

Mo Yan as Humorist

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These days I can point out an Audi, a Mercedes, a BMW, and a Toyota; I also know all about U.S. space shuttles and Soviet aircraft carriers. But at the time, I was a donkey, a 1958 donkey. This strange object, with its four rubber wheels, was clearly faster than me, at least on level ground. Allow me to repeat Mo Yan's comment: A goat can scale a tree, a donkey is a good climber.

—Mo Yan, *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* (2006)

One of the most energetic writers in contemporary China, Mo Yan 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 magical realism to black humor, and from epic historical novel to bawdy fable. His comic visions are sometimes neglected in the English-speaking world thanks to his better-known historical novels such as *Honggaoliang jiazhu* (Eng. *Red Sorghum*, 1987; film version by Zhang Yimou), which chronicles a sober history of pain. Set against a rich stream of powerful and unpredictable stories, Guan Moye's pen name, Mo Yan, signaling a vow to "abstain from speech," contains a healthy dose of humor. This claim to silence, or an author's abstinence from speech, may be seen as a gesture of self-mockery or self-praise, but it is also a critical tool in the works by Mo Yan that boldly reimagine political history and the history of sexuality. It is a tool to speak the unspeakable, and humor commits the invisible to writing. The silence of the writer Mo Yan creates a unique space for the articulate character Mo Yan, a regular in such novels as *The Republic of Wine*. More importantly, his works have reinvigorated the neglected tradition of literary humor in modern China with comic yet sympathetic portrayals of individuals in a fragmented world of postsocialist marketization.¹ Both underprivileged individuals

and bureaucrats alike find themselves in comic and sometimes absurd situations.

Similar to other contemporary writers who parody socialist realism, Mo Yan has blended the bawdy and humorous modes to construct counternarratives to the grand narrative of the nation-state. In East German writer Thomas Brussig's 1996 novel *Helden wie wir* (Eng. *Heroes Like Us*, 1997), the first-person narrator asks 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*?"² Mo Yan's *The Republic of Wine*, a parody of Chinese food culture written in the reinvented genres of detective and epistolary novels, and *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* (2006), use a similar strategy to create a sense of comic absurdity. Toward the end of *The Republic of Wine*, 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.³

This is but one of numerous examples of Mo Yan's subtle and humorous readings of China's political culture and figures. At the same time, his sympathetic and passionate pleas for the characters being ridiculed precludes any sense of superiority derived from historical hindsight (as in "we now know better").

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. Ximen Nao, a landlord executed for his "bourgeois sins," goes through a series of reincarnations as a donkey (see the epigraph of this article), an ox, a pig, a dog, a monkey, and eventually a human child. Along the way, Ximen interacts with humans, fights with other animals for survival, and observes and comments on human (Chinese) society as it goes through momentous historical changes. Reborn as a donkey, Ximen 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." 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 pigs, 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 other contemporary Chinese writers' (such as Zhu Wen and Wang Shuo) penchant for frivolity, focus on the present time, and blasphemous counternarratives against didacticism.⁴ Mo Yan's characters remain intimately connected to personal and national histories. Whereas Wang Shuo's "frivolous hooligans" may represent a departure from a socialist past of idealism and innocence, and unabashed embrace

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of the postsocialist present of shrewdness,⁵ 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" (1999) 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.

Mo Yan's unique sense of humor is defined, among all things, by his use of the term *youmo* (humor) itself, a keyword in the story "Shifu, You'll Do Anything for a Laugh." Contrary to what its title suggests, the novella does not provoke belly-rolling laughter. However, it does vividly capture a series of comic situations in which a fifty-something laid-off factory foreman finds himself. One month away from retirement with a 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."⁶ Later on, Ding is moved to tears by similarly vain promises and praises made by the vice-mayor. Ding is unable or unwilling to distinguish between disingenuous remarks and earnest offers of help. Yet it is immediately clear that Mo Yan does not follow his literary predecessors, such as Lu Xun, in reducing their characters to the grim situation they are caught in. Old Ding remains innocent at heart as he adapts to the brave new world, seemingly having just awoken from a dream.

The innocence of Old Ding is accentuated by his apprentice Lü Xiaohu's (Little Hu) cynical verbal quirk throughout the narrative: "Master, you have a good sense of humor; *shifu*, you'll do anything for a laugh!" Little Hu repeatedly uses "humorous" (*youmo*) to describe 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."⁷ 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, *youmo* (humor) takes on several meanings, ranging from absurdly incon-

gruous to amusingly odd. Little Hu uses the word *youmo* in friendly nudges to prevent Ding from becoming a laughingstock. Excited by Ding's idea of converting an abandoned bus hulk in the suburb into a lake-side 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?"

Little Hu uses *youmo* twice at the end of the story to emphatically outline the incongruities between Ding and the 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?" 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, even though *youmo* is derived from the English "humor," it is in fact hard to pin down precisely.⁸ Howard Goldblatt appropriately renders Little Hu's verbal quirk into English as "shifu, you'll do anything for a laugh," and thereby avoiding the thorny problem of translating *youmo* into 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.

Characterized by a keen sense of comedic effect that makes many scenes 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. I would like to conclude with Luigi Pirandello's metaphor for comic contrariness:

Ordinarily, 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.⁹

If characters such as Old Ding are the shadows, their comic proportion and shapes will point us to the source of light.

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¹ Chen Sihe, ed., *Zhongguo dangdai wenxue shi jiaocheng* [A course in the history of contemporary Chinese literature] (Fudan daxue chubanshe, 1999), 338; Jason McGrath, *Postsocialist Modernity: Chinese Cinema, Literature, and Criticism in the Market Age* (Stanford University Press, 2008), 20–21.

² Thomas Brussig, *Heroes Like Us*, tr. John Brownjohn (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1996), 5.

³ Mo Yan, *The Republic of Wine*, tr. Howard Goldblatt (Arcade Publishing, 2000), 333.

⁴ Zhu Wen, *I Love Dollars and Other Stories of China*, tr. Julia Lovell (Penguin, 2007).

⁵ Jing Wang, *High Culture Fever: Politics, Aesthetics, and Ideology in Deng's China* (University of California Press, 1996), 261–62; Yibing Huang, *Contemporary Chinese Literature: From the Cultural Revolution to the Future* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 78–79.

⁶ Mo Yan, *Shifu, You'll Do Anything for a Laugh*, tr. Howard Goldblatt (Arcade, 2001), 2; the collection was reviewed in *World Literature Today* 76.2 (Spring 2002): 118.

⁷ Susan Purdie, *Comedy: The Mastery of Discourse* (University of Toronto Press, 1993), 151.

⁸ Zhang Jian, *Zhongguo xiju guannian de xiandai shengcheng* [The modern formation of Chinese notions of comedy] (Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2005); Christopher Rea and Nicolai Volland, "Comic Visions of Modern China: Introduction," *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 20.2 (Fall 2008): 5–16.

⁹ Quoted in Norman Holland, *Laughing: A Psychology of Humor* (Cornell University Press, 1982), 25.



LEFT: Scene from *Xingfu shiguang* (*Happy Times*, 2000), Zhang Yimou's film adaptation of Mo Yan's "Shifu, You'll Do Anything for a Laugh."