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Mo Yan's Delicate Balancing Act

Review

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TWENTY YEARS ago, on my first day in a PhD program, my mentor Joseph Lau gave me a stack of ten novels. When I expressed doubts about fitting in this leisure reading on top of my coursework, he held up Mo Yan's *Republic of Wine* and shook the book at me. "This writer is going to win the Nobel Prize," he said. Such was the impact of Mo Yan's writing on those familiar with it long before he won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2012. Yet, since winning the prize, Mo Yan has become a scapegoat for the

sins of the regime in which he must survive. Mo's literary range and philosophical depth have received little attention in the recent flurry of press coverage, which has concentrated on his apparent acquiescence to the Chinese government's repression of dissidents. Secure in the comfort of Western freedoms, myriad writers have lambasted Mo for his public statements and silences. Few writers have noted that Western authors seldom are judged on their politics or that writers in China have reasons for working within as well as outside of the system.

In any event, Mo Yan now operates under heightened scrutiny. Indeed, the honor was triumphantly embraced by Beijing as the long-awaited global acknowledgement of China's return, not only as an economic powerhouse but as a cultural leader. Mo's was the first Nobel Prize in Literature ever awarded to a Chinese citizen. (The dissident Gao Xingjian had taken French citizenship by the time he won the 2000 prize.) Its belatedness was much discussed in light of China's rich literary heritage and cultural renaissance of recent decades. Literature is a fundamental part of what Chinese officials call their country's "national rejuvenation."

Mo's literary legacy offers a rare window into this larger cultural-political mission, and to judge him by his public actions neglects much that can be learned from his work, which traces China's history of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Mo Yan won the Nobel Prize for his writing, not for political engagement. This essay thus offers a perspective on his politics based not on a few symbolic acts but on a close reading of his literary works. "For a writer," Mo said in accepting his prize, "the best way to speak is by writing. You will find everything I need to say in my works." These works offer keen insights into truth telling, the role of the writer, history's horrors, destiny and human will. They also reflect Mo's uses of tradition and modernism, his portrayals of sensuality, aggression and violence, and his views on individual conscience. Thanks to the herculean efforts of master translator Howard Goldblatt (whose translations I quote below), English-language readers can appreciate Mo's powerful fiction.

Controversy over Mo's prize highlights the difficult position of writers in today's China. His speeches and interviews may offer an understanding of his choices, but his fiction offers his most penetrating comments on writing, truth telling and accommodation to government censorship. In his 1989 short story "Abandoned Child," a bus driver

recounts how he was once disciplined for telling the truth. When serving in the army, the driver crashed a jeep into a tree after looking in the rearview mirror to find the deputy chief of staff feeling up the commander's wife. Ordered to file a report, the driver did not spare the truth: "I lost my bearings when I saw the deputy chief of staff feel the woman up, and crashed the jeep. It was all my fault." But his political instructor swore at him, whacked him on the head and ordered him to redo the report. Asked by the narrator if he did so, the driver replies, "No fuckin' way! He wrote it for me, and I copied it."

The story suggests that being forced to copy other people's words is not the same as choosing what to write. This distinction may lie behind Mo's decision in the summer of 2012 to join other prominent writers in hand-copying Mao Zedong's 1942 "Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art" for a commemorative edition. Critics understandably assumed the copying endorsed Mao's exhortation that literature must serve the people and the revolution. That text set the stage for three and a half decades of literary and artistic repression. Mo fueled the fire of this criticism by seeming to defend "necessary" censorship at a December 2012 press conference in Stockholm.

CLEARLY, MO is no naïf in the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) reign of thought control. Born Guan Moye, he chose his pen name —"Don't Talk"—to honor his mother's caution against talking too much and in sardonic recognition of his failure to heed her warning. Yet I have been struck by his quiet and unassuming presence at literary conferences in Beijing, where he offered kind encouragement in private meetings but evinced a shy persona in public.

Adroit in his political judgments, Mo has judiciously censored himself enough to flourish in what historian Jeffrey Wasserstrom calls the "gray zone." This is a subtly negotiated space where the government suffers heterodoxy as long as writers camouflage their dissent in literary metaphor. Like many writers, Mo voices political criticism that would risk reprisal if presented overtly. But since he presents his critique on the sly, often poking fun at himself as a writer, he is allowed to pursue his truth telling. Still, to many he has erred on the side of caution, and his lack of explicit protest has allowed domestic and foreign critics to paint him as an apologist for authoritarianism.

That Mo walks a fine line between writing social criticism and angering Communist censors is attested by his prominence in the government-run Chinese Writers Association (CWA). He has been a member of the

CCP since 1978, and he joined the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in 1976. In 1982, he became a CCP cadre, a functionary roughly equivalent to a civil servant, and in 1984 he enrolled in the newly established PLA College of Literature and Arts. Now vice chairman of the CWA, Mo enjoys a privileged life as one of China's eighty-three million CCP members (about 6 percent of the population). Yet he often presents his personal history in studiously naive terms. He says he decided to become a writer when a former college student sent to Mo's village for "reeducation" told of a successful writer who ate succulent pork dumplings three times a day. Those were the days following Mao's 1958–1961 Great Leap Forward, when famine killed an estimated forty-five million Chinese. Mo also claims to write strictly for himself rather than for an audience. However, he accumulated a huge audience after a film adaptation of his novel *Red Sorghum* won the Golden Bear prize for best film at the 1988 Berlin International Film Festival.

But Mo's recent public statements have only further enraged critics who have never forgiven him for his actions at the 2009 Frankfurt Book Fair, when he walked out after Chinese dissident writers entered. "Some may want to shout on the street," Mo reasoned in a speech at the fair, "but we should tolerate those who hide in their rooms and use literature to voice their opinions."

That's what Mo did in "Abandoned Child," which can be read as a modern morality play. The narrator grapples with the ethical burdens of rescuing an abandoned newborn girl. Not only can his family ill afford to raise the child, but his wife hopes to conceive a son despite China's one-child policy, which would limit them to their first daughter. But the story also illuminates Mo's ethical framework as a writer, as well as his understanding of literature's role in a modern China grappling with its rejuvenation. After a watchdog bites him in the leg at the government compound, the narrator is grateful rather than angry: "Most likely the bite was intended for me to reach a sudden awakening through pain. . . . I was startled into awareness. Thank you, dog, you with the pointy snout and a face drenched in artistic colors!"

When the township head asks whether keeping a watchdog might rupture the government's "flesh-and-blood ties with the people," the narrator points to his injured leg and says such an injury doesn't rupture ties but "molds them." The story thus alludes to Mo's own role as the writer of fiction limning China's twentieth-century chronicle of national pain. His authorial intent may be to awaken readers into

awareness, to exorcise traumatic historical memories and to restore ties of societal unity.

THE IDEA that art molds ties between the government and its citizens frames Mo's place in the current political context. For millennia, rulers in China have understood literary culture to be foundational to political power, and China's survival through three thousand years may have depended as much on its literary traditions as on political history. Ancient history books chronicling the achievements of dynasties promoted faith that the universe was ordered and moral, and this faith bolstered belief in each ruling regime's role in carrying out the mandate of heaven. From the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) until the dawn of the twentieth century, the government was administered by an entire class of literati, scholar-officials trained in the classical Confucian texts. Literary culture—which included history and philosophy—was the root of government and civil practice. Scholar-officials both organized history to legitimate ruling regimes and remonstrated not only with artful subtlety but also with loyalty.

Similarly, those of Mo Yan's generation believed they were the vanguard of a world-changing revolution. Mo has described this deep faith as one of his reasons for becoming a writer:

It was a time of intense political passions, when starving citizens tightened their belts and followed the Party in its Communist experiment. We may have been famished at the time, but we considered ourselves to be the luckiest people in the world. Two-thirds of the world's people, we believed, were living in dire misery, and it was our sacred duty to rescue them from the sea of suffering in which they were drowning.

The writer's sacred duty had to be carried out within rigid constraints when Mo began writing in the late 1970s. During the Mao Zedong era (roughly from Mao's 1942 "Talks at the Yan'an Forum" to his death in 1976), socialist-realist fiction demanded portrayals of heroic workers, soldiers and peasants overcoming corrupt landlords and capitalists. In stark contrast to such black-and-white portrayals, Mo writes fantastical realism, sometimes grotesque, often full of black humor, and sometimes in a style the Swedish Academy praised as "hallucinatory realism." By using the artistic liberties of magical realism to challenge the political status quo, Mo and many fellow avant-garde writers continue the tradition of European surrealists and Latin American writers such as Gabriel García Márquez.

Mo is best known for his historical novels depicting the brutal Japanese invasion that preceded World War II. In these works he joins other post-Mao writers to exhume China's collective traumatic memories. His magisterial *Red Sorghum* (1987) consists of five novellas in which the narrator imagines his grandparents' experiences as the Japanese invade their village. Full of graphic violence, rape and even a butcher skinning a prisoner alive, the novel chronicles horrors commonly viewed in China as the epitome of twentieth-century cruelties. This historical setting—safely before the culmination of the Chinese Revolution in 1949—adroitly sidesteps the party's sensitivities and thus flies underneath the censors' radar. But perceptive readers may find that such novels also evoke the horrors that Chinese citizens inflicted on one another during the Cultural Revolution of 1966–1976.

Sandalwood Death (2001) could elicit a similar interpretation. But, whereas the butcher in *Red Sorghum* is forced by the Japanese, here Mo depicts a willing Chinese executioner, which perhaps explains his use of a setting even more removed in time. The torture of the protagonist, an opera singer turned rebel during the Boxer Rebellion (1898–1901), may be the most horrific scene I've ever read. The executioner skewers the prisoner alive with a sandalwood shaft, then feeds him ginseng soup to forestall his death and prolong his torture until the opening of the German-constructed railroad.

Writing in the so-called gray zone entails much more political risk in works set in the Mao Zedong period and contemporary times. As far back as *The Garlic Ballads* (1988), Mo depicted a 1987 peasant riot against official corruption and malfeasance in the transition to a market economy. Mo wrote *The Republic of Wine* (1992) in the years just following the June 1989 massacre of prodemocracy protesters in Tiananmen Square, so one can read as allegory the plot about its detective investigating a rumor that local officials were eating human babies. *Big Breasts and Wide Hips* (1996) met with such harsh criticism over its depiction of merciless Communist revolutionaries that Mo's superiors prevailed upon him to write a letter asking the publisher to discontinue it. In his prize-winning novel *Frog* (2009), Mo's account of a village obstetrician exposes the corruption and cruelty of officials enforcing the one-child policy.

Although less acclaimed than *Red Sorghum* and *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, Mo's real masterpiece of historical fiction is the more explicitly critical *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* (2006). The novel begins in purgatory in 1950, where the landowner Ximen Nao has suffered two

years of torture after his execution by Communist militiamen in the chaos of the revolution. Ximen argues that his decency should win him a reprieve, and the lord of the underworld grants him a series of reincarnations, first as a donkey, then as an ox, a pig, a dog, a monkey and finally as a big-headed human child. This tragicomic parody of the Buddhist six realms is but one of several narrative devices Mo employs to convey the complexity of history. Through his animal reincarnations, Ximen observes the land-reform movement, the Cultural Revolution and the headlong embrace of market capitalism in the 1990s.

Much of the modern Chinese history chronicled in *Life and Death* is also the history Mo Yan has witnessed. “Big-head,” the wise survivor of so many campaigns and so much death, has seen history’s horrors, seen death itself, and survived. He has the power of memory but is no more empowered than a child.

Salvation nonetheless lies in preserving the memories. By recounting events from the perspective of animals, Mo can voice criticism that might be too risky coming from a human mouth. In his first reincarnation, for example, Ximen Donkey hears the Communist cadres torturing his widow and concubines to extract the whereabouts of the family’s gold, silver and jewelry. Aware that the women don’t know, Ximen Donkey rushes forth to reveal the hiding place, despite his cynical expectation that the cadres will pocket the treasure for themselves.

The novel uses black humor to convey the horrors of the murderous Cultural Revolution. Mo casts doubt on the success of the CCP’s campaign of forced land collectivization when the robust Ximen Ox enables a lone independent farmer with only a wooden plow to outstrip the Commune with its multiple teams of oxen pulling steel plows. During the winter described in the next chapter, the Commune’s impoverished peasants are hungry. Yet the party feeds them propaganda rather than food. The passage turns fantastical after a Red Guard propaganda team arrives in the village on a Soviet truck rigged with four ear-splitting loudspeakers: “The loudspeakers blared so loud a farmer’s wife had a miscarriage, a pig ran headlong into a wall and knocked itself out, a whole roost of laying hens took to the air, and local dogs barked themselves hoarse.”

The raucous propaganda stuns a flock of wild geese that drops from the sky on top of the gathered villagers. Impoverished and starving, the villagers tear apart each bird:

The bird's wings were torn off, its legs wound up in someone else's hands, its head and neck were torn from its body and held high in the air, dripping blood. . . . Chaos turned to tangled fighting and from there to violent battles. The final tally: seventeen people were trampled to death, an unknown number suffered injury.

This fantastical microcosm deftly conveys the hysteria and public murder of innocents during the Cultural Revolution.

THE POWER of Mo's works lies not in his chronicling of events but in his probing stories of individual resilience in the face of relentless forces of instinct, sexuality and history. The inexorability of these pressures may recall the determinism of Tolstoy. Yet even as Mo's characters succumb to these forces, they also make genuine choices in deciding their lives. The tenacity of human will expresses a vital life force that powers Mo's narrative arcs.

This celebration of human will is hard-won in the face of such strong historical trajectories. Mo came of age during the high tide of socialist theory and socialist-realist literature that emphasized utopian visions of collective revolution. Perhaps in response, Mo's works ask whether responsibility for calamities lies within individuals or in forces beyond their control. As Mo bravely gives his characters responsibility for their individual moral dilemmas and actions, the moral frameworks of his narratives not only depart from socialist certainties but also challenge many liberal and feminist pieties. He depicts instinct and lust, for example, both as frequently destructive and as potentially liberating. Mo described this "humanistic stance" in his Nobel lecture: "I know that nebulous terrain exists in the hearts and minds of every person, terrain that cannot be adequately characterized in simple terms of right and wrong or good and bad." In treating fate, lust and history in ways that defy easy moralizing, Mo's works question official morality.

This questioning may be as significant as his critical portrayals of traumatic history. Against official history with its presumption of unitary truth, his insistence on moral ambiguity challenges authoritarian government. The self-questioning of his narratives is profoundly subversive in a country whose legal system convicts 99 percent of those prosecuted and where more than fifty thousand censors "harmonize" the Internet.

In Mo's own favorite story, "White Dog and the Swing" (1985), the now-

middle-aged male narrator guiltily describes an accident that disfigured a childhood friend and altered the course of her life. When he returns years later, she assuages his guilt by telling him that everything was the work of fate. Yet in a brave refusal of further resignation, the now-married mother of mute triplets pleads with the narrator to conceive a child with her: "It's the perfect time in my cycle. . . . I want a child who can talk. . . . If you agree, you'll save me. If you don't agree, you'll destroy me. There are a thousand reasons and ten thousand excuses. Please don't give me reasons and excuses" (my translation). The story ends as the narrator faces this momentous decision. The narrator's great empathy for his friend drives home the frightening freedom made possible by powerful emotions. A mother yearns for a child who can talk; a man yearns to repay a debt.

In *Red Sorghum*, the characters determine their lives by the narrator's grandfather's rape of his grandmother in the sorghum field, his murder of her leprous husband and her taking over of her deceased husband's distillery. The male characters frequently offer fatalistic explanations for these acts, as when the narrator's grandfather first touches the grandmother's foot and feels a premonition "illuminating the path his life would take." The narrator supports this notion of a destined path: "I've always believed that marriages are made in heaven and that people fated to be together are connected by an invisible thread."

In contrast to the male characters' focus on instinct and fate, the grandmother asserts her own agency, even as she lies dying. On her way to deliver food to her husband and his ragtag Chinese militia, she has been fatally shot by the invading Japanese soldiers:

Grandma lies there soaking up the crisp warmth of the sorghum field. . . . "My Heaven . . . you gave me a lover, you gave me a son, . . . you gave me thirty years of life as robust as red sorghum. . . . don't take it back now. Forgive me, let me go! Have I sinned? Would it have been right to share my pillow with a leper and produce a misshapen, putrid monster to contaminate this beautiful world? What is chastity then? What is the correct path? What is goodness? What is evil? You never told me, so I had to decide on my own. . . . It was my body, and I used it as I thought fitting."

Mo Yan's emphasis on individual will treads on even more sensitive political territory in his works depicting the excesses of the Mao Zedong era. By acknowledging his characters' own desires and choices, Mo

refuses to excuse individuals for the violence and cruelty demanded by the party's political movements. *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* presents stark portrayals of individuals who stand against both political fanaticism and social pressure. Blue Face stubbornly farms his tiny plot of soil as an independent farmer, refusing the party's pressure to join collectivization. Out of loyalty to his master, Ximen Ox chooses to endure a vicious beating at the hands of the Commune leaders. As Blue Face's son, Jiefang, later recalls, "My tears started to flow as soon as they began beating you. I wailed, I begged, I wanted to throw myself on top of you to share your suffering, but my arms were pinned to my sides by the mob that had gathered to watch the spectacle." He goes on:

You submitted meekly to their cruelty, and that they found perplexing. So many ancient ethical standards and supernatural legends stirred in their hearts and minds. Is this an ox or some sort of god? Maybe it's a Buddha who has borne all this suffering to lead people who have gone astray to enlightenment. People are not to tyrannize other people, or oxen; they must not force other people, or oxen, to do things they do not want to do.

The horror ends when Jiefang watches a Red Guard—Ximen's own son Jinlong—burn Ximen Ox alive: "Oh, no, Ximen Ox, oh, no, Ximen Ox, who would rather die than stand up and pull a plow for the People's Commune." Mo also has Jiefang explicitly note that such individual sacrifice is not in vain: "Ximen Ox died on my dad's land. What he did went a long way toward clearing the minds of people who had become confused and disoriented during the Cultural Revolution. Ah, Ximen Ox, you became the stuff of legend, a mythical being."

Jiefang's emotional commitments make him the most fully evolved character in the novel. After leaving the farming village and becoming a CCP official but trapped in a loveless arranged marriage, Jiefang shows uncommon independence of will in pursuing love with another woman. Although he knows that his refusal to hide his affair as other officials hide theirs will cost him his position and social status, he chooses to live openly with his lover, a choice that his teenage son and friends admire.

AS HIS writing has evolved over the years, Mo has developed a distinctive narrative control. Many of his works continually unsettle the reader by switching among narrators and going back and forth in time.

The often-unannounced intercutting of points of view is sometimes so startling as to feel vertiginous, and the use of metafictional narrative layers often heightens the reader's awareness of his or her own role alongside the author in constructing the fictional world. During the 1980s, after the rise of Deng Xiaoping, Mo and other writers followed the reform-era exhortation to "walk toward the world," and much has been written about the influence of William Faulkner and Gabriel García Márquez, writers for whom Mo has expressed admiration. His fictional worlds have also been compared to the dark absurdity of Kafka and the grand historical vision of Tolstoy.

Yet Mo's unique narrative style is deeply rooted in Chinese literary traditions. His fantastical passages follow in the tradition of "records of the strange," a medieval form of "unofficial history" that documented tales of ghosts, fox fairies who take on human form, animals as moral exemplars and other uncanny phenomena. In the epic sweep of his longest novels, Mo also follows the six-hundred-year-old tradition of Chinese "novels-in-chapters" such as *Journey to the West* and *Dream of the Red Chamber*. *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* pays homage to this form by beginning each of its fifty-eight chapters with a couplet that hints at the chapter's content.

The combination of traditional Chinese and modernist elements makes Mo's narratives among the most multilayered in world literature. Throughout *Life and Death*, seemingly realistic scenes are interrupted by obvious flights of fancy, such as when Ximen Pig sees Mao Zedong sitting on the moon, or when dogs gather to party and drink bottles of beer. Yet Mo's narrative playfulness goes far beyond surreal plot elements. He suggests the slipperiness of a single knowable truth through his radical storytelling techniques: tales within tales, flashbacks and flash-forwards, dream sequences and self-mocking quasi autobiography.

The novel alternates among a dizzying cast of narrators that includes the five animals, two principal narrators and the fictional character "Mo Yan." The main narrators turn out to be Blue Face's son Jiefang and the five-year-old "Big-head," who remembers his earlier incarnations as a landowner, a donkey, an ox, a pig, a dog and a monkey. Although Ximen Nao was middle-aged when executed, by the time he comes back to life as Big-head, he is a wizened old man who has lived through the twentieth century. Embodied as a five-year-old, he has the mind of a mature adult and the memory of his six earlier incarnations. In the narrative present of 2005, the two narrators converse as the

fifty-five-year-old Jiefang recalls his youth as a farmer's son beside the series of loyal farm animals he ultimately recognizes as one soul's reincarnations.

Mo reveals the date of the narrative present only about a quarter of the way through the novel:

“[Big-head], I can't let you keep calling me 'Grandpa.' . . . if we go back forty years, that is, the year 1965, during that turbulent spring, our relationship was one of a fifteen-year-old youth and a young ox.” . . . I gazed into the ox's eyes and saw a look of mischief, of naïveté, and of unruliness.

Once this narrative framing becomes clear, the reader understands that many passages from the animals' points of view are actually Big-head's memories of his animal incarnations as he speaks to Jiefang. The animals thus possess animal instincts and abilities as well as human knowledge, feelings and thoughts. Ximen Pig even quotes from classical Chinese literature, muses on Ingmar Bergman's films and shows intense interest in current events.

As the novel approaches its climax, “Mo Yan” the fictionalized author breaks the fourth wall, addresses the reader directly and introduces himself as the final narrator. In his youth this quasi-autobiographical character is frequently made the butt of ridicule, but as a young man he gains a position of modest respectability as a writer and is thus able to help Jiefang during his period of disgrace. Nonetheless, the many mocking references to “Mo Yan” add a wry internal commentary on the novel's accounts. Perhaps warning the reader not to believe anyone who claims to present the truth, Ximen Pig cautions against taking “Mo Yan” too seriously:

According to Mo Yan, as the leaders of the Ximen Village Production Brigade were bemoaning their anticipated fate, feeling utterly helpless, he entered the scene with a plan. But it would be a mistake to take him at his word, since his stories are filled with foggy details and speculation, and should be used for reference only.

Whereas Mo's metafictional techniques produce psychological distance, the vivid sensuality of his writing creates a gripping sense of immediacy. But only rarely does Mo employ sensual description in the service of human pleasure. Pleasure is often passed over with a

euphemism or an ellipsis. Mo's animals experience far more ecstasy in eating and in sex than do humans.

As with his recurrent scenes of defecation and urination, Mo often treats sexuality as an irresistible, bestial force of nature. Yet sexuality can also offer a path to redemption. Jiefang cannot resist his passion and loses his worldly station as a result. But Mo also foregrounds passion's redemptive power, as when making love speeds Jiefang's recovery after thugs hired by his wife viciously beat him. And in the end, the wife who refused to grant him a divorce forgives him on her deathbed, and Jiefang reconciles with his family once he is able to marry his lover.

More than a painter of pleasure, Mo Yan is a master of the sensuality of pain. The flaying alive and skewering of prisoners and the beating and burning of Ximen Ox are just a few of numerous scenes of graphic violence in Mo's works. The description of the ox's beating will bring a reader to tears, but Mo's narrators at other times seem to exult in the sound of whips striking bodies, the vivid red of dripping blood and the stench of burning flesh.

Why is there so much suffering in Mo's works? In his many indelible scenes of pain, Mo confronts history and ideology as these forces mark human bodies. By making his characters' bodily experiences the parchment on which he records his chronicles, he avoids direct criticism while still testifying to history's horrors. In *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, when a party VIP sentences to immediate death the young children of a Nationalist officer framed for rape, the scene makes a mockery of violence sanctioned in the name of revolution: "On the surface, we'll be executing two children. And yet it's not children we'll be executing, but a reactionary, backward social system."

Might Mo put his characters in profoundly harrowing circumstances in the hope that their suffering might offer a healing catharsis? His sensuality—both of pain and of pleasure—may be key to Mo's underlying faith in redemption. The sensuality of suffering reminds one of Christian penitents who find ecstasy in pain. He may even present the visceral shock of pain to awaken the empathy that could build a better future. Even as we wince at the savagery, we might thank Mo Yan, as the narrator of "Abandoned Child" thanked the watchdog that bit him for his "sudden awakening through pain."

In grappling with human aggression, Mo invites readers to confront the

dark depths of the human psyche. Under the duress of that darkness, in a world of extreme greed and corruption, his most sympathetic characters also vindicate the human spirit through their passion for life and their abiding devotion to others. The life force that runs through Mo's fiction powers destruction, but it also powers what the narrator of *Red Sorghum* calls "the iron law of love."

I RETURN now to the critics who condemn what they see as Mo's acquiescence to his government's repression. Much of the recent press coverage relies on a binary classification of progovernment versus dissident writers. But astute readers recognize his veiled yet clear political critiques. As literary historian and critic Steven Moore wrote in a 2008 review in the *Washington Post*, "Over the last 20 years, Mo Yan has been writing brutally vibrant stories about rural life in China that flout official party ideology and celebrate individualism over conformity. (How he has escaped imprisonment—or worse—I don't know.)"

Mo is neither an apologist for the government nor a reflexive dissident. "A great writer," he avers, "has to be like a whale, breathing steadily alone in the depths of the sea." He believes in individual conscience even as he takes seriously the contradictions within individuals. His characters don't generally exhibit the uncorrupted core of individual selfhood common in American fiction. Yet the characters who might qualify as heroes evince an almost-libertarian allegiance to personal freedom.

One such character is Blue Face, the sole remaining independent farmer in *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*. A thorn in the side of the Commune, Blue Face demands respect for his independence in a passage that might convey Mo's personal statement of apolitical tolerance:

No, independent farming means doing it alone. I don't need anybody else. I have nothing against the Communist Party and I definitely have nothing against Chairman Mao. I'm not opposed to the People's Commune or to collectivization. I just want to be left alone to work for myself. Crows everywhere in the world are black. Why can't there be at least one white one? That's me, a white crow!

Just as Mo Yan's metanarrative techniques repeatedly challenge the existence of any unitary truth—whether voiced by the government or

by dissidents—it might be wise to accept him as a nuanced, even contradictory, but ultimately principled and heartfelt writer.

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