

A close-up portrait of Mo Yan, an elderly man with dark hair, wearing a brown pinstriped suit jacket, a light pink shirt, and a patterned tie. He is looking slightly to the right with a neutral expression. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

# MO YAN

## IN CONTEXT

**Nobel Laureate and  
Global Storyteller**

*Edited by  
Angelica Duran  
and Yuhan Huang*

## Mo Yan's Work and the Politics of Literary Humor

*Alexa Alice Joubin and Angelica Duran*

### Abstract

In "Mo Yan's Work and the Politics of Literary Humor" Alexa Huang and Angelica Duran present close readings of the diverse type of humor in Mo Yan's short stories and novels. Mo Yan's texts are in deep conversation with the long tradition of humor in Chinese writings, yet are also innovative thus extending that tradition. Huang and Duran attend to the ways in which silence as comic technique and authorial self-construction works in terms of the character Mo Yan in *The Republic of Wine*, *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*, *POW!*, and other novels. The study also teases out Mo Yan's use of Chinese humor (幽默, *youmo*), primarily in his novella *Shifu: You'll Do Anything for a Laugh*. They conclude with a discussion of the ribald humor of understatement that Mo Yan utilizes in *The Republic of Wine* and *Big Breasts and Wide Hips* to comment on sexual peccadillos.

One of the most prolific writers in contemporary China, Mo Yan, the 2012 Nobel Prize in Literature Laureate, has been at the center of some of the most significant literary events of his time. His writings are energized by several interconnected themes and styles ranging from magic realism to black humor and from epic historical novel to bawdy fable. The comic visions in the works of Mo Yan are sometimes neglected in the English-speaking world. This owes in part to the difficulty of translating humor across languages and culture. As Jocelyn Chey and Jessica Milner Davis note in their *Humour in Chinese Life and Letters*, "in terms of accessing Chinese humor by non-Chinese literature audiences, the need for translation—particularly of literary jokes and humorous writing—adds a level of difficulty (as well as itself contributing many examples of unintended funniness)" (29). Culturally, Chinese readers may be more on the lookout for comic elements given a literary and cultural tradition in which the serious and comic seek rather than forsake each other. That tradition extends deeply, as Henry W. Wells also notes in his book-length study of Chinese humor: "The Taoists and the sect of Ch'an Buddhists made

virtually a religion of humor, performing ceremonial dances about a sacred toad. Even the Confucian scholar-statesmen devised a scheme of values cordial to humor, to say the least" (9). The near invisibility of comic elements may be owing to readerly predisposition toward Chinese literature generally and Mo Yan's works in particular. Chey and Milner Davis note the long-standing critical foundation for the dearth of current critical attention to this topic. They call attention to the fact that, about a century ago, when the U.S. writer and translator Lionel Strachey took on the daunting task of translating and compiling the compendium in fifteen volumes *The World's Wit and Humor*, "he drew distinctions between differing European traditions but did not extend his sampling into Asian languages, beyond Omar Khayyam whose work was well-known in translation" (2).

To this broad inattentiveness to traditional Chinese humor, we can add readerly expectations of serious themes and neglect of comic elements in Mo Yan's contemporary works. His better-known historical novels are known for their serious nature, such as *红高粱家族* (*Red Sorghum*), made even more renowned by Zhang Yimou's award-winning film version, which chronicles the sober history of pain for a rural Chinese village in the turbulent 1930s. Paradoxically, the very seriousness of Mo Yan's driving political and social commentaries in works like this should alert readers to look for comic elements since, as C. T. Hsia has shown in *The Chinese Sense of Humor*, humor in general, and Chinese humor in particular, retaliates against and helps with coping with "the powerful repressive forces of society" (35). Literary humor frames and informs serious subject matters in Mo Yan's stories, and the writer sometimes uses a serious tone to contrast frivolity and human folly.

Mo Yan blends bawdy and humorous modes to construct counternarratives to the grand narrative of the nation-state, similar to other contemporary writers who parody socialist realism. In the 1996 novel *Helden wie wir* (*Heroes Like Us*), the East German writer Thomas Brussig has the novel's first-person narrator ask in a self-reflexive and playful tone: "The story of the [Berlin] Wall's end is the story of my penis, but how to embody such a statement in a book conceived as a Nobel Prize-worthy cross between *David Copperfield* and *The Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire*?" (5). The connection between the Wall and its attendant political extensions to the narrator's penis is absurd, enabling the hilarious commentary on the Cold War. We can look to *The Republic of Wine* and *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* for Mo Yan's similar strategy to create a sense of comic absurdity. *The Republic of Wine* is a parody of Chinese food culture written in the reinvented genres of detective and epistolary novels. Toward the end of the novel, on his way to Liquorland on the invitation of Li Yidou, a doctoral student in "liquor studies at the Brewer's College" there, the character Mo Yan reminisces that "back when I was leaving Beijing my bus passed through Tiananmen Square, where ... Sun Yat-sen [commonly referred to as the father of the Republic of China founded in 1911], who stood in the square, and Mao Zedong [leader of the People's Republic of China from its establishment

in 1949 until his death in 1976], who hangs from the wall of the Forbidden City, were exchanging silent messages past the five-star flag hanging from a brand-new flagpole" (333). This is but one of numerous examples of Mo Yan's subtle and humorous readings of China's political culture and figures (see Yuhan Huang on the significance of public visual culture in China). At the same time, his sympathetic and passionate pleas for the characters being ridiculed preclude any sense of superiority derived from historical hindsight, as if "we now know better."

Mo Yan's works—whether generically categorized as hallucinatory realism, the fantastic, epic historical novel, or salty fable—are peppered with a variety of types of humor. We chart a selection of such modes of expression in Mo Yan's short stories and novels to show their diversity and interplay as elements that contribute to the depth and charm of his works. That they would play such an integral role should come as no surprise given the penname 管谟业 (Guan Moye) adopted for his prolific and assertive writings: 莫言 (Mo Yan) ("Don't Talk"). This seemingly serious claim to silence or an author's abstinence from speech may be seen as a gesture of self-mockery or self-praise. It is also a critical tool: a tool to speak the unspeakable in writings which reimagine political history and the history of sexuality.

The silence of the writer Mo Yan creates a unique space for the articulate character Mo Yan, a regular in his novels, such as *The Republic of Wine* and *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*. The evolution of the character Mo Yan in *Life and Death* attests to the seriousness that is derived from the humorous. The novel revolves around the themes of social injustice, hunger, poverty, and the irrational aspects of the Cultural Revolution. Mo Yan frames these harrowing themes in a facetious version of the Chinese Buddhist notion of reincarnation. The novel's central character, landowner Ximen Nao, negotiates with the king of the underworld and returns to his village reincarnated in turn as a donkey, an ox, a pig, a dog, a monkey, and, finally, a big-headed boy. There is also a character named Mo Yan. Similar to Brussig's *Heroes Like Us*, *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* parodies official narratives about the history of the People's Republic of China from 1950 to 2000 through the metaphorical framework of the Buddhist idea of the six paths of reincarnation. It thus revitalizes a long-standing cultural and literary device that goes back to the Chinese classic *Journey to the West* and the Monkey King. At once sophisticated and basic, this "humor has its roots in animal vitality, which when joined with the nature of man, reveals itself in the physical manifestations of smiling and laughing" (Wells 11). Ximen Nao, a landlord executed for his bourgeois sins, goes through a series of reincarnations and along the way interacts with humans, fights with other animals for survival, and observes and comments on Chinese—and human—society as it goes through momentous historical changes.

In Book 1, the character Mo Yan is mentioned only as a writer of the drama *Black Donkey* (30, 39, 74, 102) and short stories (8, 12, 52, 53), which the narrator characterizes as "nonsense, not to be believed" (82). In Book 2, the narrator refers

to Mo Yan as one of the "clever, glib students" (117) of Ximen Village who has a talent for making up "limericks" (119), which are particularly ribald rhymes. When the character Mo Yan appears in the early chapters, he is a young "ruffian" (119) and a bit of a whiner (131), for whom the narrator finds little sympathy as when for example "Mo Yan mistakenly picked up [a firecracker] and bang, his lips parted as it tore a hole in his hand. Serves you right!" (206). His characterization begins to change in Book 3. On the first page of that Book, the spirit of Ximen Nao sees among the sad witnesses to the horrific death of his second reincarnation, Ximen Ox, "Mo Yan, smeared with snot and tears" (219). Later, he is portrayed as a kind, middle-aged man: Mo Yan, "who had risen to the position of editorial director of the local newspaper, gave [the forlorn Lian Jiefang] a job as an editor and found work for Pang Chunmiao in the dining hall" (477). Finally, in Book 5, by far the briefest Book (515-40), he takes over to narrate the surprising, sad, and hopeful ending of the novel. Mo Yan's authorial self-inscription, like the rest of his uses of humor, thus does not come off as narcissistic or haphazard. Rather, Mo Yan reinvigorates the neglected tradition of literary humor in contemporary China with comic yet sympathetic portrayals of individuals in a fragmented world of postsocialist marketization (see Chen; McGrath). Both underprivileged individuals and bureaucrats alike find themselves in comic and sometimes absurd situations.

Mo Yan adapts folklorized Buddhist traditions of reincarnation as a frame to extend both the narrative voice and the reach of the social commentary, not limited to China or to a specific era but rather to all humanity and all times. Ximen Donkey paraphrases communist slogans to persuade two black mules to share their food with him: "Don't be so stingy, you bastards, there's enough there for all of us. Why hog it all? We have entered the age of communism, when mine is yours and yours is mine" (92). In another episode, Mao Zedong, who has just passed away, sits on a "solemn and bleak" moon (a reversal of Mao as the crimson sun in communist iconography) while two piglets, Piglet Sixteen (Ximen) with his girlfriend Little Flower on his back, follow him ardently: "We wanted to get closer to the moon so we could see Mao Zedong's face with even greater clarity. But the moon moved with us, the distance remaining constant no matter how hard I paddled ... Schools of red carp, white eels, black-capped soft-shelled turtles, fly up to the moon, an expression of romanticism; but before they reach their goal, the pull of gravity brings them back [to become] meals for waiting foxes and wild boars" (340).

Piglet Sixteen's playfulness and facetiousness should not be confused with the penchant for the frivolity in Zhu Wen's *I Love Dollars* or Wang Shuo's *Please Don't Call Me Human* and *Playing for Thrills*. Whereas the frivolous hooligans in Wang's many bestsellers of the 1990s may represent a departure from a socialist past of idealism and innocence and unabashed embrace of the postsocialist present of shrewdness (see Wang, Jing 261-62; Huang, Yibing 78-79), a number of Mo Yan's characters such as Ding Gou'er in the *Republic of Wine* and Ding Shikou in the novella

*Shifu: You'll Do Anything for a Laugh* are caught uncomfortably between different modes of existence, between the past and the present. They are thrown overnight into a new world with a different cultural logic, akin to the protagonist Hank Morgan, who is transported back in time to the medieval British court of King Arthur in Mark Twain's burlesque novel *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*.

Mo Yan has attested to the way he has merged China's tradition of humor and his unique use of the self-reflecting character Mo Yan to write novels about the Cultural Revolution. An example of Mo Yan's dark and cold humor in characterizing madness and absurdity is in his use of colloquial language of political sloganism. During the Cultural Revolution, the long-standing, common practice of people greeting each other with the exchange "Have you eaten?—I have" was replaced. Instead, people made use of political slogans, so that if one began, "Chairman Mao," the other was supposed to respond "lives ten thousand years." Mo Yan recounts how a "woman Red Guard encountered the madman in our village, and asked, 'Chairman Mao,' however, the madman answered with fury, 'fuck your mother.' The Red Guard took the madman to the village revolutionary director, who simply replied, 'he is an idiot'" (119). Thus the author Mo Yan's regular comments in various novels and various interviews about the stupidity or madness of the character Mo Yan should be understood as part of this cultural complex.

There is plenty in human nature, independent of politics that can serve as the target of humor. In *POW!*, Mo Yan concentrates the humorous arc on the narrator Luo Xiaotong's obsession with meat. Unlike Bei Dao or Gao Xingjian, who are more vocal and critical of the Chinese government, Mo Yan's critique is often more subtle. Chris Cox rightly observes that *POW!* "doesn't land any blows on the Chinese regime" (<<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/jan/19/pow-mo-yan-review-fiction>>). The backdrop of any comedy is key to the way the quotidian engages with large-scale societal events and trends. Luo's story is grounded in the added dispossessions women face during cultural turmoil, as is the case with Luo's mother in the development of a meat-packing plant, representative of the industrialization China faced in the twentieth century when its population grew substantially and from the perspective of a monk presented in an intimate and most definitively unsacred manner. The monk who listens to the story in *POW!* has animal urges that coordinate interestingly with the animal forms taken on by the narrator of *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*. As such, the festival of carnivore delight gives some insights into the initial basis for the vegetarianism that infused into Buddhism after it entered into China and became Chan Buddhism—prior to that, begging Buddhist monks would accept any form of food, including meat. Hector Tobar is insightful in calling narrator Luo "Mo Yan's Candide," since Voltaire's eponymous work also celebrates the connoisseurship that can be developed by those near starvation when every little bite counts (<<http://articles.latimes.com/2012/dec/14/entertainment/la-ca-jc-mo-yan-20121216>>). And like *Candide*, *POW!* is an acquired taste: Mo Yan

achieves and maintains the comic level by juxtaposing the large-scale background and the intimate details of not just camels-as-food but rather camel tongue, not just horse-as-food but also horse testicles, and not just mundane beef but cow anuses.

We can learn much about the complexity of laughter and humor by tracing a few moments of each in *POW!* In the nearly four-hundred-page narration of his obsession with meat and his fractured family life, amid the town's corrupt manipulations of farmers, workers, and the meat market to Wise Monk Lan, narrator Luo mentions but few instances of laughter. Some of his narration, however, clearly shows that he learned from his mother that laughter is used as a social control to confirm social mores. Early on in the novel, he interrupts his story of Auntie Wild Mule, the mistress of his father, Dieh, because he becomes confused by his own sexual desire for her: "I can't tell any more of my story right now. I'm confused. The Wise Monk seems to be able to read my mind, since I didn't say any of this but merely thought it. But he knows. His sardonic laugh brings an end to my lustful thoughts. All right, I'll go on" (29). The laughter of others functions as a deep-seated social control for the narrator, as shown in two other stories. He tells of his mother, Yang Yuzhen, dragging him around town shortly after she learns that Auntie Wild Mule has died and left behind a daughter. In the account, observers witness Yang and Luo "obviously puzzled" (77). Luo slows down his account to describe one observer: "The man on the motorbike turned to look at us. What's so damn interesting about us? I may have hated Mother, but not as much as I hated people who stared. She'd told me that people who laugh at widows and orphans suffer the wrath of Heaven. Which is what happened: He was so busy staring at us that he ran into a poplar tree" (78). In the midst of his nearly two-page-long description of the accident and the man, he describes the driver as "one of my father's drinking buddies. His name was Han, Han *shifu*. Father told me to call him Uncle Han" (78).

In another case, he describes cursing his mother for a painful home-haircut: "Shave my head? She was going to cut it off! 'Help,' I shouted. 'Help ... murder ... Yang Yuzhen is going to murder me ...' I guess my shouts weren't as effective as I thought, because her rage was abruptly replaced by snorts of laughter. 'You little swine, is that the best you can come up with'" (127). His actions in turn cause passing-by children to stand "just beyond the door, giggling and watching the comedy play out in front of them" (90). The story comes back to the matter of laughter as a mechanism of social control as his mother asks, "Aren't you ashamed of crying like that?" (128). Elsewhere, Yang voices her awareness of laughter as an expression of superiority by others and her attempts to avoid being the object of laughter. In discussing a proposed invitation to have the powerful Lao Lan to their house in thanks for a loan, she notes that "if you're going to have him over do it right. He'll laugh if you give him common fare. Don't invite someone if you're afraid of spending money" (127). It is not just Luo who holds the view that laughter is meant to mock or indicate implicitly one's superiority. During a festival, the well-dressed Lao

manages to get himself into "a pile of loose ostrich shit and he winds up flat on his back. Noticing that his employees are trying to keep from laughing, he cries "Think that's funny, do you? ... Go ahead, laugh, why don't you?" (132). When they do, he threatens to fire them and shoot them.

Detailed images and detailed word usage are Mo Yan's forte in his varied comic touch: his unique sense of humor is defined, among all things, by his use of the term 幽默 (*yōumo*), a keyword in the story *Shifu: You'll Do Anything for a Laugh*. *Youmo* has been traditionally used to describe Chinese humor since it first appeared in a 1924 article by Lin Yutang. It literally means "silence" and "tranquility." The word itself dates back to the poetic verse of Qu Yuan (屈原) (340-278 BCE). For Lin, humor is an understated form of expression. Humor is distinct from boisterous laughter and is often at its best when it is discreet. So far, Mo Yan's discretion has indeed been insufficiently grasped by his readers. Contrary to what its title suggests, the novella does not provoke belly-rolling laughter (see Chey and Davis). However, it does capture vividly a series of comic situations in which a fifty-something laid-off factory foreman finds himself. One month away from retirement with pension, Old Ding, a hardworking man with firm ideological investments in an era before market capitalism, is laid off despite the manager's exaggerated reassurance: "You're a veteran worker, a provincial model worker, a *shifu*—master worker—and even if we're down to the last man [in the coming years of financial setbacks], the man will be you" (2). Later on, Ding is moved to tears by similarly vain promises and praises made by the vice mayor (5). Ding is unable or unwilling to distinguish between disingenuous remarks and earnest offers of help, much like the displaced titular character of Cervantes's *Don Quijote*. Yet it is clear immediately that Mo Yan does not follow any of his literary predecessors, even Chinese ones like Lu Xun, in reducing characters to the grim situations they are caught in. Old Ding remains innocent at heart as he adapts to the brave new world, seemingly having just awakened from a dream (5).

Old Ding's innocence is accentuated by the cynical verbal quirk throughout the narrative by his apprentice Lü Xiaohu (Little Hu): "Master, you have a good sense of humor; *shifu*, you'll do anything for a laugh!" Little Hu repeatedly uses "humorous" (*yōumo*) to describe Old Ding's antics and moral assumptions, which are increasingly at odds with the new society. Such comments, offered at regular intervals, serve to steer a potentially traumatic personal history toward a comedy of manners filled with Ding's "discursive ineptness" (151). Ding's earnestness toward everything in life and moral conscience does not sit well with Little Hu's life philosophy of *laissez-faire*. Within the story, *yōumo* takes on several meanings, ranging from absurdly incongruous to amusingly odd. Little Hu uses the word *yōumo* in friendly nudges to prevent Ding from becoming a laughing stock. Excited by Ding's idea of converting an abandoned bus hulk in the suburb into a lakeside love nest to rent out by the hour to couples (the same way a pay toilet operates), Little Hu urges

Ding to stop worrying about whether it is moral and just do it, for, after all, "what's there for a laid-off worker to be embarrassed about!" (29).

Somewhat of a miniature of the poignancy of the comic with the development of the character Mo Yan in *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*, Little Hu's use of *youmo* twice at the end of the story emphasizes the incongruities between the quixotic Ding and the abased world around him. With great determination, Ding drags Little Hu and a policeman to retrieve the bodies of a couple that he believes to have committed suicide in his bus hulk, only to find it empty. Cornered, Ding chooses to indulge in an abject attitude toward the unknown, refusing to believe that the couple may have simply left without his knowledge. He concludes that "it was a pair of spirits." Little Hu responds: "Shifu, you really will do anything for a laugh, won't you?" (58). While he finds Ding's fiasco amusing, he also regards compassionately the split between a confused mind and an incorruptible soul. Therein lies the significance of *youmo*.

As existing scholarship on Chinese comic culture testifies, although *youmo* is derived from the English "humor," it is in fact hard to render precisely in other languages. Howard Goldblatt renders appropriately Little Hu's verbal quirk into English as "Shifu, you'll do anything for a laugh," thereby avoiding the thorny problem of translating *youmo* to English. Little Hu's use of *youmo* does not correspond to usages of the English word "humor," at least not in the sense of boisterous laughter. It seems that doing anything for a laugh is the only way out for Ding as he scrambles to reinvent himself in the face of a social structure that has turned its back on him. For Ding, the hut in the woods embodies both his shame and the pleasure-seeking couples' shame. He feels like a voyeur, but more importantly he imagines that his illicit business exposes his other source of shame: being laid off at an old age. From Little Hu's and the narrator's perspectives, the *youmo* of Ding's situation arises from this conflation of private and public realms. The bus hulk is decked out with "everything couples might need for their trysts," but Ding has to learn to solicit business in the open. In his mind, this liminal space publicly announces the unfortunate turns in his private life (34).

Some types of humor do get lost in translation, like the "linguistic punning humor uniquely connected to the Chinese language *xiehouyu* ... a saying with the latter part suspended ... leaving the hearer to extrapolate the second part and interpret it as a pun for another word or phrase with a different meaning" (Chey and Davis 8). Thus this perambulation of just some key aspects of Mo Yan's humor has striven to be provocative rather than comprehensive, to showcase an element in Mo Yan's literary toolkit that he himself might not have noticed had it not received sufficient attention: in *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*, he "doth protest too much, methinks" (*Hamlet* 3.2) but not to the tragic ends to which William Shakespeare draws his drama. Even when author Mo Yan represents character Mo Yan as sympathetic, starting in Book 3, he surrounds him with comic elements or puts him in comic situations. A particularly multilayered moment occurs in a long passage in which Ximen Pig describes that

his "morning exercises" are interrupted by three jalopies riding in to the farm, which "bumped and rattled" so much that it looked "like long-tailed monsters" (235). The situational humor—what comprises a pig's morning exercises?!—prepares readers for the sight-gag featuring the drivers and passengers disembarking the technological monstrosities, culminating with Mo Yan's exit: "I saw Lan Jinlong, his hair a mess and his face covered with grime, climb out of the first cab. Then Zhu Hongxin and Dragon Sun climbed out of the second vehicle, and finally, the remaining three Sun brothers and Mo Yan climbed out of the last one. All four faces in this last group were coated with dust, looking like the terra-cotta warriors of the First Emperor" (235).

Mo Yan's technique is focused: he uses only visual and kinesthetic images to lead to a trenchant simile. The simile refers to the famous "Terra Cotta Warriors and Horses," the collection of nearly nine thousand life-size statues dating from the third century BCE. Three finely tuned elements add to the basic sight-gag to create humor. First is the anachronistic reference to the statues by narrator Ximen Pig, who lived decades before the 1974 discovery of the statues: Chinese readers would be well aware of at least the decade of this impressive find. Second is the juxtaposition of this group of local-yocal government officials with the regal figures. Third, and the subtlest, is the replacement of the regal terracotta "horses" by the three jalopies, or "iron horses" as they were called. The second and third elements thus incisively yet subtly depict the resources of China's early twentieth-century officials as clearly and amusingly inferior to those of China's third century. Author Mo Yan's self-deprecating inclusion of character Mo Yan in such a statement minimizes any outrage—perhaps its subtlety may even curtail many readers' recognition of it.

Character Mo Yan, however, is saved from the sexual escapades that comprise so much of Mo Yan's humor. Chinese writings have a long heritage of varied sexual humor, from slapstick to the macabre. Its success is difficult, since it is easy for writers to sway from the pornographic to the disgusting, without any literary pay-off. Sabina Knight is thus helpful in the attention she has given to P'u Songling's 1766 *Strange Tales from a Leisure Studio*, "the pinnacle of classical-language tales." She notes that it is P'u's "erudition" that lays the foundation for his "satirical humor" in his "stories [that] bring out the fluidity of selfhood and sexuality" (70). Two examples show the breadth and depth of Mo Yan's similar skill.

In *The Republic of Wine*, character Mo Yan has engaged with an epistolary relationship with the aspiring writer Li Yidou, but it is not until near the end that he makes an appearance in the action of the main narrative. His entrance recalls the entrance of the main character, forty-eight-year-old Ding Gou'er, to Liquorland. Ding makes a sexual pass at the younger truck driver and later engages in sex with her, in what seems like a setup between her and her husband Diamond Jin. The narrative is very suggestive about this newcomer's sexual daring but constantly pulls back, as in this scene: "Miss Ma picked up the uncorked bottle of liquor and carried it to the bathroom, with Mo Yan close on her heels. The room was still steamy, tendrils of

whiteness lending it an air of romance. Miss Ma emptied the bottle into the bathtub, releasing a heavy, rather stimulating cloud of aroma—alcohol, of course. 'There you go, Mo Yan. Jump in.' She smiled as she walked out, and Mo Yan detected a vague sense of romance in that smile. His emotions stirred, he nearly reached out to put his arm around her and plant a kiss on her ruddy cheek. But he clenched his teeth to keep his emotions in check and saw Miss Ma out" (341). The narrator sets up again the possibility of the character Mo Yan engaging in a sexual peccadillo, only to have the rug pulled out. Author Mo Yan well recognizes that the blurring of fiction and reality is too fuzzy to characterize his avatar as promiscuous. Fictionally representing himself as "keep[ing] from doing something he shouldn't" (342), Mo Yan reifies marital fidelity and at the same time he keeps readerly interest going to the very end.

The other instance involves narrator Shangguan Jintong's description in *Big Breasts and Wide Hips* of the banquet following his "Sixth Sister" Shangguan Niandi's wedding: "Niandi, who sat in the chair beside [the groom, Babbit], was wearing a white gown, open at the neck to reveal the top half of her breasts. I nearly drooled ... a look of smug contentment showed on her heavily powdered face. Lucky Niandi, how shameless you were. The Bird Fairy's [her eldest sister's] bones weren't even cold before you walked down the aisle with the American!" (230). The quotation is part of an ongoing joke throughout the novel, one of Jintong's numerous and hilarious indications of his obsession with breasts: breasts as food source, however, for a young man who refuses to be weaned until he is seven years old. The juxtaposition between his view of breasts as food source and as sexual object is brought to the fore shortly after, when the good-natured Babbit pats Jintong's "head with one of his big hands. 'Your mother's breasts belong to you, youngster,' he said with a wink. 'But your sister's breasts belong to me' ... I drew back [moving away from his big and imposing hand] and glared hatefully at his comical, ugly face" (233).

Goldblatt's translation of the passage reflects the tone of Mo Yan's original ("我躲闪开他的大手，仇视地盯着他的既滑稽又丑陋的脸" [196]) with the right measure of comical connotations. "Comical" (滑稽) in Mo Yan's original indicates a sense of funniness and amusement. Unlike humor, this word is often used in a derogatory way. The "sniping" of the youngster, like an old biddy, resonates with the figure of the gossip; and its resonance is deep. The foundation of gossip is the presumed hard-heartedness on display. But hard-heartedness in this case verges on a needed sense of perseverance amid the devastating toil and pain that the Shangguan sisters have undergone and will continue to undergo. Further, Shangguan Niandi's "shamelessness" is shown as poignant passion in subsequent scenes where she chooses to stand by her man, despite the added danger that doing so brings to her.

Characterized by a keen sense of comedic effect that makes many scenes in his works resemble short theatrical skits, Mo Yan's works deploy various comic modes to construct alternative narratives about China, revising the affective spectrum of the literary experience. We conclude with Luigi Priandello's metaphor for comic contrariness: "Ordi-

narily, the artist concerns himself only with the body. The humorist concerns himself with body and shadow at the same time and sometimes more with the shadow than the body. He notes all the fine turns of that shadow, how it stretches this much or grows that much fatter, as if to make fun of the body, which all this time does not concern itself with the shadow or its size" (Pirandello qtd. in Holland 25). If characters such as Old Ding are the shadows, their comic proportion and shapes will point us to the source of light.

## Note

Portions of this article first appeared in Alexa Alice Joubin, "Mo Yan as Humorist," *World Literature Today* 83.4 (2009): 32-35. Copyright release to the author.

## Works Cited

- Brussig, Thomas. *Heroes Like Us*. Trans. John Brownjohn. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996.
- Chen, Sihe (陈思和), ed. 中国当代文学史教程 (A Course in the History of Contemporary Chinese Literature). Shanghai: Fudan daxue chubanshe, 1999.
- Chey, Jocelyn, and Jessica Milner Davis. *Humour in Chinese Life and Letters: Critical and Traditional Approaches*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong UP, 2011.
- Cox, Chris. "POW! By Mo Yan: Review." *theguardian.com* (19 January 2013): <<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/jan/19/pow-mo-yan-review-fiction>>.
- Holland, Norman. *Laughing: A Psychology of Humor*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1982.
- Huang, Yibing. *Contemporary Chinese Literature: From the Cultural Revolution to the Future*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.
- Huang, Yuhan. "Mo Yan's *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* in a Cultural and Visual Context." *Mo Yan in Context: Nobel Laureate and Global Storyteller*. Ed. Angelica Duran and Yuhan Huang. West Lafayette: Purdue UP, 2014. 107-22.
- Knight, Sabina. *Chinese Literature: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2011.
- McGrath, Jason. *Postsocialist Modernity: Chinese Cinema, Literature, and Criticism in the Market Age*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2008.
- Mo Yan. *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*. Trans. Howard Goldblatt. New York: Arcade, 2011.
- Mo Yan (莫言). 丰乳肥臀. 上海:上海文艺出版社 (*Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*). Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 2012.
- Mo Yan. *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*. Trans. Howard Goldblatt. New York: Arcade, 2008.
- Mo Yan. *The Republic of Wine*. Trans. Howard Goldblatt. New York: Arcade Publishing, 2000.
- Mo Yan. *Shifu: You'll Do Anything for a Laugh*. Trans. Howard Goldblatt. New York: Arcade, 2001.
- Tobar, Hector. "Mo Yan's *POW!* Packs a Punch, However Veiled." *latimes.com* (14 December 2012): <<http://articles.latimes.com/2012/dec/14/entertainment/la-ca-jc-mo-yan-20121216>>.

- Wang, Jing. *High Culture Fever: Politics, Aesthetics, and Ideology in Deng's China*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1996.
- Wang, Shuo. *Playing for Shrills*. Trans. Howard Goldblatt. New York: Penguin, 1998.
- Wang, Shuo. *Please Don't Call Me Human*. Trans. Howard Goldblatt. Boston: Cheng & Tsui, 2003.
- Wells, Henry W. *Traditional Chinese Humor: A Study in Art and Literature*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1971.
- Zhu, Wen. *I Love Dollars and Other Stories of China*. Trans. Julia Lovell. New York: Columbia UP, 2007.

### Author's profile

Alexa Alice Joubin teaches English literature, East Asian languages and literatures, and international affairs at George Washington University. Her interests in scholarship include Shakespeare, comparative literature, intercultural performance, translation, and globalization studies. In addition to numerous articles, her single-authored book publications include *Chinese Shakespeares* (Columbia University Press, 2009) and *Weltliteratur und Welt-theater. Ästhetischer Humanismus in der kulturellen Globalisierung* (Transcript Verlag, 2012), and her edited volumes include *Shakespeare in Hollywood, Asia, and Cyberspace* (with Charles S. Ross, Purdue UP, 2009) and 新世纪国外中国文学译介与研究文情报告 (with Hon-gtao Liu, 2013) (*Sourcebook of Chinese and Sinophone Literary Studies in North America in the New Millennium*).

### Author's profile

Angelica Duran teaches English, comparative literature, and religious studies at Purdue University. Her interests in scholarship include comparative literature, disability studies, and Renaissance British literature. In addition to numerous articles and chapters, Duran's single-authored book publications include *The Age of Milton and the Scientific Revolution* (2007) and her edited volumes include *A Concise Companion to Milton* (2007) and *The King James Bible across Borders and Centuries* (2014).

## Contents

Acknowledgments	vii
Note	ix
Introduction to <i>Mo Yan in Context: Nobel Laureate and Global Storyteller</i> <i>Angelica Duran and Yuhan Huang</i>	1
<b>Part One</b>	
<b>Leaves</b>	
A Mutually Rewarding yet Uneasy and Sometimes Fragile Relationship between Author and Translator <i>Howard Goldblatt</i>	23
The Censorship of Mo Yan's 天堂蒜薹之歌 ( <i>The Garlic Ballads</i> ) <i>Thomas Chen</i>	37
Representations of "China" and "Japan" in Mo Yan's, Hayashi's, and Naruse's Texts <i>Noriko J. Horiguchi</i>	51
Abortion in Faulkner's <i>The Wild Palms</i> and Mo Yan's 蛙 (Frog) <i>Lanlan Du</i>	63
Rural Chineseness, Mo Yan's Work, and World Literature <i>Chengzhou He</i>	77
<b>Part Two</b>	
<b>Trunk</b>	
The Realpolitik of Mo Yan's Fiction <i>Sabina Knight</i>	93
Mo Yan's <i>Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out</i> in a Cultural and Visual Context <i>Yuhan Huang</i>	107

Mo Yan's <i>The Garlic Ballads</i> and <i>Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out</i> in the Context of Religious and Chinese Literary Conventions <i>Chi-ying Alice Wang</i>	123
Religious Elements in Mo Yan's and Yan Lianke's Works <i>Jinghui Wang</i>	139
Mo Yan's Work and the Politics of Literary Humor <i>Alexa Alice Joubin and Angelica Duran</i>	153
<b>Part Three</b>	
<b>Roots</b>	
Cosmopolitanism and the Internationalization of Chinese Literature <i>Ning Wang</i>	167
Variation Study in Western and Chinese Comparative Literature <i>Shunqing Cao and Miaomiao Wang</i>	183
A Textbook Case of Comparative Cultural Studies <i>Donald Mitchell and Angelica Duran</i>	195
<b>Epilogue</b>	
Soul Searching in Contemporary Chinese Literature and Society <i>Fenggang Yang</i>	215
Selected Bibliography of and about Mo Yan's Work in Chinese and English <i>Angelica Duran and Yuhan Huang</i>	221
Index	227

Chapter Title: Mo Yan's Work and the Politics of Literary Humor Chapter Author(s):

Alexa Alice Joubin and Angelica Duran

Book Title: *Mo Yan in Context*

Book Subtitle: Nobel Laureate and Global Storyteller

Book Editor(s): Angelica Duran and Yuhan Huang

Published by: Purdue University Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.com/stable/j.ctt6wq1tk.15>

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



This content is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0). To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>.



Purdue University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Mo Yan in Context*

JSTOR