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## Mo Yan in Context

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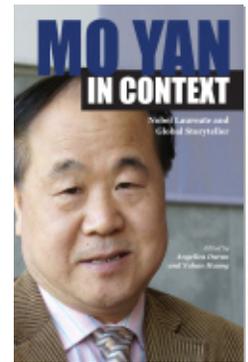
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## Religious Elements in Mo Yan's and Yan Lianke's Works

*Jinghui Wang*

### Abstract

In "Religious Elements in Mo Yan's and Yan Lianke's Works" Jinghui Wang discusses how Chinese folk versions of the religious concepts of incarnation and atonement are represented in Mo Yan's *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* and Yan Lianke's *Dream of Ding Village*. Wang analyzes the intratextual and extratextual parallels of the novels from the striking textual parallels of their boy narrators, the narrators' physical ailments, the near-contemporaneous historical settings, and their inclusion and sophisticated representations of rural life and their attendant Buddhist and Chinese folk beliefs; to the biographies of the authors. This article then discusses some of the key differences between the authors' aims and styles that may help to account for Yan Lianke's much more limited reception in China and globally.

While direct references to formal religion have been actively avoided in specific cultural arenas such as literature in China for brief periods the long, rich history of Chinese religion has ensured its cultural permanence. The recent Economic Reform (改革开放) or Opening-up Policy has fostered renewed versions of traditional Chinese religions such as Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism and of younger religions such as Islam and Christianity in particular (see Mitchell and Duran for a description of this recent religious history). Two recent literary works demonstrate how Chinese folk religions are represented in Chinese literature, articulated neither to evangelize nor mock but rather to reflect and comment: Mo Yan's *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* and Yan Lianke's *Dream of Ding Village*. The intratextual and extratextual parallels of these two novels are provocative; they include their boy narrators, the near-contemporaneous historical settings, and their inclusion and sophisticated representations of rural life and their attendant Buddhist and Chinese folk beliefs.

## Narration of Buddhist and Chinese folk beliefs

On one of the opening pages (above the list of "Principal Characters") of *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* is the epigraph "The Buddha said: Transmigration wears owing to mundane desires / Few desires and inaction bring peace to the mind" (n.p.), which comes from the second awakening of the eight great awakenings in *The Sutra of Complete Enlightenment*. The epigraph thus sets up the novel's cultural logic located in the basic doctrine of incarnation in Buddhism. The protagonist and main narrator of *Life and Death*, Ximen Nao, starts off as a landowner in Gaomi Township and undergoes reincarnations as a donkey, an ox, a pig, a dog, and a monkey until finally being born again as a human, Millennium Boy. Through the artistic application of incarnation, the novel covers China's rural history of fifty years from roughly 1950 to 2000, starting from the founding of New China and ranging through the Land Reform Movement (1947-52), the Great Leap Forward (1958-60), the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), and the Opening-Up Policy (1978-) until the new millennium. Through the eyes of animals and human beings, readers are given multiple perspectives of the lives of Chinese peasants with their tenacious but suffering spirit.

*Dream of Ding Village* also adapts spiritual aspects into its literary frame. The novel is narrated by the ghost of a boy and covers a suffering decade in Ding Village. The villagers give up their long practice of going to the Temple of Guangong (the Chinese god of war) to ask for his blessing. They find that Guangong does not bring them wealth but that selling blood does. So they tear down the temple and crowd the blood station only to find themselves punished by a plague of fever ten years later. The funerals of the narrator's uncle and aunt-in-law and also the ghost wedding ceremony held for the narrator illustrate the pervasiveness of the belief in an afterlife in China.

The finesse applied to Chinese religions in these novels may strike some readers as anomalous given the perception outside of China that religious practices remain dormant in China and the claimed nonreligiosity of Chinese people. These novels are two important examples evidencing that it is inaccurate to say that the Chinese have no religion. In the past two thousand years, Chinese people's worldviews have been founded on strong, native Chinese folk traditions shaped by Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. Hans Küng and Julia Ching point out that a prime characteristic of Chinese religion is the coexistence of these three religions and Chinese people's participation in the three religions (225). Chinese folk beliefs are flexible and for over a millennium have developed into hybrids which integrate elements of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. Originally, the teachings of Confucius were about humanistic ethics and moral conduct: "He dismissed speculation about the supernatural and insisted on the need for personal responsibility in the context of formal relationships between men and women, parents and children, rulers and subjects. In later centuries, Confucianism was adopted as the state orthodoxy and came to dominate official thinking, culture, and education" (Melton and Baumann 237). While in practice the Chinese populace found that this highest ideal of knowl-

edge brought them little chance of daily success, it provided a comprehensive set of explanations about not only life but also the afterlife. Straddling secular ethics and religion, Confucianism is more concerned with how humans should behave when alive and views spirits from an aloof perspective.

This leaves a lacuna for Taoism and Buddhism to fit in, because of their attention to heaven and the afterlife. The Han dynasty (202 BCE-220 CE) saw the rise of Taoism, as well as the arrival of Buddhism from India. Both were adaptable in China: "Buddhism and Taoism were also aspiring to strengthen their respective liturgical and evangelical monopolies. To integrate one another's favored rituals was undoubtedly viewed as the best means to consolidate the status of their clerical organizations and to attract or keep faithful followers by providing them with the most fashionable religious trends, even if this meant borrowing conspicuously from the opposing camp's heritage" (Mollier 19). Buddhism emphasizes the regulations of desire and the importance of inaction, while Taoism accentuates inaction to a higher degree. The foremost Taoist scripture, Lao Tse's *The Tao Te Ching*, provides Tao's consistent philosophical position and penetrating insights into its key term of 无为 (*wuwei* (nonaction), namely the paradoxical nonaction that in itself is a sort of action: "Regress and again regress, until coming to not acting. When not acting then there is nothing not done" (101). This advocacy was favored by ancient Chinese emperors, as it helped quiet down possible civilian rebellions. It should be noted that before Buddhism and Taoism, concepts of spirits or gods were only connected to good or bad fortune in the present life without a sense of retribution or rebirth. The fully formed concepts of incarnation or rebirth after physical death and karma were imported with Buddhism and Taoism and quickly became rooted in the worldviews of the Chinese people, although in a hybrid form.

The incarnations represented in *Life and Death* is different from those of traditional Buddhism or Christianity. "Incarnation" in Christianity refers to the action of God coming to Earth in the form of Jesus Christ roughly two-thousand years ago. Incarnation in Buddhism refers to the Sanskrit *samsara*, the eternal cycle of birth, suffering, death, and rebirth. The traditional "Wheel of Dharma" that is often used as the visual symbol of Buddhism captures the six realms ascribed to Buddhist incarnation: the realm of gods or God, Titans or Asura, human, animal, hungry ghosts or Preta, and Hell. The first three realms are outcomes for goodness, thus higher levels of existence than the latter three. These six levels of existence of rebirth are determined by karma, the total effect of a being's actions and conduct during the successive phases of the being's existence. It is through actions of goodness and spiritual practice that one is able to reincarnate into a higher level of existence and finally become free from the Wheel of Dharma.

In *Life and Death*, incarnation does not adhere strictly to Buddhist doctrine. It does not disambiguate different levels of existence among the six different reincarnations of Ximen Nao. Instead, it provides a structure for

storytelling, with each of the reincarnations narrating approximately ten years in China after the 1950s. In an interview on the novel, Mo Yan commented on his appropriation of Buddhist terms and made it clear that he intended it to be more of a metaphor: "When I wrote this novel, my real intention was to understand the six-spoked Wheel of Dharma as Time. It provides a person with opportunities in the long river of time. He reincarnates again and again, facing life and death. When one experiences the trial of life and death, he will achieve very different understandings of society and life" (Xiong 74; unless indicated otherwise, all translations are mine).

Similarly, the novel's use of karma is distinct from Buddhist morality. Traditional karma does not work in Ximen Nao's life or afterlife. At the beginning of the novel, Ximen Nao depicts himself as a benevolent and noble landowner: "I am innocent! Me, Ximen Nao; in my thirty years in the land of mortals I loved manual labor and was a good and thrifty family man. I repaired bridges and repaved roads and was charitable to all. The idols in Northeast Gaomi Township temples were restored thanks to my generosity; the poor township people escaped starvation by eating my food. Every kernel of rice in my granary was wetted by the sweat of my brow, every coin in my family's coffers coated with painstaking effort. I grew rich through hard work, I elevated my family by clear thinking and wise decisions. I truly believe I was never guilty of an unconscionable act" (4). If there is some indication in this case that the narrator is insufficiently detached from self-interest or self-awareness to give an accurate self-assessment, there is another example. His adoption of Lan Lian, who was deserted outside the temple, convincingly shows him to be a conscientious person. Yet, he is not rewarded. Instead, he suffers what seems by and large unfair punishment from the new government. First, he is targeted during the Land Reform Movement in 1948 and executed so that his land can be redistributed (7). Then, after his death, he does not enter the realm of gods or humans. Instead, he is sent to Lord Yama's Audience Hall in Hell, where he sees "Lord Yama, underworld judges seated beside him, oleaginous smiles on their faces" (1). Strictly speaking, Lord Yama is not a Buddhist figure: he derives from Taoism. Lord Yama tortures Ximen Nao in an attempt to elicit his admission of guilt. But Ximen Nao argues for his innocence and utters no word of repentance. Though he earns the unspoken respect of many of Yama's underworld attendants for his tenaciousness, he does not satisfy Lord Yama, who grows so sick of him that he orders to have him flung into a vat of boiling oil, "tumbled and turned and sizzled like a fried chicken for about an hour" (1).

Ximen Nao's reincarnation seems inconsistent with karma, since the narrative has provided readers with no explanation of any previous wrongdoings. He is reborn back in his village on Earth as a donkey on 1 January 1950. To Ximen Nao, this is degradation rather than the reward for a person who has worked hard and behaved well. In many of Mo Yan's and other Chinese writers' works, dramatic conflict arises from the nonaction of karma, that is, kind people are not rewarded with good

retribution, which partly manifests Mo Yan's "symbolic meaning" or adaptation of Buddhist incarnation. Ximen Nao articulates understandable perplexity: "Is there no justice in heaven or on earth, in the world of men or the realm of spirits? Any sense of conscience? I protest. I am mystified!" (12). In addition to contradicting the essence of Buddhist karma, the novel also shows Mo Yan's contemporary understanding of the six realms of incarnations. He emphasizes the quantity of six, instead of the levels themselves. Indeed, the numerical division has been unfixed in Buddhism, which tends to contravene fixed notions. While Mahayanan Buddhism, predominant in China, enumerates six realms, earlier sources list five realms and some Buddhist traditions cite eight or ten.

In *Life and Death*, nonetheless, during the process of incarnation, the doctrine of karma itself maintains in part in terms of the accumulated moral energy of a person's life determines his or her character, class status, and disposition in the next life. When Ximen Nao is reborn in animal forms, his incarnations still hold his character and remember his past experience. Indeed, near the end of the novel, the narrator calls attention to the latest reincarnation again being male, "a chubby little baby boy" (539). Mo Yan thus uses a karmic characteristic as a literary device, to provide a consistent point of view, despite the occasional adding of other narrators, such as Lan Jiefang, or a character called Mo Yan. Similarly, as much as Ximen Nao is relieved when he is able to return to life as a human on New Year's Eve 2000, fifty years after the death of his previous human body, readers are prepared for the narrative arc to conclude, thus creating a sort of literary release that mirrors the ultimate release to nirvana sought in Buddhism.

Insofar as Ximen Nao's six incarnations are concerned, the main matter is not whether the religious belief is authentic or faithful to the canon but rather the coherence of Mo Yan's narrative. The symbolic significance of Ximen Nao's incarnation is that no matter in what form or where he is reborn, he faces the fate of suffering and painful death. To most characters, both human and nonhuman, life is bitter and short: Ximen Nao dies in his thirties "trussed up like a criminal, marched off to a bridgehead, and shot" (4), two of Ximen Nao's wives hang themselves (363, 507), Ximen Nao's son Jinlong is decimated by Hong Taiyue's human bomb, and they "depart this world together" (489), melancholy Huang Hezuo dies of cancer (507), ambitious Pang Kangmei is sentenced to death due to corruption (479), true-love-seeking Pang Chunmiao is killed in a car accident (516), desperate Lan Kaifang commits suicide (536), innocent Pang Fenghuang dies while delivering a baby (539), penitential Ximen Huan is stabbed to death (527), Ximen Donkey is slaughtered by the starving peasants (102), Ximen Ox is clubbed to death by Ximen Jinlong (206), Ximen Pig dies saving a drowning child (377), and Ximen Monkey is shot dead by Lan Kaifang (528). Mo Yan's work depicts the tragic and brutish ending of each individual on a sorrow-ridden earth. This coordinates well with the foundational Buddhist concept of the first Noble Truth of *dukkha* (suffering of desire). Even when Ximen Nao is reincarnated as the

Millennium Boy Lan Qiansui, he still suffers physically from hemophilia and spiritually from the torture of the memory of the past: "Small in body, he had a remarkably big head, in which near total recall" (539) existed. The suffering on both levels adheres to the Buddhist seamlessness of body and mind, external and internal.

Whereas *Life and Death* integrates most fully Chinese Buddhism, many works of contemporary Chinese literature, such as *Dream of Ding Village*, forefront Chinese folk beliefs. This is not to say that *Life and Death* ignores Chinese folk beliefs. Mo Yan includes many signs of folk beliefs in the novel, such as the Earth God Temple and the God of War Temple in the village where Ximen Nao lives. Additionally, readers will most likely notice Confucian, Taoist, and Buddhist elements in both novels. Like Mo Yan, Yan Lianke centralizes religious elements in giving the narrator a specific physical disability. Mo Yan's big-headed Millennium Boy is "born with a strange bleeding disease that the doctors called hemophilia, for which there was no cure. He would die, sooner rather than later" (539). That death, however, is not narrated in *Life and Death*. Serendipitously enough, Xiaoqiang, the short-lived boy whose death is also associated with blood in *Dream of Ding Village*, seems almost like a continuation of the final narrator of *Life and Death*, even in terms of the setting of a poor village and in the first decade of the twenty-first century. The problems that the fictional Ding villagers face are those faced by many actual Chinese villagers searching for prosperity in 1990s. Ghost Xiaoqiang tells the story of how this small village is decimated by HIV/AIDS as a result of unregulated blood selling. To people in Henan Province, one of the most crowded areas in central China, blood had become a valuable commodity. Yan creates in *Ding Village* a fictional version of the hundreds of villagers induced to sell their blood to government-run blood stations in the mid-1990s. What readers see from this novel is a common scenario actually going on in hundreds of villages in China during that period. *Dream of Ding Village* represents that blood business could be profitable as long there is a stable flow of donors. To secure the supply of donors, the government tries different ways to promote people's eagerness to donate their blood. When Ding villagers are reluctant to sell their blood, the local government organizes them to visit other model blood donation villages where they witness those villagers' happy life: as long as they agree to donate their blood, they get bonuses, such as "vegetables and meat from the local council for free" (28). They gain social status symbols as well: their government-built houses are labeled with different numbers of stars showing their different levels of contribution to the blood supply.

The narrator's father, Ding Hui, rises to the top of the local social rank and makes a big fortune through exploiting the situation, first by organizing villagers to donate blood at blood-plasma collection stations as a Blood Head (10), then by selling coffins during the HIV/AIDS epidemic as a merchant. In order to make more money, he forsakes his morality. He sets up his own private blood collection center with no facilities to screen donors or sterilize collection instruments. He buys and

resells blood so as to earn a higher margin. To reduce costs and get more profit, he uses one syringe on four people and stealthily replaces the 700cc blood bags with 500cc ones so as to cheat more blood from donors. The ignorant villagers are so eager to sell their blood in order to become rich quickly that they sell blood more frequently than their bodies can tolerate, seeing no danger of being exposed to dirty syringes and tainted cotton and not caring about being used or cheated. The spread of greed is followed by the spread of a "fever," a term that reflects the local folk's primitive understanding of AIDS. Deepening the emotional impact, even Blood Head's brother, the narrator's uncle, Ding Liang, gets infected and faces early death. There are three generations in this novel: Xiaoqiang the grandson, Ding Hui the father, and Ding Shuiyang the grandfather. They all face Buddhist *dukkha*: Xiaoqiang is poisoned because of his father's greediness, and Ding, believing in karma, kills his son Hui in the hopes of enacting atonement. Xiaoqiang's death through poisoning shows the villagers' limited understanding of karma. Ten years after the craze of blood selling in Ding Village, almost the whole village is wiped out with no responsibility taken or enough reparations paid. Bursting with anger and unable to fight the strong, some villagers take revenge on any weak they can find. They first poison Ding Hui's fowls, then poison Ding Hui's pigs, and finally poison Ding Hui's then-twelve-year-old son Xiaoqiang (9). The response of Dings' neighbor, Xiao Ming's mother, is that "it is karmic" (112).

After his poisoning early on in the novel, Xiaoqiang, a ghost wandering around the village, serves as the narrator. Rather than utilizing the Buddhist concept of immediate reincarnation as with Nao in *Life and Death*, Yan makes use of the traditional Chinese folk belief that after the human body dies, the human soul still exists and observes the living. The Chinese name for "ghost" is 鬼 (*kuei*), which refers to the spirits of humans shortly after death who wander until they are absorbed back into the earth. This folk belief of *kuei* can be traced back to the Shang Dynasty (1500-1100 BCE) and has influenced all of China throughout its two-millennium history. Xiaoqiang's ghost keeps crying to his grandfather for help, and this is partly the reason why Ding Shuiyang finally kills Ding Hui.

Every region in China developed its own particular traditions, practices, and beliefs related to gods, ghosts, and ancestors. All over China, local deities made up a varied pantheon including spirits of local heroes, versions of Taoist and Buddhist deities. Ancestor worship is most common and plays a central role in kinship, lineage, and clan systems. Most households have a small altar where respect is paid to previous generations. Yan represents such an altar in Ding Hui's house (134). Ancestors and deities are expected to answer petitions. If they fail to do so, the supplicant is perfectly entitled to switch allegiance to others, which explains why Ding villagers tear down the God of War Temple. The entire religious system in China is decentralized, unsupervised, and subject to local conditions. Temples in China are often dedicated to several gods, and there is no concept of exclusivity. This kind of

religious folk belief is the foundation of Blood Head Ding Hui's otherwise unaccountable action of exhuming the dead body of his son Xiaoqiang for a marriage to a dead girl, Lingzi. In Ding Hui's plain and simple concept, his son could still have a family and live a happier life in the afterlife through the ghost marriage. Lingzi is chosen because "she is the daughter of the county magistrate ... She acquired a rare disease and drowned in water, after her father became the county magistrate and started organizing the whole town to sell blood" (260). Ding Hui and other villagers believe that even in death there is still a rigidly divided social hierarchy.

The ghost marriage ceremony between Xiaoqiang and Lingzi is not the only one. Ding Hui arranges thousands of pairs of deceased for ghost marriages. Ironically, although Ding Hui gets monetary benefit for these ghost marriages, he still gets praise from other villagers. An old man in Cai County says, "Director Ding is a good man. He sells coffins at a low price to Shang Yang villagers, solving problems for the dead, and now he arranges marriages for the boys and girls who died single, solving problems for those alive" (247). The reason for this praise of Ding Hui is that those alive believe in the concept of the afterlife, too, and are relieved to learn that their relatives will have company in that afterlife. Religious traditions merge and transform in the novel as they do in actual practice. While there is no Buddhist reincarnation in *Dream of Ding Village*, there is karma, which is closely linked with atonement. The narrator's grandfather, Ding Shuiyang, believes that his grandson Xiaoqiang is poisoned and Ding Liang acquires AIDS as punishments for the deeds of his son, Blood Head Ding Hui. Ding Shuiyang fears the death of his other two grandchildren and the infection of other relatives, so he begs Ding Hui to kowtow in front of each family in Ding Village and then commit suicide in order to atone for his bad actions. This request exemplifies the valuation of the divine over the mundane. After Ding Hui refuses and after he fails to kill Ding Hui with his own hands, Ding Shuiyang himself kneels down and kowtows in front of all villagers as a proxy for his son begging for the villagers' forgiveness (44).

It is worth pausing here to call attention to how deeply Chinese cultural practices are related to Chinese religious practices: kowtowing or bowing deeply and even prostrating oneself is a practice that goes as far back as the Shang Dynasty. This expression of deep respect was used at least since the Han Dynasty in the presence of the emperor as much as in front of religious emblems and items. With the introduction of Confucianism in the fifth century BCE, the practice was extended so that children bowed to parents as a show of respect, but also reconceived philosophically to enable the kowtowler to physically and mentally instantiate humility (an early version of behavioral psychology). Thus grandfather Ding Shuiyang takes it upon himself to atone for his elder son's social iniquity. His assumption is, of course, a far cry from a Christian concept of personal sin, but perhaps not too far from the sense of social and familial sin to be found in Jewish and Islamic religions. In atonement for his son's sin, he converts the village elementary school into a nursing home that

shelters AIDS patients deserted by their family members. Ding Hui is aware of his sin and knows that Ding villagers hate him, but he says to his father, "So long as you do not want me to die, nobody of Ding Village dares to challenge me" (274). Seeing that his own substitutionary atonement is not enough and he himself has become the only person to end the sin of his son, Ding Shuiyang finally strikes Ding Hui on the head with a baton. Before Ding Shuiyang strikes his son dead, he experiences a hallucination that his grandson is reluctant to leave his tomb, crying: "Grandpa, save me please" (275). The reason for Ding Shuiyang's killing of his son is to save the grandson from all the family ills and to extract the son from the infernal dungeons to which his bad karma has condemned him.

Whether Buddhist, Taoist, or atheist, contemporary Chinese readers understand the doctrines manifested in these acts: the doctrines of karma are widely adopted in Chinese people's daily life. The general Chinese populace may not go to temple for serious learning, but they have integrated many religious practices and enjoy increased freedom to adapt Buddhist and Taoist doctrines. Before the founding of communist China, every village had at least one Buddhist or Taoist temple. Most were built on fertile soil with good *feng shui*. Many who encounter suffering or dissatisfaction in their life go to temples to seek for relief and try doing good deeds as atonement.

### Authorial representations of religious beliefs and practices

The cultural significance of *Life and Death* and *Dream of Ding Village* as contemporary Chinese works that include religious concepts and practices cannot be overstated. A great number of Chinese writings involve the depiction of gods, ghosts, or strange images that satisfy the curiosity of humanity about the unknown. *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* (聊斋志异) from the Qing Dynasty (1644-1912) is typical of Chinese literature in its combination of folk belief within a social context. There, readers can find vixen spirits, ghosts, scholars, court officials, Taoist exorcists, and beasts with supernatural powers, all to be found in Mo Yan's works, too, of course. To cite just one example, the well-known story "The Painted Skin" (Pu 47-51) narrates the story of scholar Wang who is bewitched by an evil spirit disguised as a pretty girl but ultimately saved by his devoted wife. This story tries to tell readers not to be misled by surface beauty. The May Fourth Movement (五四运动) (1919) with its advocacy of its version of democracy and freedom required modern Chinese literature to develop under the banners of science and reason, denouncing the traditional feudal sense of the spirits of people. It attempted to change the mentality of people's fanatical worshiping of spirits, because spirits were held to be superstitious and against science or reason. As such, "spirits" novels (灵异鬼怪小说) encountered more and greater obstacles with the founding of communist China in 1949. This new era ruled out superstitious beliefs, including well-formed religions, and

emphasized the grand narratives of political propaganda. The Social Realist writers of this period narrated rural life that elaborated more on actual struggles between old and new practices than on spirits or ghosts. The most popular works in the 1950s were Shuli Zhao's 1955 三里湾 (San Li Bay), Bo Qu's 1957 林海雪原 (Lin Hai Xue Yuan), and Libo Zhou's 1958 山乡巨变 (Shan Xiang Ju Bian), all of which depict a panorama of rural life in the newly built communist China.

With the advent of the Economic Reform (改革开放) or Opening-up Policy early in 1980s, China opened its door to the world with the aim of learning how to boost its economy. As can be expected, new ideas filtered into literary writing as well. In the mid-1980s, Chinese literature encountered magical realism, especially with the works of Jorge Luis Borges and Gabriel García Márquez. Spirits returned to Chinese narrative in the 1980s and were resurrected in Chinese writers' fictional narrations of everyday life in China. Through adapting trends in foreign literature, Chinese writers explored the historical fragments of national memory by taking spirits novels to a new stage. The Western world is probably most familiar with the nuanced use of this genre through Maxine Hong Kingston's *Woman Warrior*, in which spirits are used in order to represent life metaphorically and to express their present worldly wishes. Chinese literature of the 1980s regenerated once-suppressed traditional folk beliefs in grand narratives with such spirits novels as Pingwa Jia's 1993 废都 (The Deserted City), Zhongshi Chen's 1993 白鹿原 (White Deer Plain), Shaogong Han's 1985 爸爸 (Dad), and Mo Yan's *Red Sorghum*. Chinese scholars and critics rightly note that this group of novels receives guidance from both the Chinese classical spirits narrative tradition to "write about the world life metaphorically through ghosts, and express thoughts through spirits" (Wang 5), and from contemporary Western constructs, such as "linking techniques, maze, and void and suspense with no solution" (Nan 56).

On entering the twenty-first century, the best Chinese writers have successfully rid their works of the traditional construct of contrasting the old and new or finding solutions for social problems. Instead, they have innovated their style, content, and even genre to present social problems with no intention of resolving them. Both *Life and Death* and *Dream of Ding Village* provide readers with perspectives on residents in rural areas struggling to find a way out but hopelessly hindered by the despicable, dark, wretched, and pathetic side of human nature. Both employ religion and folk beliefs in supporting roles. Using religious belief, the two writers give tentative accounts of the life of not only the souls after the death of the body but also the earthly rural life of numerous wretched peasants in China.

## The biographies of Mo Yan and Yan

In addition to the connections between specific aspects of the two novels are connections in the biographies and historical contexts of Mo Yan and Yan: both were nourished by the Yellow River civilization and its derivative dominating folk beliefs,

they share similar historical backgrounds, and they challenge the state in similar, but not the same, ways. These similarities by no means determine their artistic productions, as indeed their different success, reception, and literary output demonstrate. Lying in the central part of the "Middle Kingdom," from which "China" takes its name, the Yellow River is one of China's most significant water sources, stretching over 5400 kilometers, covering nine provinces, and nourishing millions of people. For generations, peasants have depended on the river for their livelihood and have seen the rise and fall of the various dynasties and different regimes. The river itself has generated a rich foundation for Chinese culture and diverse Chinese folk beliefs. It is believed that Chinese civilization is divided into six cultural districts visualized as a giant flower in which the Central Plain is nourished by the Yellow River and forms the center of the giant flower surrounded by the five petals formed by other districts (see Yan 38-50). Contemporary Chinese writers from various regions along the Yellow River have captured the diversity of folk beliefs from their respective areas. Each of China's nine provinces has its own representative contemporary writer, such as Jia from Shaanxi Province, Rui Li from Shanxi Province, Mo Yan from Shandong Province, and Yan from Henan Province. As much as Mo Yan sets many of his works in Gaomi Township of Shandong Province, as he does with *Life and Death*, and Yan sets *Dream of Ding Village* in Ding Village—a small village of eight hundred people—Jia builds his 废都 (Deserted City) in Xi'an of Shaanxi Province, and Li makes the most of the quiet Lüliang Mountains in 厚土 (Thick Soil).

The Shandong and Henan provinces are neighboring and are also the last two along the Yellow River before it finally enters the Bohai Sea. This geographical proximity helps to account for the similarity in the folk beliefs reflected in Mo Yan's and Yan's novels. The folk beliefs from these areas are still inflected with Buddhism, although with expected deviance. To investigate the origin of this kind of Buddhism, one should follow the Yellow River tracing back to its cradle, the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, through which Buddhism makes its way into central China. As the Yellow River flows eastward to the middle area of China, it picks up and integrates local spiritual and cultural thinking, resulting in the rich forms of folk beliefs in the Henan and Shandong provinces. In Mo Yan's hometown Gaomi, every village had at least one Buddhist temple before the founding of communist China. There is a striking similarity between the two authors' childhoods and adult life experiences. Both born in the 1950s (Mo Yan in 1955 and Yan in 1958) and in the countryside, they made their way out of rural life by joining the army, Mo Yan in 1976 and Yan in 1978. During these years, there was no college entrance examination that could bring young peasants the chance to study in colleges and then to work in cities. So joining the army was the only way for powerless rural people to change their fate. They both took the opportunity of serving in the army to further their education and both graduated from the same department of the same college, in the Department of Literature, Arts College of People's Liberation Army, Mo Yan in 1986 and Yan in 1991. Their

literary careers also bear a striking resemblance: they both started publishing in the 1980s and their fictions are affected by Western writing techniques. Additionally, both are regarded highly in the Chinese literary world. They have garnered the two major Chinese literary awards: Mo Yan the Mao Dun Prize in 2011 and Yan Lianke the Lu Xun Literary Prize in 1995-1996 and 1997-2000.

Amid these parallels are intersections: the slightly older Mo Yan has sometimes exhibited the duty of an elder brother to Yan. When Yan ran into a legal suit with Shanghai Arts Press about *Dream of Ding Village*, Mo Yan served as a mediator to help the two sides reach a compromise. Mo Yan and Yan are friends both in daily life and in the writing field. They both reside in Beijing now and are members of the Chinese Writers Association. The basis for their intersections may have as much to do with their similar heritage as their bravery in depicting cultural truths which may contravene the will of the state. Both tend to challenge existing social norms including censorship. As Lanlan Du posits, Mo Yan criticizes China's family planning (计划生育), or One-child, policy. Yan criticizes the government for another matter related to health and human services, namely the blood-selling scandal in the Henan Province that led to the outbreak of HIV/AIDS and huge loss of life. Further, both Mo Yan and Yan are audacious in touching political taboos. Thus it is natural to question why Mo Yan's *Frog* was published and 丁庄梦 (*Dream of Ding Village*) banned when first published in Chinese. One preliminary answer is that Mo Yan is more tactful than Yan in dealing with political taboos. Mo Yan shows how a writer in a socialist country can internalize the censoring function in his writing and subsequently become globally renowned as testified by his Nobel Prize in Literature. For example, in *Frog* we can read Mo Yan's tact in dealing with censorship (see Chen).

In *Frog*, Mo Yan describes the abortion provider Aunt with features acceptable to state ideology, such as her hard-working nature and her admission to the communist party in 1955 on the same day that "she delivers the 1000th baby in her midwife career" (112), her break from her former boyfriend after he flies to Taiwan (118), and her not holding a grudge for "being wronged during the Cultural Revolution" (130) but instead claiming that she is "born the communist party's member, dead as party's ghost" (120): she is a faithful population-control policy implementer. The description of these pro-government acts goes uncensored. Mo Yan is also good at employing hallucinatory realism to depict the unspeakable parts of his stories. For example, to develop the plot toward Aunt's final wakening of her conscience, he has the croaks from thousands of frogs shock Aunt into feeling remorse for her previous merciless and cruel acts (169). On the other hand, Yan is more straightforward: it is not simply that he is not as subtle as Mo Yan, however: "Much of the best contemporary writing from the mainland also follows in China's humanist tradition, including Yu Hua's 余华 (1960-) *To Live* 活着 (1992) and *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant* 许三观卖血记 (1995). And whereas Yu's portrait of a desperate father who nearly dies selling his blood offers a subtle critique of market capitalism, Yan Lianke's 阎连科

(1958-) *Dream of Ding Village* 丁庄梦 (2006) directly indicts the government's blood-selling profiteers who unleashed an AIDS epidemic in Henan province. As Yan's characters die 'like falling leaves,' his haunting novel may be a twenty-first version of Camus's *The Plague* (1947)" (Knight 106-07).

In the postscript of his novel, Yan points out that he feels pained for his hometown of the Henan Province and many other poor provinces suffering from the HIV/AIDS epidemic. He finds himself unable to do anything but cry out for the "uncountable HIV/AIDS carriers" with "unprecedented desperation and helplessness" (287). Before publishing the book, he signed a contract with Shanghai Arts Press and claimed that he would donate 50,000 Yuan of his royalties to Xinzhuang Village in Henan Province where he conducted his research for the novel. These actions led to the book's fate of being censored. The fatal factor for the book's being banned is textual: Yan does not adopt any dodging tactics in his style or content, and except for the narrator being a dead boy, *Dream of Ding Village* is a plainly realistic novel. With Xiaoqiang as its omniscient narrator, the novel is like documentary literature describing the problem of AIDS in a Henan village and the irresponsibility of the government. Thus it has faced a different fate from that of Frog.

In conclusion, I posit that Mo Yan and Yan are both great Chinese writers with masterful writing techniques, bountiful human consciousness, and acute sensitivities to China's cultural heritage. As much as *Life and Death* and *Dream of Ding Village* provide us with a panorama of rural life in the China of the recent past, their biographies and historical contexts give us a sense of literary formation and development during the same time period. The complexity of folk beliefs prevailing among Chinese people has a similarly complex analogue in governmental practices related to Chinese literary practices. Besides Mo Yan and Yan, there are many other Chinese writers who address the religious and philosophical practices of incarnation and atonement in the daily life of the present common Chinese populace.

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