read as a fictional narration of the process in which the traditional society of Chinese countryside was invaded and destroyed. Under the impact of the complicity of the external politics and power, the people and the nativist world that the mother represents were subject to severe harm and damage in both physical and spiritual senses" (Zhang, Qinghua 3). Covering the different eras of twentieth-century China from the Boxer Rebellion of 1900 to the market economy in the 1990s, the novel portrays the gradual breakdown of traditional rural life in China through a family story. The impotency of Jin Tong, the "Golden Boy" son of a Swedish father and Chinese mother, is metaphorical in that it is used to "examine the viability of the model of intimate integration" (Cai 123) between East and West and its impact on just one component of the Chinese nation, rural China.

Mo Yan's novel *Frog* is an incisive commentary on the family planning (计划生育) or One-child policy as experienced in his hometown. Like *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, it has been viewed as "a great Chinese novel"; it is the winner of the prestigious national prize, the Eighth Mao Dun Literature Prize of 2011. The One-child policy has been of great import to China in the last quarter of the twentieth century and will continue to exert a huge impact on almost every aspect of Chinese life and society. In most parts of China, especially in cities, it has been strictly implemented with violators severely punished. Mo Yan says, "getting to know the issue of Chinese paternal planning does not mean that one is able to understand China. However, if one is ignorant of the Chinese paternal planning, it is impossible for him to form a sensible understanding of China" ("Listening" 342). Recently, the policy has again become controversial in China as it confronts an aging society. In *Frog*, Mo Yan adopts an ethical perspective of the grassroots in the countryside characterized by an attitude of regret and forgiveness for the lives that have been lost in response to the national policy. The theme of atonement is mainly expressed on three levels. First, the atonement

of the character "my Aunt," who started her medical career as a "barefoot doctor" and a nurse midwife in the countryside. Later, she becomes an administrator who carries out the family planning policy, ensuring that "illegitimately" pregnant women—married women who did not get permission from the local government to give birth—in her township get abortions. Because of her role, the locals give her the nickname "living lord of hell." In the countryside, some extreme actions used to be taken to ensure birth control among the peasants, as the novel chronicles in great detail. After her retirement, Aunt begins to repent for taking away the lives of so many unborn babies.

The narrator's atonement comprises the second ethical commentary. Tadpole's agreement to the abortion of his pregnant wife, Wang Renmei, causes her death. As a member of the People's Liberation Army, Tadpole chooses to abide by the government's family planning policy in order to retain opportunities for promotion in the military. Later, he feels responsible for the death of his first wife and their unborn baby. It is explicitly mentioned in the novel that the author wants to fulfill his wish for atonement through his writing. However, it did not provide the consolation he had wished for, but rather even more guilt. Atonement, however, is performed in Frog in a collective sense in the countryside. Two native craftsmen devote themselves to making earthen figures of babies. Near the end of the novel, Aunt worships the earthen babies, full of rich and specific details of the dead unborn babies: "Aunt puts the earthen baby in her hands into an empty square, and then she withdraws one step. After having ignited three sticks of incense, she kneels down in front of the small altar in the middle of the room. Putting her palms together, she murmurs incessantly" (270). Clearly, such nativist narrative is a response, resistance, or even subversion of the grand narratives of the One-child policy. This local atonement for a national policy performs an understated yet bold atonement at an international level and by extension a fully human one. Mo Yan structures the novel to broaden the theme of atonement with the story being told through long letters to a Japanese friend whose father had been an officer in the Japanese army that invaded China and had been stationed in the region. The atonement of a Japanese man for the harm and damage to the Chinese people caused by his father and the Japanese army thus generalizes the theme of atonement.

It must be noted that, from time to time, Mo Yan addresses political issues directly in his writings such as in *The Garlic Ballads* and *The Republic of Wine*. But more often Mo Yan writes in a metaphorical manner to resist or complement the grand discourse of history and revolution. Literature cannot avoid politics, but it can distance itself from and transcend politics through various literary techniques, such as satire and form. Mo Yan used the rare opportunity of his Nobel Lecture to outline his perception on the relationship between aesthetics and politics: "My greatest challenges come with writing novels that deal with social realities, such as *The Garlic Ballads*, not because I'm afraid of being openly critical of the darker aspects of society, but because heated emotions and

anger allow politics to suppress literature and transform a novel into reportage of a social event. As a member of society, a novelist is entitled to his own stance and viewpoint; but when he is writing he must take a humanistic stance, and write accordingly. Only then can literature not just originate in events, but transcend them, not just show concern for politics but be greater than politics" (<[http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/2012/yan-lecture\\_en.html](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2012/yan-lecture_en.html)>).

For Mo Yan, then, rural Chineseness is his method to raise questions on the grand narratives of history and politics in China and beyond. For his critics, Mo Yan's performance of rural Chineseness offers a new perspective to read his literature. Others have joined in on performing Mo Yan and his image of rural Chineseness for domestic and international audiences, specifically the film industry. For example, in 1987 Yimou Zhang, a well-known fifth-generation Chinese film director, directed the film *红高粱* (*Red Sorghum*), and Jianqi Huo's 2003 film *暖* (*Nuan*) is an adaptation of Mo Yan's 1985 *白狗秋千架* (*White Dog and the Swing*).

In conclusion, we are invited at the beginning of the twenty-first century to join Mo Yan in the performance of rural Chineseness to inquire into the creation and reformation of Chineseness. Chineseness should no longer be mythologized, orientalized, and approached as unified and unchanging. Instead of being looked at only from the outside, Chineseness along with its conflicts and agencies are to be interrogated, critiqued, and analyzed from inside China and from all perspectives. Through performing a unique rural Chineseness, Mo Yan, instead of what his pen-name suggests of "being silent," speaks eloquently and forcefully on various political and social issues in his literary works. In that sense, Mo Yan's penname itself is part of his performance as a storyteller.

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