

Jaded Mandarin? Mo Yan's Search for Order in a People's Republic

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Introduction

A cursory glance at the news coming out of China is sufficient to let us know all is not well with the People's Republic. Workers protest against inhumane indigenous and foreign business practices, children are murdered in the schools by desperate people trying to make a statement about the hopelessness of their lives, property is expropriated from the powerless to advance development programs that will benefit the well-connected, and business leaders and corrupt governmental officials are executed for acts that violate any possible standard of normative conduct. At the same time, the Chinese economy grows at breakneck speeds and the country attempts to translate its economic success into military and political capital that will enable it to play a more and more prominent role on the world stage.

A recent anecdote about the distribution of James Cameron's film *Avatar* in the People's Republic gives some insight into the nature of the present regime's struggle for legitimacy. The film *Avatar* was viewed to have a potentially destabilizing message. Since the film portrays indigenous people standing up for their property rights and beating back a mechanized colonial power, some bureaucrats decided that the film's distribution should be limited to reduce the

number of people who would see this subversive message. The official reason for limiting the distribution of *Avatar* focused on the need to promote Chinese cinema. The film to be promoted at the expense of *Avatar* was Hu Mei's *Confucius*, a film celebrating the life of one of the great spiritual authorities of China's past. A film featuring the sage would ideally help to advance values associated with Hu Jintao's harmonious society, a concept addressing concerns about growing inequality and the decline of spiritual values within China.

When *Confucius* failed to draw a wide audience, the wider release of *Avatar* was permitted. Cultural and political concerns were ultimately trumped by concerns about profit. The regime's primary strategy to retain legitimacy is heavily weighted towards delivering material goods to key constituencies.

The most basic political science textbook gives insight into the struggle for legitimacy touched upon in the above anecdote. Generally, people accept as legitimate those regimes that:

1. Are rooted in tradition.
2. Have divine sanction or are in harmony with reality.
3. Deliver basic material goods and services in an equitable and just fashion.
4. Utilize force in a way to provide security, while not severely interfering with the existential interests of their politically effective members.

Much as the Chinese government is comfortable with focusing on delivering the materials goods and the utilization of force, mainstream political science has

been more comfortable with focusing on the measurable aspects of legitimacy while neglecting the more ephemeral sources of legitimacy.

The Austrian American philosopher, Eric Voegelin, has proven an exception to this rule. Voegelin's insights focus on the first two features of legitimacy mentioned above: on tradition and the divine. He argues:

1. In ancient times, a unity between the divine and power is articulated as the political order.
2. This order is disrupted by conquests that shatter the relationship between spirit and power.
3. This break between spirit and power produces differentiated insights into the structure of reality by philosophers, prophets, and sages that become the foundation for a universal humanity.
4. Existence in truth requires properly balancing reality's transcendent and immanent aspects in the consciousness of individuals and their effective systems of representation.
5. This balance is difficult to maintain and if lost can unleash passions that will be massively destructive.
6. The twentieth century has been a time of such imbalance and destruction.
7. The dynamics of this breakdown is grounded in both extraordinary egomania and ordinary human passions as they mix on the plains of ordinary political concerns.

8. Spiritual values are essential to political order but also can disrupt human communities with disastrous outcomes.

Voegelin's work on China confirmed his insights about a structure of reality providing the context for human political action, but his brushing away of 1,300 years as a division between power and spirit appears somewhat arbitrary and can only misrepresent the human struggle for living in political communities while being true to the tensions of existence. In fact, Voegelin's emphasis on the extremes of differentiation and egomania may tell us little about how people and societies live in truth.

A possible place to begin in implementing a research program within the parameters outlined above is through examining contemporary literature. In general, literature acts as therapy, education, and entertainment for the literate stratum of a society. Getting a sense of the tone of prominent authors will give us insights into the mindset of opinion leaders. If literature illuminates reality in a truthful way, there is hope that the society will be attuned to reality with both its limits and creative possibilities. If literature obscures aspects of reality, it can give us insight into rebellion or if it is socially effective, it can contribute to a climate of opinion that disrupts human community.

The growing importance of China to global order as an economic, military, and cultural actor makes this country an interesting focus for research into how the structure of reality is represented in a contemporary country wrestling with the problem of political legitimacy. Mo Yan, a writer who tackles history, will

provide us with the material for our initial investigation of the People's Republic's search for order.

Mo Yan

Guan Moye (1955 – present), a writer who began his career in the People's Liberation Army as a teacher in one of its cultural education units, adopted the pen name Mo Yan (do not speak) to remind him to hold his tongue. Nevertheless, his work is characterized by a sharp eye for human foibles reminiscent of Lu Xun, the most influential writer in modern Chinese history, and a mixture of desire, violence and the fantastic that appears in magical realist authors such as Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Salman Rushdie. His choice of historical fiction as a medium for his creative voice has a long pedigree in Chinese history tracing itself back to the Chinese folk art of history telling as exemplified in *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* and *The Water Margin*. His early stories *Transparent Radish* (1981) and *The Red Sorghum Family* (1981) were adopted as the creative core for Zhang Yimou's film, *Red Sorghum*. As of date, he has published some fifteen odd books occasionally coming close to political controversy as when his book, *Big Breasts and Wide Hips* (2001) was awarded a prize, banned for its indecency, and then issued in an unabridged addition in a relatively short period of time.

He has welcomed the transition from a Maoist literary sensibility to one more tolerant of the de-politicization of literature. In a recent interview he stated, "As Mao put it, politics shall be in first place, the economy in the second place; nowadays everything is put to the service of economy. In the old days it was

politics that was considered important by the people, now it is money.” Though he happily confesses he began his career as a writer to eat, he now confesses that he writes because he has something to say. Japanese Nobel Prize winner Kenzaburo Oe appears to believe in the value of what Mo Yan has to say as he declared, “If I were to choose a Nobel Laureate, it would be Mo Yan”.

Mo Yan’s *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* (2005) wrestles with both political and existential questions. In this work he gives a humorous glimpse into himself, as he is both a character and a narrator. “We are told, Mo Yan was never much of a farmer... His body may have been on the farm, but his mind was in the city. Lowborn, he dreamed of becoming rich and famous; ugly as sin, he sought the company of pretty girls; generally ill-informed, he passed himself off as a knowledgeable academic. And with all that, he managed to establish himself as a writer, someone who dined on tasty pot stickers in Beijing every day.” When asked in an interview about the extent that his themes were determined by political and social themes he responded, “... I am first an ordinary person who is living in society, and then I am a writer. I think literature certainly would be influenced by the changes in society, but literature must concern itself with the more basic things: human emotions and human fate. And also with the lives and the deaths of humans and with thinking about such issues.” From his perspective, the writer’s vocation has a gravitational center in those experiences that move us towards reflective distance. His choice of Buddhist mythology as the conceit of his work exploring the last fifty years of Chinese history is very useful for bringing attention to basic things.

The Problem and the Plot

In this work Mo Yan gives us an interpretation of Chinese history from 1950 -2005 at the village level. If we are to take the word of a “knowledgeable and wise” German shepherd being recalled in the middle of the book, we have access to Mo Yan’s assessment of these fifty years. “People in the 1950s were innocent, in the 1960s they were fanatics, in the 1970s they were afraid of their own shadows, in the 1980s they carefully weighed people’s words and actions, and in the 1990s they were simply evil.” (Mo Yan, p. 266).

The plot is tightly woven around the life of Ximen Nao, a benevolent landlord, who is murdered during Mao’s land reform program of 1950. He ends up in Hell before the judge of the dead, Lord Yama, to protest his innocence and begins a series of transmigrations in the animal kingdom including a donkey, ox, pig, dog, and monkey before he is reincarnated as a wonder child born at the break of the millennium to recount his experiences to his adopted son’s son in the year 2005. The story he tells is of the fate of his family as it progresses through the various man made disasters of Maoist China and the reform era. His animal incarnations and the animals he associates with prove to have more virtues than most of the people of Gaomi Township, the locale of the story.

Three other characters play prominent roles in this tale. Lan Lian, Ximen Nao’s adopted son, Ximen Jinlong, Ximen Nao’s son to his first concubine, Yingchun, and Lan Jiefang, the son of Lan Lian and Yingchun after the death of Ximen Nao. Lan Lian is the sole holdout against the collectivization of agriculture in all of China and as an independent farmer represents the best case for reform

and the dignity of the individual in the face of crushing oppression. Lan Jiefang, in his own way, chooses the path of individual authenticity by leaving a loveless arranged marriage to follow his passion at the expense of all he could gain from the corrupt practices of Communist party centered capitalism. Ximen Jinlong follows every bad path offered by Chinese history from Cultural Revolution fanatic to corrupt kleptocrat. Despite its seemingly iconoclastic tone, the work articulates the line of the Chinese Communist Party including the Cultural Revolution was a horrible mistake, Chairman Mao is good, corruption is to be prosecuted and spiritual values need to be cultivated to avoid the corrupting effects of market reforms. At least on the surface, his work remains silent about the Tiananmen incident of 1989 and other issues sensitive to the Chinese Communist Party.

The story is narrated from various perspectives including Ximen Nao as a millennium child commenting on his many lives, Lan Jiefang expressing how he saw the events surrounding his life unfold, and Mo Yan, the author of the book as a mischievous character, telling the story from his own perspective as he witnessed it and heard it from others. This technique does not create the problem of the unreliable narrator, but instead gives veracity to this fantastic tale.

The historical context of this tale and the nature of the regime behind it can best be garnered by Jean Louis Margolin's brief summary introduction to his essay "China: A Long March into the Night" in *The Black Book of Communism: Crimes, Terror, and Repression*:

...Even if one excludes the civil war, the regime must be held accountable for a huge number of deaths. Although the estimates are quite speculative, it is clear that there were between 6 million and 10 million deaths as a direct result of the Communist actions, including hundreds of thousands of Tibetans. In addition, tens of millions of “counterrevolutionaries” passed long periods of their lives inside the prison system, with perhaps 20 million dying there. To that total should be added the staggering number of deaths during the ill-named Great Leap Forward – estimates range from 20 million to 43 million dead for the years 1959-1961- all victims of a famine caused by the misguided projects of a single man, Mao Zedong, and his criminal obstinacy in refusing to admit his mistake and to allow measures to be taken to rectify the disastrous effects...If one discounts the Japanese occupation, which was not followed by famine or other disasters, one has to go back to the third quarter of the nineteenth century to find slaughters on anything resembling a comparable scale. And at that time there was nothing to compare to the generality or the systematic and carefully planned character of Maoist atrocities, despite the dramatic nature of events in China at the time.

(Black Book of Communism, p. 464)

Margolin concludes his reflections on present day China with the recognition that contemporary China is much richer and less violent and not inclined to the strange utopianism of perpetual civil war as articulated by Mao Zedong.

Nevertheless, he fears that a failure to reject this founding father makes the regime susceptible to relapse to Mao's methods.

Magical Realism

Mo Yan is associated with the literary genre of magical realism. Magical realism utilizes the conceit of making ordinary things appear extraordinary and supernatural things appear ordinary. The genre is political insofar that it subverts the authority of the existing power structures and gives authority to marginalized voices. In the words of Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy Faris, "Magical realist texts are subversive: their in-betweenness, their all-at-onceness encourages resistance to monologic political and cultural structures... (p. 5). The plurality of discourses contained within a symbolically rich magical realist text opens up a dialogue about the legitimacy of the politically and culturally dominant power structures.

Mo Yan's use of magical realism to speak about history offers his work the appearance of being subversive, but as previously mentioned, a closer examination of the text finds his voice to be comfortably situated on the edge of permissible political discourse within the People's Republic of China. His work is at war with the policies of the past that caused substantial pain and suffering, and the evils of the present that undermine the efficacy of economic reforms. From this perspective, Mo Yan is a patriot deserving the greatest respect of his countrymen and his government. Mo Yan indicates to us that more may be present. In an interview with *Time*, he asserts, "One of the biggest problems in

literature is the lack of subtlety. A writer should bury his thoughts deep and convey them through the characters in his novel.”

Magic is used to illuminate the path of the text and perhaps much is hidden within these supernatural ornaments. Lan Jiefang’s dream of Lan Lian as a wizard like figure overseeing an odd acrobatic demonstration of Ximen Ox showing off his large gonads brings attention to the book’s fear of emasculation and the importance of potency to a human life worth living. It affirms a natural order that defies the conventional understanding of order. The military genius of a pig adviser to Ximen Pig and the eventual demise of the pigs in a war with the humans, a scene reminiscent of the strategy and tactic filled *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, reveal the value of independence as well as its dangers. Ximen Nao’s transmigratory path and an apparently bungling Hellish bureaucracy reveal justice and its limits. The magic of the story opens the doors of the moral imagination to give legitimacy to forces that are left out of the public discourse, but nevertheless part of the truth of existence.

Much like *Love in the Time of Cholera* and other works in the magical realist genre, erotic love drives the story. Lan Jiefang becomes an ambivalent hero by abandoning his family to pursue an affair of passion. By taking this action, he avoids the emasculation that is an omnipresent threat in the book, but he gives up power and authority, though the text makes it clear that what he gives up is tainted by corruption. His actions bring shame upon his family, and fate will end his affair with the death of his lover just as their relationship earns paternal acceptance. Lan Jiefang’s decency, personal integrity, and his

acceptance of his responsibility make us respect him, but the reader is left to wonder did his lack of faithfulness to family bring suffering upon him.

The death of his brother, Jinlong, brings Lan Jiefang and his first love, Hu Zhu, Jinlong's widow together. The intensity of erotic love in Lan Jiefang's life eclipses all other aspects of reality. A turn to the most private part of life is a solution for living in evil times.

Later his estranged son from his first marriage, Kaifeng, follows his father's path. Unfortunately, the object of his desire unbeknownst to him is his first cousin. The girl, Pang Fenghuang, is the child of Ximen Jinlong and Pang Kangmei. She is fickle and cruel. She tells Kaifeng she would only consider dating him if he removed the blue birth mark on his cheek that links him to his father and grandfather, a mark of their independence. He has surgery to remove the mark and is embraced by Pang Fenghuang. When his parents reveal to him the common family background between he and Fenghuang and explain that it is impossible for them to be together he commits suicide. Desire without authenticity and in accordance with certain laws can be fatal. Lan Kaifeng is the first in his line to lose the ability to stand against social pressures. Later Fenghuang will die in childbirth bringing Ximen Nao into the world as Lan Quiansui, the gifted millennium child who will tell us this tale. A careful reading of the text can only lead us to be ambivalent about desire.

A straightforward reading of the text from a modern Western perspective, an Enlightenment perspective, may go as follows. The individual is of supreme value. Lan Lian who asserts his right to be independent and later his son, Lan

Jiefang, who asserts his independence by renouncing his loveless marriage are heroes. Lan Jiefang goes so far as to cite Engels in defense of his infidelity. Ximen Nao, who was murdered by a violent and illegitimate government, further suffers the indignity of being punished by the inept bureaucracy of hell. The tragedies that befall the individuals in the story are due to their lack of independence. In so far as China enhances the independence of the individual through economic reforms and rejects its violent communalist path, it is a moral society. Yet, this reading, for all of its truth, is not the only possible reading. Reading the story through Confucian and Buddhist lenses will uncover aspects of reality and the challenge of being human that would be muted without the broader horizons of awareness these lenses give us.

Buddhism

Mo Yan's work is prefaced by an epigraph invoking the Buddha's words. "Transmigration wearies owing to mundane desires. Few desires and inaction bring peace to the mind." *Life and Death Is Wearing Me Out* is about desires and the pain they cause. If the reader wanted to develop a Buddhist theory of what caused the tragedy of the past fifty years of Chinese history, it would be grounded in the emotional lives of people and their desires. Mo Yan gives us a glimpse into these desires by dissecting a family's fate over this time period. Jinllong's desires for status lead him down the path of extreme brutality and corruption. The heroes of the story certainly suffer because of their desires for independence, but it would be possible to interpret Lan Lian's efforts to preserve his commitment to independent farming and Lan Jiefang's pursuit of love as

efforts to minimize their desires. Ximen Nao's case is perhaps the clearest and most interesting case in terms of understanding the problems of desire and the suffering it causes.

Ximen Nao is presented as a good landlord who ends up in hell and is tortured without remorse by demons trying to coerce a confession from him. He maintains his innocence and makes a powerful claim for his justness. Lord Yama, the judge of the dead, agrees to send him back to the world, and Ximen Nao is born as a donkey soon to be sold to his adopted son, Lan Lian. Ximen Donkey shows spiritedness, courage, indignity to those who were not loyal to him, and loyalty to those who were loyal to him. He suffers miserably and dies being sent back again to live the life of an Ox. The same pattern plays out in his Ox life with perhaps an even deeper loyalty met with an even more terrible and heroic end.

In light of these heroic moral lives, the judge of the dead appears ready to yield. He affirms:

I will bestow a special mercy on you by sending you to be reborn in a distant, stable country whose citizens are rich, a place of natural beauty where it is springtime year-round. Your father to be is thirty-six years old, the country's youngest mayor. Your mother is a gentle and beautiful professional singer whose voice has won for her many international prizes. You will be their only son, a jewel dropped into their hands. Your father has a brilliant future ahead of him: at forty-eight he will rise to the position of a governor. When she reaches middle age, your mother will

give up her professional career and go into business as the owner of a famous cosmetic company. Your father drives an Audi, your mother a BMW; you will drive a Mercedes. Fame and fortune beyond your imagining will be yours, and you will be lucky in love – many times. You will be richly compensated for the suffering and injustice you have experienced on the Wheel of Life so far.

Ximen Nao is reincarnated as pig in Gaomi Township under the responsibility of his son, Jinlong, who brutally murdered him as an ox. Lord Yama, the judge of the dead, is not to be trusted or Ximen Nao misinterprets karmic justice.

His pig life is perhaps the most political life he lives. He is king of the pigs, establishes his dominance, runs away saving himself from a plague, establishes himself as king of a tribe of wild pigs, oversees the growth of their power and then steps down from power, unknowingly sparing his life from the upcoming pig/human war. His final action as pig is to save the lives of several village children from drowning in an ice pond.

He is then reincarnated as a dog, who loyally takes care of his grandson's child, while his grandson, Lan Jiefang, abandons his family for the love of his life. He witnesses the pain and suffering the affair causes his grandson's wife and his great grandson, and he does not think a great deal of Lan Jiefang's awakening to life. He passes away on the estate of his adopted son Lan Lian, and he discovers the secret of why he has not been incarnated as a human being.

Lord Yama explains that Ximen Nao did not receive a human incarnation because there was too much hate in his heart. He reveals, "There are too many,

far too many, people in the world in whose heart hatred resides... We are unwilling to allow spirits who harbor hatred to be reborn as humans. Unavoidably some do slip through the net” (Mo Yan, p. 510). The imperfections of justice are confessed to, just as the moral core of transmigration is revealed. Hatred is to be purged. Transmigration appears to be the skillful means that Lord Yama is using to help weaken the chains of karma that condemn sentient beings to suffering. The Buddhist teaching contradicts human political values that may revel in anger and revenge.

Buddhism contends desires are the source of suffering. Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse, head of the Dzongsar Monastery and a leading Bhutanese film director, captures the contents of Buddhist ontology succinctly. He contends, “In order to be a Buddhist, you must accept compounded phenomena are impermanent, all emotions are pain, all things have no inherent existence, and enlightenment is beyond concepts” (Norbu, p. 5). Does Mo Yan’s work bring the readers to the realization of this truth? No one in his work achieves liberation though Ximen Nao makes progress. Hate, greed, and ignorance are assaulted, but erotic love appears to have a redemptive quality that makes Mo Yan appear ambivalent about the truth of Buddhist teaching.

The Buddhist teaching about reality is inherently problematic. There is no substantive reality and therefore the cause and effect of building up karma cannot exist. On the furthest edge of enlightenment, the moral teachings of compassion have the potential to dissolve in non-existence. This problem is not uncommon for other mystical traditions. For example Meister Eckhart finds the

devils turning into angels to bring about his assent to God. Mo Yan does not bring us to this point in his story. He stays firmly grounded in the moral teaching of compassion that attempts to reveal the folly of hatred. He also refuses to let go of erotic love and its powers of mitigating the sufferings of existence. These anchors protect him from the moral and political dangers of a radically transcendent vision. They also open him to the moral truths embodied within Chinese tradition.

Confucianism and the Chinese Tradition

Mo Yan's vision of morality is neither strictly modern with the desires of individuals reigning supreme nor Buddhist with liberation from desire being its goal. The dominant social-ethical-political tradition of Chinese society for over 1,800 years has been Confucianism. This tradition has emphasized the importance of family relationships, ritual propriety, and benevolence as the key to social order. The *Analects* 1.2 has Confucius asserting: "Exemplary persons concentrate their efforts on the root, for the root having taken hold, the proper way will grow there from. As for filial and fraternal responsibility, it is, I suspect, the root of authoritative conduct." This important tradition plays a key role in making sense out of Mo Yan's analysis of the problem of the past fifty years of Chinese history and provides a possible therapy for making an evil society healthy.

The concept of fate plays a prominent role in Mo Yan's work. Fate is mentioned 26 times in the text, and it is universally used to speak of the suffering associated with a difficult life. The cause and effect of human actions have a

karmic legacy that brings human's pain. A careful reading of the text shows that unfilial acts, those acts that negate fundamental relationships are the greatest source of pain and where the evil of the nineties results in the death of the young.

This case is a difficult case to make given one of the heroes of the tale Lian Jiefang is the one character who consistently accuses himself of unfilial behavior, yet, he appears to be a character who attains a balance of consciousness as well as love at the end of the work. Nevertheless, his sentiments are deeply filial. First, his decision to follow his heart is in accordance with Lan Lian's decision to follow his heart by sticking to independent farming. Secondly, his awareness of his failings as a son and his remorse about these failings make him authentically filial.

The most unfilial character, Jinlong, pushes his adopted father toward suicide, sadistically kills an ox, an incarnation of his real father, who is displaying loyalty to his master, and expropriates resources from peasants to advance his business enterprises associated with a grotesque, transmogrification of a theme park built around a Cultural Revolution motif, and symbolically fails to give his son guidance in either the principles of being a businessman or a Confucian while teaching sophistry. The son is not a son and the ruler is not a ruler and the father is not a father. The legacy of his actions include the intense suffering of his step father, the destruction of the moral norms to guide the young through life, his own eventual death at the hands of a Marxist fanatic, and finally the end of his family's name line. In contrast his sister, who shows care to her step father

and real father in his various incarnations achieves the small comforts a human life can offer with an understanding son and an engaging romantic partner.

Pursuit of inordinate passions without concern about the roots of human community intensified the violence of the past fifty years of Chinese history. The fate of the characters in this book focuses on the humanizing virtues of a Confucian worldview. Neglecting the root of the family cannot lead to anything but the destruction of life. *Analects* 2.3 expresses the political theory of this truth clearly:

Lead the people with administrative injunctions and keep them orderly with penal law, and they will avoid punishments but will be without a sense of shame. Lead them with excellence and keep them orderly through ritual and they will develop a sense of shame, and moreover, will order themselves.

Commentators like H.C. Creel, Herbert Fingarette, Henry Rosemont, Roger Ames and David Hall emphasize the creative and spontaneous nature of Confucian ritual as an ordering force in human relations. Such a flexible interpretation of the Confucian tradition enables us to perceive the filial nature of Lan Jiefang and detect how his behavior is in accordance with a Confucian sensibility.

Lan Lian, the patriarch of the Lan clan, offers us insight into the problematic nature of the Confucian worldview. First Lan Lian, confronted by overwhelming force cannot save his adopted father from murder. He then goes on to adopt his father's children as his own and marries his father's first

concubine, Yingchun, and sires a child with her. He owes his status as an independent farmer to Mao's revolution, and he remains loyal to Mao throughout the story even as Mao's policies cause him tremendous pain. By holding on to his land, he provides the entire family a lifeline even as he allows them to pursue what they perceive to be in their best interests. He is angered by Lan Jiefang's dishonorable behavior and banishes him, but he accepts him back while remembering his failings. He upholds a natural and moral order at tremendous cost to himself. In many senses he seems to be an exemplary person. Nevertheless, we do not know his transmigratory path, though for a Confucian, virtue is its own reward.

The period of economic reforms raise questions about Lan Lian's judgment. He is confronted by one of his form persecutor's who seems to be offering him some grudging respect. Lan Lian responds:

I am not the sage. That would be Mao Zedong or Deng Xiaoping... A sage can change heaven and earth. What can I do? I just stick to one firm principle, and that is even brothers will divide up a family's wealth. So how will it work to throw a bunch of people with different names together? Well, as it turns out, to my surprise, my principles stood the test of time... (Mo Yan, p.351).

A tension exists in Lan Lian's perspective. On one hand, he accepts Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping as sages who can change heaven and earth, but at the same time he asserts his commitment to independent farming was based upon a firm principle related to an unchangeable human nature. This criticism of

the past can only be uncovered by the application of logic, perhaps a trait lacking in those who would censor the work.

There is another possibility. Mao Zedong was the founding father of the People's Republic of China, a China that stood up after 100 years of humiliation. How can a nation condemn its founder and continue with any sense of legitimacy. Honoring the father is the root of order. Yet, what should a good Confucian do if the father has committed a crime? Confucius responded to Duke Sheh, who indicated in his country a son would turn in a father for stealing a sheep, in the following way, "Among us, in our part of the country, those who are upright are different from this. The father conceals the misconduct of the son, and the son conceals the misconduct of the father. Uprightness is to be found in this." But another concern within the Confucian canon qualifies this position.

In *Analects* 13.5, Duke Ding asks Confucius whether there was any saying that can ruin the state. Confucius responded, "A saying itself cannot have such effect, but there is the saying, 'I find little pleasure in ruling, save that no one will take exception to what I say.' If what one has to say is efficacious and no one takes exception fine indeed, but if what one has to say is not efficacious and no one takes exception, is this not close to a saying ruining the state?" If justice is efficacious, it is the duty of a son to remonstrate with his father, just as it is the duty of a subject to remonstrate with his ruler. Mo Yan's work by bringing attention to human desire and the damage done to the roots of the society when certain policies are combined with these desires continues a gentle remonstrance with the present and the past. Still, until we learn of Chairman

Mao's encounter with Lord Yama, his remonstrance remains incomplete.

Existence in Truth with Ten Thousand Things

Chinese culture is the inheritor of three great spiritual traditions: Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism. A very old Chinese painting known as *the Vinegar Tasters* offers a quick glance into the stances of these traditions with regards to the world. Three men stand around a jar of vinegar reacting in different ways to the taste of vinegar. The first man has a sour look on his face, the second man has a bitter look on his face and the third man is smiling. Confucius views this world as being sour requiring ritual action and culture to place the world in harmony with a virtuous past. Buddha views the world as a bitter experience to escape through eliminating the desires that trap us in cycles of pain. Lao Tse finds life to be fine as it is and is happy to see things being what they are. World changing, world fleeing, and world dwelling cover a wide existential horizon, but given that the Chinese began with understanding the world as 10,000 things with differences preceding unity, such breadth should not be unexpected.

The Chinese cosmology is a world of 10,000 things that are in a constant process of change. Living in such a cosmos requires awareness of this process. Appreciating things for being in the state they are, while recognizing the transitory nature of that state is the fundamental truth if it is even appropriate to speak of fundamental truths. Mo Yan simulates the complexity of these 10,000 things while sticking to a story line that brings light to the past 50 years of Chinese history. Strangely it brings this light to a grand human tragedy while

remaining light in spirit. In his self-deprecation and with his sharp eyes for human foibles, he does something the theorist cannot easily, if at all do. He finds life sustaining humor in the mess that is history. After experiencing a very painful life, Lan Jiefang points us towards a simple life strategy, "The dead cannot be brought back to life, and everyone else has to keep living whether they do so by crying or laughing" (Mo Yan, 538).

Whether laughter and tears will sustain people in a harmonious society plagued by corruption or not is a fair question, but Mo Yan's subtle critique of the People's Republic offers the spiritual substance that has allowed Chinese civilization to flourish for hundreds of years. The answer to whether Mo Yan is optimistic about the influence of his work to bring order to his country may be hidden in a simple literary trick. Ximen Nao is returned to the human world as the child, Lan Quiansui, certainly a point of hope, but that child begins to retell the story word for word as it began in Chapter 1. The reader is left to ponder, are we stuck with a history that begins in hope and ends in evil.