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Duran, Angelica, Huang, Yuhan

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Mo Yan's *The Garlic Ballads* and *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* in the Context of Religious and Chinese Literary Conventions

Chi-ying Alice Wang

Abstract

In "Mo Yan's *The Garlic Ballads* and *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* in the Context of Religious and Chinese Literary Conventions" Chi-ying Alice Wang discusses Mo Yan's novels in the context of religion and traditional Chinese literature. Like many of Mo Yan's works, these two novels are set in his home county of Gaomi in the Shandong Province, where the first local literary works appear in the form of eleven songs grouped under the sectional title "Airs of Qi" in the earliest collection of Chinese poetry, *The Book of Songs*. Echoing this ancient tradition, folk songs and ditties play a vital role in the two novels as they set the tone of sarcasm and sorrow, the latter because the characters find themselves trapped in 天堂 – simultaneously the word for heaven, the name of the county where *The Garlic Ballads* is set, and the county's hellish reincarnation – which sets up the framework for *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*. While ghosts and demons appear and disappear in these novels, there is no reference to God. From the context of the three-thousand-year-old tradition emerges the political monopolization over the Chinese concept of a supreme God.

"Why not *The Garlic Ballads*?" answered Peter Englund, Permanent Secretary of the Swedish Academy, responding to the question "which book should I start with if I want to get to know [Mo Yan's] work?" Englund emphasized the relevance of *The Garlic Ballads* being based on a true incident in the 1980s: "it is not merely history, but contemporary. " ("Nobel Prize" <<http://www.nobelprize.org/mediaplayer/index.php?id=1834>>). Mo Yan, however, named *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* in response to a similar question during an interview conducted by the Nobel Prize committee after the announcement of the 2012 Nobel Prize in Literature, stating that it "comprehensively represents my writing style and the exploration I make in the art

of fiction writing" (Mo Yan "Interview" <http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2012/yan-telephone.html>). My focus is on these two representative novels in the context of religious and Chinese literary traditions to reveal the deeper roots and broader scope of Mo Yan's works.

Mo Yan's novels are characterized by the setting of his native home of the Gaomi Township of the Shandong Province, social criticism, the style of magic or hallucinatory realism, unbridled imagination often self-reflectively called attention to, and striking language. His novels also possess well-crafted narrative frameworks and an ostensive realism founded on not simply magic or hallucinatory references but also, as this study shows, on allusions to religions. In other interviews, Mo Yan claims to be an antitheist and denies involvement in Buddhist study, as the title of *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*, a quotation from a Buddhist sutra, would suggest (see "Interview: Mo Yan on *Life and Death*"). Indeed, the fact that he is not a Buddhist demonstrates how foundational China's rich Buddhist heritage infuses the culture as a whole and that it is not limited to its practitioners but rather emphasized by the fact that the supernatural motifs in these two novels are too prevailing to be dismissed as mere literary symbolism without significance on the level of spirituality. Englund calls the term "magic realism" being applied to Mo Yan's works "belittling" because Mo Yan's work is "quite unique with supernatural going into reality" ("Nobel Prize" <<http://www.nobelprize.org/mediaplayer/index.php?id=1834>>). The supernatural motifs and numerous allusions in Mo Yan's novels are built on the cultural common ground of religious locution and conventions shared by the author and his readers regardless of their religious beliefs. From this point of view, allusions to religion can be appreciated as the employment by a secular writer, and by extension his readers, to give a dimension to his narration of the mundane world. To draw out this claim, I analyze the narrative framework, allusions to religion, and dialectic relation between literary devices and religious references in Mo Yan's *The Garlic Ballads* and *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*.

Scholars of modern Chinese literature including David Der-wei Wang and Michael Berry have analyzed carefully Mo Yan's indebtedness to modern Chinese writers since the May Fourth Movement in 1919. These complement Mainland Chinese writers from the 1950s to 1970s whom Mo Yan has mentioned as his literary mentors and whose works comprise points of departure in his writing. However, we can investigate Mo Yan's literary lineage much further back to the onset of Chinese history when folk songs were first collected and compiled with court odes and temple hymns to form the first anthology of Chinese poetry, *The Book of Songs* (eleventh to eighth century BCE). As David Damrosch points out, "world literature is multi-temporal as well as multicultural... All too often, students of imperialism, colonialism, nationalism, and globalization do indeed define their projects in such a way as to restrict their investigations to just the last five hundred years of human history, or the last one hundred years, or even the last few years" (17). As a result,

this kind of research is fated to "reproduce one of the least appealing characteristics of modern American—and global commercial—culture: its insistent presentism that erases the past as a serious factor, leaving at best a few nostalgic postmodern references, the historical equivalent of the 'local color' tipped in to distinguish the lobby of the Jakarta Hilton from that of its Cancún counterpart" (Damrosch 17). This is especially the case with *The Book of Songs*, recognized as "the most powerful spring-head for Chinese verse" and by extension highly pertinent in all other forms of Chinese literature (Wells 165).

What Mo Yan and other Chinese writers inherit is far more than what they learn from their immediate mentors or writers whom they study "in the last five hundred years." What they all share is the immense body of the Chinese culture since it was first recorded and transmitted, so strongly in fact, as the Introduction to this volume notes, that his works are part of the *root* or *root-seeking* literature in China (see Duran and Huang). Such cultural ties with the distant past are especially pertinent in Mo Yan's case as his works are rooted in the very land on which the first states of Qi and Lu were established. These ancient and powerful voices in the form of songs, ditties, odes, and hymns have been recorded since the early Zhou Dynasty (1046-256 BCE). Last but not least in this line of singing children, illiterate bards, aristocratic poets, and proletarian writers who relay the stories of their homeland, Mo Yan tunes in to these voices and makes them a vital part of his narrative strategy.

Narrative framework

Mo Yan calls *Life and Death* a landmark among all his novels set in his hometown of Gaomi because it distinguishes itself from his earlier works in its formal structure, language, and narrative perspectives ("Mo Yan Talks"). Mo Yan considers new literary forms as the only territory left for writers of his generation to explore and display their talents. In *Life and Death* and *The Garlic Ballads*, Mo Yan employs his story-telling talents by merging various narrative perspectives and applying them with sophisticated stream of consciousness into conventional forms of Chinese fiction. His ingenuity and revitalization justly wins the praise of Englund, who calls Mo Yan an "extremely skillful narrator" ("Nobel Prize" <<http://www.nobelprize.org/mediaplayer/index.php?id=1834>>). In his complex sources of inspiration, Mo Yan acknowledges William Faulkner, Gabriel García Márquez, and reaching a bit further back into his own culture, the Chinese writer Pu Songling (1640-1715), but mostly he agrees with many commentators, scholarly and popular, that the form of *Life and Death* is an homage to traditional Chinese fiction ("Nobel Lecture" <http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2012/yan-lecture_en.html>).

The homage is indeed pervasive. For example, all fifty-three chapters from Book 1 to 4 open with a title in the form of a couplet, a convention observed by classical Chinese fiction writers until the beginning of the modern era. The title couplet

is a poetic device in which individual words at the corresponding positions of the two lines match syntactically and semantically. These couplets provide a thematic clue for the content of the chapter, accentuate the rhythm of fictional narration with poetic rhetoric, and bring in another form of aesthetic pleasure to the reading experience. Mo Yan fully takes this device a step further: in each of the six parts of *Life and Death* he takes a new narrative perspective, that of the newly adopted form of life of the protagonist Ximen Nao, who undergoes the cycle of reincarnation from human to donkey, ox, pig, dog, monkey, and then back to human at the end. This structural design enables the author great freedom in shifting narrative perspectives not merely from person to person but from various persons to a variety of animals, each with its own distinct personality as they relate the story of the village in Gaomi stretching half a century from 1950 to 2000.

Mo Yan utilizes repeatedly this unique narrative device in his treatment of chaotic scenes as he builds up tension, maintains perfect control of the multitude of characters involved, depicts details ranging from the gory to grotesque to farcical, and imbues the mess with extraordinary emotional and psychological complexity. At times, similar scenarios in different parts of the novel narrated from different perspectives intensify the inner coherence, multiply the layers of meaning, and make a fuller account of the episodes. Such is the case in Chapter 5, when the narrator shifts from Ximen Nao's donkey reincarnation back to his human self of the previous life. Ximen Donkey recalls the last scene of confrontation between Ximen Nao and his persecutor Hong Taiyue. Ximen Nao overheard the false accusation his third concubine Wu Qiuxiang made against him, saw the delight in her eyes when she was released, and heard the crying of his frightened young children Jinlong and Baofeng. All the intense emotions accumulated in this scene do not end with the execution of Ximen Nao but are brought to a new climax in the remarkable scene in Chapter 14 when the next reincarnation of Ximen Nao, Ximen Ox, butts his former concubine Wu to the ground while his son Ximen Jinlong whips him and jumps on his back trying to control him. The narrator of this chapter, Lan Jiefang, the son of Ximen Nao's other concubine Yingchun and his farmhand Lan Lian, comments on the events years later when he addresses the five-year-old boy Lan Qiansui, the last reincarnation of Ximen Nao: "I didn't know you were the reincarnation of Ximen Nao, and was clueless about the complexity of feelings you were experiencing in the presence of Yingchun, Qiuxiang, Jinlong, and Baofeng. A tangled mess, I suppose, when Jinlong hit you, it was a son striking his father, wasn't it? And when I yelled at him, I was cursing your son, isn't that so? Your heart must be full of conflicting emotions. A mess, a real mess, your mind all twisted out of shape, and only you can make any sense of it" (127).

This much-delayed, moving commentary is grounded in ancient Chinese folk religious tradition. Lan Jiefang mentions noticing a missing chunk of Ximen Ox's ear: "Maybe Jinlong had swallowed it. King Wen of the Zhou was forced to eat the flesh of his own son. He spit out several lumps of meat, which turned into rabbits

that ran away. By swallowing a piece of your ear, Jinlong was eating his own father's flesh, but he'll never spit it out, and it will turn into waste that he'll expel" (127-28). The episode of King Wen of Zhou being forced to eat the flesh of his own son is elaborated in Xu Zhonglin's seventeenth-century novel 封神演义 (The Legend of Deification), a fictional embellishment of 史记正义 (Shiji Zhengyi), an eighth-century annotation of Sima Qian's 史记 (The Record of History). Mo Yan's allusion to this anecdote underlines the cold, treacherous character of Ximen Jinlong.

In Mo Yan's writing, the multiple-perspective narration is a versatile tool for presenting the complex emotions of his fictional characters. Ximen Nao's own narration of hearing the cry of his son Jinlong during his persecution transmits to readers the intensity of his fatherly love even when he faces utmost humiliation and death. This love stands in dramatic contrast to the betrayal by his son. While Ximen Ox remains silent throughout the scene, readers can sense the explosive anger and despair contained in him with the aggression of his physical tortures. To add insult to injury, the story is now told by Lan Jiefang, whose existence as a result of the union of Ximen Nao's former concubine and farmhand is another betrayal to the protagonist. On top of all these layers of emotions and narrations, Mo Yan adds the final touch of cannibalistic allusion with his application of intertextuality. This is an homage to Lu Xun's (1881-1936) famous claim that the entire Chinese history can be summed up in one word, cannibalism. It is also a point of departure from the official ideology since 1949: whereas cannibalism had officially faded into history, this novel represents it as just as rampant in the new China. Regardless of Mo Yan's disclaimer about religiosity, the religious framework in the form of Buddhist reincarnation not only strings together plots dispersed in several chapters but also provides a dimension of ethics, culture, and spirituality.

The later conventions of Chinese fiction and the modern device of narration resonate with the much older tradition of Chinese literature, limited neither to the genre of fiction nor to the written text. 赋 (*fu* or narration) is considered the first and foremost of the three literary devices—the other two are 比 (*bi* or metaphor) and 兴 (*xing* or stimulation)—characterizing the first anthology of Chinese poetry, *The Book of Songs*. In his 2012 lecture at Peking University "Language and History: New Historical Novels," Mo Yan attributed the vitality of his language to the inspiration he received from the 民间 (the common people), which is exactly the same source that gives rise to and retains the songs from three thousand years ago. At least two legacies of these songs can be identified in Mo Yan's works. First, the simplicity and the immediacy of the ditties of children and the songs of the blind singer in *Life and Death* and *The Garlic Ballads* are direct descendants of these ancient folk songs. Second, the themes of love, marriage, hunting, and social criticism invested in the lyrics bespeak the same spirit of flirtatious lovers, anticipating newlyweds, athletic hunters, and outspoken critics of corruption, immorality, and injustice. The voices of these songs echo each other, then and now, at the two ends of Chinese history.

Each chapter of *The Garlic Ballads* opens with a song of the blind singer Zhang Kou. In the first two chapters, Zhang Kou sings about the fertile land, the clear water in the gurgling river, the juicy garlic sprouts, the handsome young men and women, and the farmers' dream of building new houses with the money they make by selling their garlic. In the songs of Qi, the anonymous ancient singers sing about the rushing water in the River Wen (Poem 105), the teaming fish caught in the fish-trap set by the bridge (Poem 104), and the athletic hunter and the handsome young men (Poems 97, 103, 106). From Chapter 3 on, Zhang Kou's songs begin to carry a satiric overtone as the lives of the garlic peasants take a downward turn. Satire then turns into sharp accusation against corrupted officials (Chapters 8 and 9), followed by encouragement of defiant actions (Chapters 11 and 12). From Chapters 13 to 20, Zhang Kou continues to depict the plight of the people under the persecution of the local officials.

The songs of Qi also allude to the scandals of their leaders, Duke Xiang of Qi, his sister Wenjiang, and her husband Duke Huan of Lu. According to the historical record, Duke Huan of Lu and his wife Wenjiang visited Qi in 684 BCE, fifteen years after their marriage. During their visit, Duke Huan discovered the incestuous relationship between his wife and her brother Duke Xiang of Qi. As a result, Duke Xiang arranged for an assassin to kill Duke Huan. To appease the anger of Lu, Duke Xiang had the assassin executed but continued the incestuous relationship with his sister. This scandal is the subject of several poems in *The Books of Songs*, three of which are included in the songs of Qi. In "Southern Hill" the poet comments in the first stanza: "But the way to Lu is easy and broad, / For this Qi lady on her wedding-day. / Yet once she has made the journey, / Never again must her fancy roam," and in the last stanza, "When one takes a wife, how is it done? / Without a match-maker he cannot get her. / But once he has got her, / No one else must he approach" (Allen and Waley 80). The poet's allusion to the strong taboo against spousal infidelity is explicit.

One may wonder why poems like this would be included in *The Book of Songs*, a text sanctioned by Confucius and canonized as one of the five Chinese classics. When Confucius urges his disciples to study *The Book of Songs*, the master cites "to give expression for complaints" as one of the four major functions of poetry and "serving one's lord" as the way one should employ learning (*Analects* 17.9). In the context of Confucian convention, social criticism is seen as a major function of Chinese literature. This imbedded literary purpose compels Chinese intellectuals in the Confucian tradition to take as their obligation to expose the erroneous, criticize injustice, and speak up for the injustice suffered by ordinary people.

Readers may ask a similar question about Mo Yan's inclusion of the salacious and gory details in his criticism against those in power in his works. Mo Yan and his fellow writers in Mainland China grew up in the anti-Confucian era when Confucianism was criticized and Confucian texts hardly available. Their heroes in Chinese literature were Lu Xun and his fellow writers of the May Fourth generation

who criticized the so-called feudal Chinese society in anticipation of a new China. Ironically, this tradition of social criticism and intellectuals' concept of such criticism as their obligation are rooted in the poems in *The Book of Songs* and thereby nourished by Confucius and his followers. In the early twentieth century, when Lu Xun and other writers in the following generation turned against Confucianism, they seemed to forget that this critical spirit was handed down to them by none other than the ones they disparaged. Mo Yan inherits the same critical spirit, but in *The Garlic Ballads* and *Life and Death* he takes his writing a step further and subjects his emotions and political concerns to literary considerations: "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" ("Nobel Lecture" <http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2012/yan-lecture_en.html>). By "writing novels that deal with social realities," Mo Yan picks up an electronic version of the writing brush handed down from the poets and writers in Chinese history, from the anonymous poets of "Southern Hill" to Lu Xun, to make his own contribution to his time and society. Literary space converges with historical space and transcends historical facts in a higher level of reality.

Mo Yan parts ways with the ancient tradition in the way he delivers his criticism. The songs of Qi are mild in tone and restrained in rhetoric even when the subject matter involves scandalous sexual relationships, violent multimurders, and deceptive cover-ups. In "Wicker Fish-Trap," Wenjiang's wedding escorts are described in similes such as "a trail of clouds," "thick as rain," and "like a river." These serve as elaborate foils of her scandalous behavior, which become just as spectacular as her pompous wedding entourage or the clouds, the rain, and the river in nature, which no one fails to perceive (Poem 104). On the other hand, Mo Yan's criticism is sharp and direct, and his language so striking and unreserved that he gives free rein even to scatological descriptions of the intolerable condition and despicable scenes in prison in *The Garlic Ballads*.

In the name of revolution, the new China since 1949 mounted one political campaign after another until the death of Mao Zedong in 1976. The 温柔敦厚 (gentle and kind) Confucian poetic aesthetics was rejected as dated and weak, vilified as decadent and retrogressive, and roundly condemned. Through these stormy decades, the critical spirit in traditional Chinese literature turned progressive and crudely grassroots, especially in terms of the language of some writers who grew up in this environment. Still, Mo Yan's love for the land is apparent in his depictions of the beauty and power of nature, echoing the voices of his predecessors three thousand

years ago. In terms of social criticism, one can also sense the *noblesse oblige* Mo Yan took upon himself as a writer when he completed *The Garlic Ballads*, a novel of nearly half a million characters in forty-three days. These are clearly the legacies he inherited from the collective culture of China shaped by the first work of Chinese literature (on literature and major religions in China, see Mitchell and Duran).

Religious allusions

Amid others, three major sources of supernatural allusions in Mo Yan's *The Garlic Ballads* and *Life and Death* deserve special attention: 1) Chinese conventions, 2) the Buddhist concept of life and death, and 3) references to Christianity. The first source, consisting of the collective body of Chinese political-religious mythology and mystical folktales, by far commands the oldest, most complex, and most prevailing presence in these novels. The second source gives rise to the narrative structure, thematic metaphors, and major symbolism of *Life and Death*. The third, although much less conspicuous, is employed and reveals some universal values to be found in major religions despite their great divergences elsewhere. Biblical references are beginning to be accepted by the Chinese as a part of modern culture (see Yang).

In his Nobel Lecture, Mo Yan told his audience the following about when he was a child: "I was, without a doubt, a theist, believing that all living creatures were endowed with souls. I'd stop and pay my respects to a towering old tree; if I saw a bird, I was sure it could become human any time it wanted; and I suspected every stranger I met of being a transformed beast." This theist inclination does not stem merely from his own imagination but has a common root shared by folks around him: "Wherever I happened to be ... my ears filled with tales of the supernatural, historical romances, and strange and captivating stories, all tied to the natural environment and clan histories, and all of which created a powerful reality in my mind" ("Nobel Lecture" <http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2012/yan-lecture_en.html>). The adult Mo Yan now considers himself an antitheist, but his childhood perception of the supernatural remains vital and takes on new life in his writing. Only by careful study will one discern the most vigorous contentions displayed on the common ground shared by ancient Chinese convention and Mo Yan's contemporary *The Garlic Ballads*. The most fundamental contentions are neither the riot of the peasants against their oppressive local officials nor the ill-fated lovers against their persecuting selfish family members, but the more deeply rooted dialectic relationship of the state versus religion.

Ever since the first historical dynasties, Chinese political regimes have officiated religious views and practices, just as is the case in ancient Western political states. The most noteworthy supernatural power is certainly the concept of the supreme god. A number of modern scholars, including Wang Guowei, consider the transition between the Shang and the Zhou Dynasties in 1046 BCE as the most significant change in ancient Chinese history, as the Zhou ushered in its own beliefs

to complement and gradually replace Shang conventions. One of the most crucial concepts revolves around the idea of God 帝 (*Di*) or 上帝 (High God), worshipped by the Shang. In *Early Chinese Religion*, Robert Eno's study of the etymology of 帝 and theories regarding the identity of God leads to the conclusion of the essential ambiguity of the Shang idea of God. Eno is positive, however, that the Zhou Dynasty comes up with "the innovation of a single supreme deity governing all aspects of the experienced world" (76). The "single supreme deity" in the Zhou concept is not entirely inherited from the *Di* of the Shang. Rather, the Zhou introduces another word, literally sky or heaven (*Tian* or 天) to denote the transcendental dimension complementing the more personal denotation of *Di* as God.

Modern scholars of Chinese philosophy recognize a number of definitions of *Tian* in the early Zhou Dynasty, including "the physical sky, the ruling *Tian*, the fatalistic *Tian*, the naturalistic *Tian*, the ethical principal" (Fung 31), the "first and foremost a metaphysical and religious idea" (Eno, *Confucian* 5), the transcendental *Tian* (see Lao), and "in general, God's Providence ... draped in the cloak of 'August Heaven, God on High'" (Chen 207). With the evolution and expansion of the Chinese language, the meanings and connotations of *Tian* grew exponentially in its forms of idioms. In *The Book of Songs*, *Tian* appears 170 times, including many in idioms containing the term such as 苍天 (*cangtian*, azure sky or heaven) or azure, 天子 (*Tianzi*, the son of Heaven, also an epithet referring to the king), and 天命 (*Tianming*, mandate of Heaven). In comparison, *Di*, including all its related idioms, appears only forty-three times, barely 25% of the total references of *Tian*. The last kings of Shang adopted the word *Di* to add sublimity to their royal title. The Zhou claimed their victory over the Shang as dictated by the mandate of Heaven, *Tianming*, and the Zhou kings called themselves the sons of Heaven, *Tianzi*. To ensure the support of the people, the founding fathers of the Zhou raised the concept of virtue (德) and underscored its significance by propagating the virtuous characters of the rulers on the one hand and admonishing their royal lineage to cultivate and practice morality on the other. As the notion of *Tian* becomes increasingly theoretical and abstract, the legitimacy of the ruler hangs more heavily on morality.

In modern Chinese, the meanings of *Tian* and its idiomatic terms remain as vital and versatile as ever. The Chinese title of *The Garlic Ballads* is 天堂蒜薹之歌 (The Garlic Ballads of Tiantang). The Chinese idiom 天堂 (*Tiantang*) means Heaven or Paradise. In the novel, it is also the fictional name of the county where the garlic peasants' riot takes place. The ostensive irony of the place name and the hellish conditions are reinforced by the first song of the blind singer Zhang Kou as he praises his county in terms of the *Tiantang* of "the mortal world" (人间天堂) and the disgusting stench of rotting garlic permeating the novel's opening scene. As the story unfolds, the mundane paradise becomes increasingly hellish in the experiences of the protagonists Gao Ma and Gao Yang. The irony extends to the last chapter in the official announcement from the local government that acknowledges

the disaster and proclaims the procedure it takes to restore justice. In this announcement, the *Tiantang* county and its adjacent *Cangma* (literally azure horse) county are referred to collectively as 苍天 (*Cangtian*, Azure Sky or Heaven) Municipality. While *Cangma* is derived from the name of the actual county *Cangshan* (苍山, azure mountain) in Shandong where this riot took place historically, the term *Cangtian* has a further connotation. Appearing eight times in *The Book of Songs*, the meanings of the idiom *cangtian* range from the physical sky (Poem 65, Poem 121) to the judging supernatural power to whom people would plea in persecution and suffering: "Oh, Heaven, azure Heaven, / Take note of that proud man, / Take pity upon that toiler!" (Poem 200). Just as the county named *Tiantang* or Paradise in the mundane world is characterized by the odor of corruption, the municipality called *Cangtian* or Azure Heaven is no less ironic. The irony is driven deeper by another usurpation of title: the abusive jailors instruct the prisoners to address them as "government," a term no less awkward than it is satirical in the context of the novel's plot. After all the abuse, the meek Gao Yang (高羊, with its pun on lamb [羔羊] in Chinese) names his only begotten son "law abiding" (守法 or *Shoufa*). The sarcastic absurdity now becomes apparent in light of the Chinese political convention in which, for purposes of self-glorification and legitimacy, the sacred is secularized and the secular deified as the pre-modern monarchs dubbed themselves as *Di* or "Sons of God." In the end, in *The Garlic Ballads* both "Heaven" and "government" are claimed by hypocritical abusive impostors. The upper hand the political power seems to gain over religion turns out to be mockingly empty and deceptive.

The second source of allusions comes from the Buddhist concept of life and death, which inspires Mo Yan's narrative framework and the thematic metaphor of *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*. The title of the novel, literally "wearies of life and death," is quoted from the Buddhist sutra 八大人觉经 (Eight Great Realizations) from 中华大藏经 (Chinese Tripitaka 362) translated to Chinese by the Persian Buddhist monk An Shigao who came to China to teach Buddhism in the second century CE. This text sums up the Buddha's basic teaching about the correlation of human desires, sufferings, and relief from the vicious cycle of desires and pain. In the epigraph, Mo Yan quotes the second great realization from the sutra containing the phrase "wearies of life and death," which Howard Goldblatt renders as "The Buddha said: 'transmigration wearies owing to mundane desires. Few desires and inaction bring peace to the mind'" (Epigraph). The novel is by no means thereby an evangelical tract of Buddhism. Rather, Mo Yan adopts the Buddhist view of desire and suffering to construct the major structure and themes of the novel. The protagonist Ximen Nao is not the only one caught in this trap. The antagonist characters Hong Taiyue and Ximen Jinlong are blown to pieces in each other's arms in their insatiable pursuit of power and wealth, exemplifying the destructive result of human desires.

Extratextually, Mo Yan has also emphasized the Buddhist foundation of the work. He avers that during a visit to a Buddhist temple he saw a group of images

which inspired him to set his novel *Life and Death* in the framework of the six realms of *samsara*. The structure of the Buddhist cycle enables him to present his characters and events of the story through the eyes of a group of animals. Mo Yan chose five animals he knows well from his early experience in the village to animate the consecutive reincarnations of his protagonist Ximen Nao. What distinguishes Mo Yan's literary metaphors from religious allegory is the absence of didactic doctrines. Instead, Mo Yan's personal knowledge of these animals, both physically and psychologically, and his talent as a storyteller brings human consciousness and bestial nature into a dynamic fusion. A case in point is Ximen Donkey's romantic relationship with the female donkey Huahua culminating in their sexual union: "Feelings of great joy erupted, surging over me, and over her. My god!" (58). This overt description of sexual joy is empowered by the personified animals but at odds with the traditional Chinese Buddhist doctrine of abstinence. Ximen Donkey's ecstatic cry "My god!" (我的天哪!), though containing the word *Tian* (Heaven), is such a common Chinese exclamation that it hardly strikes any religious overtone.

Through his consecutive reincarnations, Ximen Nao is given one opportunity after another to face life and death and thus to put an ever widening distance between his current life and that of the executed landlord full of grudges and hatreds. Along this process, the memories of Ximen Nao's life are replaced gradually by the consciousness of the new animals. The purgatorial procedure is not achieved in the underworld but rather completed during multiple lifetimes in the world. Thus religion is employed as a literary device to state the theme that the ultimate triumph of life comes from leaving the old life to time and oblivion. While Mo Yan draws a perfect circle of narration by ending the novel with Lan Qiansui's announcement "My story begins on January 1, 1950" (3, 540), the verbatim echo of the very first sentence of the book, the ingenuity of his design emerges in correlation with the cyclical representation of *samsara* reincarnation, often depicted in the image of the Buddhist wheel. Embedded in the seemingly perfect symbolism, however, is the paradox: the human reincarnation of Lan Qiansui is neither the nirvana proclaimed in Buddhist teaching nor the ultimate solution to human desires and suffering. With the restoration of human existence, has the soul achieved any spiritual advancement or redemption, or is it simply undergoing the same cycle again and again? After all, in spite of the spiritual dimension of the novel, the ultimate concern of the novelist is the stories of life, not the redemption of the soul.

The third source of Mo Yan's allusions is universal religious values held by religions which do not have a long history of contact with China, such as Christianity. Biblical references are neither prominent nor prevailing but rather strategically employed at crucial moments. The first one appears in reference to the love of Lan Jiefang and Pang Chunmiao, the second one is at the death of Lan Lian. The love that displays the greatest mutual commitment in *Life and Death* is that between Lan Jiefang and Pang Chunmiao. Their persistence and sacrifice eventually turn their

adulterous relationship into a union forgiven by Lan Jiefang's dying wife and accepted by his father. After they are forced to leave their hometown in humility, they start a new life of cohabitation in another township. At their shabby new residence, everything about life is reduced to the minimum: "We cooked, we ate, and we made love" (475). For lack of extra clothing, they even stay naked, which Lan Jiefang makes light of by saying self-teasingly, "This is the Garden of Eden," a reference to the Book of Genesis (2.8-25), lines omitted in the English translation: "因为我们仓皇出走，根本没带换洗衣服，所以我们大部分时间是赤身裸体。赤身裸体做爱是正常的，但当我们每人捧着一个碗，赤身裸体对坐喝粥时，荒诞和滑稽的感觉就产生了。我自我嘲讽地对春苗说：“这里就是伊甸园” (471). Earlier, when Ximen Dog leads Lan Jiefang's son to the dorm of Pang Chunmiao where she and Jiefang had been making love, Lan Jiefang claims, "we'd promised not to open the door even if God came knocking" (470). Here, for the word "God," Mo Yan chooses the Chinese epithet of the Christian term 上帝 (*shangdi*), reminiscent of the episode in Genesis when God seeks out Adam and Eve as the couple hide themselves in shame after they sinned by eating from the prohibited fruit from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. What compelled Lan Jiefang to open the door was certainly not God but his recognition of the dog's barking, which implied the presence of his son. The greater irony falls on the allusion to the Garden of Eden as the fictional episode subverts the biblical story: Lan Jiefang and Pang Chunmiao were banished into their Garden of Eden after they committed sexual transgression against his marriage. There is no discernible theological connotation behind the biblical allusion. It is clear, however, that Mo Yan is confident his contemporary Chinese readers will pick up the irony behind a verbal allusion that has become part of the common expression shared globally in cultures with a Christian heritage and without.

At the conclusion of Book 4, Lan Lian's epitaph "everything that comes from the earth shall return to it" at once strongly echoes the biblical verse "then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it" (Ecclesiastes 12.7) and sums up his life and another major theme of the novel, the inseparable ties between humans and the land. One wonders what happens to the soul of Lan Lian. In Mo Yan's fictional world, while the physical body returns to the earth, the spirit falls into *samsara* instead of returning to God. There are only wearying incessant cycles of life and death, with no sight of Buddhist nirvana or biblical rest.

Lan Lian, the last independent peasant in the entire Mainland China, represents the last Chinese farmer in the conventional sense who loves the land as much as he loves his life because his livelihood comes from the land, and he owns it. The sacred ties between humans and the land date to the beginnings of Chinese culture. In the Shuo Gua chapter of *The Book of Changes*, Heaven, Earth, and humans are considered the three powers constituting the universe. Chapter 25 of the Daoist classic *Dao De Jing* claims, "therefore Dao is great, Heaven is great, earth is great, / And the king is also great ... / Man follows the ways of earth, / Earth follows the ways of Heaven, / Heaven follows the

ways of Dao; / Dao follows the ways of itself" (qtd. in DeBary 59). In *Life and Death*, Lan Lian is the one who follows the way of Earth throughout his life until his final return to the earth. His roots in the Earth also give him the unique insight into the reality behind the apparent as he never fails to recognize Ximen Nao in his reincarnations.

Lan Lian's insistence on the ownership of the land contrasts to the values embraced by Hong Taiyue and Ximen Jinlong. Hong Taiyue, a beggar before 1949, never owned any land. Ximien Jinlong was among the first in the family to relinquish ownership of the land in answering the call to join the commune. In the name of revolution, their rejection of land eventually cuts off their ties to their origin, which turns Jinlong into the treacherous son who later eats the flesh of his birth father (the reincarnated ox), lashes him with a whip, and burns him to death in one of the most gruesome scenes of the novel. Jinlong hardly shows any more mercy to his adopted father Lan Lian when he orders his follower to brush red paint on Lan Lian's face or when he threatens to hang him on the tree. One is left wondering if these two instances combine to form another Christian allusion, since they so closely echo the imagery surrounding Jesus Christ, his face reddened from the blood coming from his crown of thorns as literary and visual imagery represents his crucifixion on a cross.

Between Heaven and Hell is the human world, the "Middle Kingdom" where people live and die, love and hate, sustain each other, and struggle against one another. In *The Garlic Ballads*, "Heaven" is a nominal imposture referring to the county where the air under the sky is polluted by rotting garlic symbolizing political corruption and government, as suggested by the self-claimed title of the jailors, is mired in injustice and persecution. In *Life and Death*, God or Buddha is left out, but the Lord Yama and Hell constitute the reality of the fictional world of the novel. While the carefully crafted novel fits itself into a cyclical structure of narration, the corresponding cycle of *samsara* offers no exit from the weariness of life and death. The spiritual significance of the novel lies in Chinese tradition, since the ultimate rest is bestowed to Lan Lian, the one who follows the way of the Earth. In the light of *Dao De Jing*, Lan Lian is in turn following the way of Heaven and The Way (Dao) itself. In the end, he is blessed with the perfect union with nature or self-so (自然). Yang Xiong in the Han Dynasty would regard him as the "true man ... who has never become separated from the Great Oneness" (DeBary 209).

Because of its direct allusion to Buddhism in its epigraph and strong allusion to Buddhist *samsara*, *Life and Death* readily warrants discussions of religious elements, which are as deep as they are varied. *The Garlic Ballads* demonstrates that even when religious elements are not thematized strongly, they are infused in the setting in a China that is in turn infused with a rich religious heritage. If we are both willing and able to apply the tools with which the secular study of religious studies supplies us, many of Mo Yan's works and those of his contemporaries can be better appreciated for their innovations and the discipline of comparative cultural studies can fulfill its promises for fulsome, careful, and sensitive conversation.

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Author's profile

Chi-ying Alice Wang teaches Chinese language, literature, and culture at Purdue University. Her interests in scholarship include Chinese literature, culture, and art history. Wang's recent publications in English include "The Teaching of Chinese Culture in an American University," *Perspectives on Chinese Language and Culture* (Ed. Ik-sang Eom, Ya-fen Chen, and Shih-Chang Hsin, 2010).

