

Tonglu LI

## Trauma, Play, Memory: *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* and Mo Yan's Strategies for Writing History as Story

**Abstract** Commonly acclaimed for its black humor, *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* uses the Buddhist concept of reincarnation to follow two families during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The novel exemplifies the strategies through which Mo Yan transforms the violent and absurd events of recent Chinese history into personal memory of historical trauma. It focuses less, however, on those events *per se* than on the traumatic effects they create on the individual victims, and on the ways through which personal trauma caused by historical atrocities is addressed and healed. This article analyzes three layers of the novel: the evolving mechanisms of violence that condition the formation of personal trauma; the theatrical manifestation of the state-endorsed violence, and its loss in the post-revolutionary era; and the rationalization of the tragicomic past through the dialectic of remembering and forgetting. Built one on the other, these layers constitute the very dynamic stage on which the individuals interact with the violent and absurd world to negotiate the meaning of their lives, make sense of historical trauma, and insist on driving historical change.

**Keywords** violence, trauma, memory, theatrical play, desire, reincarnation, Buddhism

### Introduction: Writing History as Story

Like much of the world, China experienced radical social changes and manmade disasters in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the literary representation of these events, particularly of those after the foundation of the People's Republic, ideological conflict has never ended. For example, Ding Ling (1904–86) and Eileen Chang (Zhang Ailing, 1920–95) represent the Land Reform (1946–52) in totally different ways.<sup>1</sup> Other

events, such as the Great Leap Forward (1958–61) and the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), have stirred up controversies both within and beyond literature. What can be written and how they can be written are sometimes political rather than literary issues. Mo Yan's works have addressed many such sensitive topics. So in 2012, when his works earned him the Nobel Prize for Literature, he became the center of a worldwide debate. While some critics think that he deviates too radically from the official version of history, others accuse him of being politically conservative and of identifying with the regime.<sup>2</sup> The first book-length research on his works in English praises him for offering a “subversive voice” in China.<sup>3</sup> What is at stake is his ambiguous attitude toward the disasters in history, such as the starvation following the Great Leap Forward, and the political controversies in reality. The debate is not only politically related, but also touches upon the moral integrity of the author and the ethics of writing.

However, as Sabina Knight points out, “Mo Yan's literary range and philosophical depth have received little attention in the recent flurry of press coverage,” and “to judge him by his public actions neglects much that can be learned from his work.”<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, asking that he dissents more loudly or condemns political injustice more broadly is to ask that he follows a narrow social-realist doctrine. In writing about history, this approach often implants a predestined central idea, or “essence” of society in the text. Mo Yan himself has refused to accept such politicized roles, arguing that he is only a “storyteller.”<sup>5</sup> Here the tension between story and history emerges. With its concern with the individual's fate, its multiplicity and ambiguity, story gives a voice to people who are otherwise silenced and marginalized. As Howard Goldblatt puts it, Mo Yan “re-creates the past from below, becomes the chronicler of that other history, the one not written but lived.”<sup>6</sup> Covering the fifty years of dramatic

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Eileen Chang, *The Rice Sprout Song: A Novel of Modern China and Naked Earth*, respectively.

<sup>2</sup> For examples of the debate, see Perry Link, “Does This Writer Deserve the Prize?,” and Charles Laughlin, “What Mo Yan's Detractors Get Wrong.”

<sup>3</sup> Shelley Chan, *A Subversive Voice in China: The Fictional World of Mo Yan*.

<sup>4</sup> Sabina Knight, “The Realpolitik of Mo Yan's Fiction,” 93–94.

<sup>5</sup> Mo Yan, “Nobel Lecture: Storytellers.”

<sup>6</sup> Howard Goldblatt, “A Mutually Rewarding yet Uneasy and Sometimes Fragile Relationship between Author and

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<sup>1</sup> See Ding Ling, *The Sun Shines over the Sanggan River*, and

changes in China's rural and urban life starting from 1950, *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* (hereafter *Life and Death*)<sup>7</sup> provides a case in point for this claim. It offers a chance for us to examine the complexity of writing history as story.

Commonly acclaimed for its black humor, the novel uses the Buddhist concept of reincarnation to follow two families during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. One is headed by a benevolent landlord, Ximen Nao; the other belongs to his long-term tenant, Lan Lian.<sup>8</sup> Ximen Nao is killed during the 1948 land reform, though his wife Ximen Bai, his concubines Yingchun and Qiuxiang, and his twins Jinlong and Baofeng all survive him. Persistently seeking justice from the underworld king, Yama, Ximen Nao is reincarnated into a series of animals to temper his hatred. He returns first as a donkey, then as an ox, a pig, a dog, and a monkey. All of this prepares him to become human again fifty years after his first death. Marrying Ximen Nao's widowed concubine Yingchun, Lan Lian insists on bucking the collectivist trend, leading his own way of life on his private land. Inheriting his blue face and characteristics, Lan Lian's son and grandson both pursue their true loves at the cost of their social standing—and even their lives—in the post-revolutionary era. Ximen Nao's personal trauma belongs to what Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart defines as “historical trauma,” namely, the “cumulative emotional and psychological wounding over the lifespan and across generations, emanating from massive group trauma.”<sup>9</sup>

*Life and Death* exemplifies the strategies through which Mo Yan transforms the violent and absurd events in Chinese history into personal memory of historical trauma. It focuses less, however, on those events *per se* than on the traumatic effects they create on the individual victims, and on the ways through

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Translator,” 25.

<sup>7</sup> The Chinese edition is first published in 2006. The English edition, translated by Howard Goldblatt, is published in 2008. Some lines or paragraphs are omitted in the English translation. In this article, I will quote from the English version wherever possible, and go back to the Chinese edition when discussing the content omitted.

<sup>8</sup> Some scholars argue that in the novel, “incarnation does not adhere strictly to Buddhist doctrine. It does not disambiguate different levels of existence among the six different reincarnations of Ximen Nao. Instead, it provides a structure for storytelling, with each of the reincarnations narrating approximately ten years in China after the 1950s.” See Jinghui Wang, “Religious Elements in Mo Yan's and Yan Lianke's Works,” 141–42.

<sup>9</sup> Brave Heart, “The Historical Trauma Response among Natives and Its Relationship with Substance Abuse: A Lakota Illustration,” 7.

which personal trauma caused by historical atrocities is addressed and healed. This article analyzes three layers of the novel:

1. The evolving mechanisms of violence that condition the formation of personal trauma.
2. The theatrical manifestation of the state-endorsed violence and its loss in the post-revolutionary era.
3. The rationalization of the tragicomic past through the dialectic of remembering and forgetting.

Built one on the other, these layers constitute the very dynamic stage on which the individuals interact with the violent and absurd world to negotiate the meaning of their lives, make sense of historical trauma, and insist on driving historical change. Writing history as story provides the tactics for readers to engage with the specifics of history. It also makes it possible to explore the philosophical meanings of irreducible human experiences unconstrained by ideological confinement. Mo Yan's layered stories deliver answers to a pair of pressing questions: Can historical trauma be healed? If so, how?

## The Changing Facades of Revolutionary Violence

Through demonstrating the evolving mechanisms of revolutionary violence, *Life and Death* attempts to rationalize the violent past from its victims' perspectives. Revolution is not, in Mao's famous argument legitimizing the use of violence, “a dinner party, or writing an essay, or painting a picture” but “an insurrection, an act of violence by which one class overthrows another.” Particularly, “a rural revolution is a revolution by which the peasantry overthrows the power of the feudal landlord class.”<sup>10</sup> Ximen Nao, as a benevolent landlord, cannot get over the brutal way he is executed during the 1948 land reform by poor farmers he once helped. He does not understand that the landlord class has become a structural evil destined for destruction. As his executor Huang Tong tells him, his death is “government policy.”<sup>11</sup> Therefore, the problem is not what Ximen Nao *does*, but who he *is*. To some extent, the policy grants a form of divine violence. (Ximen Nao using Buddhist terms, refers to it as “a doom” 劫数.) As a ghost, Ximen Nao continually complains

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<sup>10</sup> Mao Zedong, “Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan,” 28.

<sup>11</sup> Mo Yan, *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*, 8.

that retribution is not reliable, and the world is unfair. Facing this, even Yama, the underworld king, has to admit that he is powerless to correct injustice in an absurd reality. In this large-scale disaster, as Lan Lian comments in his late years, his landlord died an unfair death, but he is not the only one who died unjustly.<sup>12</sup> Attributing Ximen Nao's death to a force beyond control thus relieves Lan Lian of any possible sense of personal guilt.

This "doom" is not a natural phenomenon, but one that is manufactured with deliberate theoretical considerations, and carried out by Ximen Nao's compatriot Hong Taiyue, the Party Secretary of the Ximen Village. Hong—a genuine communist who worked undercover as a beggar before 1949—embodies the new social order in the novel. It is he who issued the order to execute Ximen Nao based on the land reform policy. With a strong faith in establishing the new society, he believes that it is necessary to take violent measures and to physically eliminate the landlord class. Therefore, in his hands, violence is not inflicted to settle personal scores, but to bring justice to the whole society. However, Hong seldom gets his hands bloody. His violent commands on behalf of the ultimate social justice are often carried out by such figures as Huang Tong and Yang Qi. Once trapped at the bottom of the social scale, people like Huang and Yang can now have the pleasure of torturing and killing the "counter-revolutionaries." In search of Ximen Nao's hidden treasure, they use these grisly methods while interrogating the women who survive him. Hong Taiyue may provide a pure-sounding rationale for using violence on behalf of the state, but he still has to rely on social-climbing torturers like them to carry out the dirty work. It is through the perfect collaboration of Hong and the torturers that the farmers' commonsensical (traditional) criteria for good and evil are replaced by antagonistic class consciousness.<sup>13</sup>

The revolutionary situation stabilizes in the early 1950s and 1960s, mass movements gradually give way to a more peaceful, everyday mechanism of inclusion and exclusion. The hidden logic of this coercive mechanism, to use a popular phrase, is that "you are either with us or against us." There is no

middle ground.

The new holders of power still coerce and control their charges, but less cruelly than they did during the land reform. This time, rather than harshly abusing Ximen Nao's wife, Hong Taiyue tells her, "There's nothing to be afraid of. We've all been liberated. Our policy is not to beat people, and we are certainly not about to resort to torture."<sup>14</sup> However, the wife is still classed with the landlords and forced to undertake heavy physical labor under close supervision. Meanwhile, Ximen Nao's biological son Jinlong struggles to be included in the system by forcing Lan Lian and Jiefang to join the cooperative. And when Ximen Ox, the reincarnation of Jinlong's father, refuses to tread on the cooperative's land, he provokes Jinlong into burning him. The bloody interaction between animal and human here can be read as the pervasiveness of violence across the sphere of humans and animals. Shelley Chan argues that the depiction of the agonized death of the ox is a way to signify "the brutality of human beings."<sup>15</sup> Jinlong's savagery indicates a more fundamental loss of sympathy and benevolence toward life in general, according to Jinlong's sister, a doctor named Baofeng. She sees animals and humans as spiritual equals, a view that most Buddhists share.<sup>16</sup>

As a form of cold violence, exclusion can also lead to disastrous consequences. When Lan Lian decides not to join the agricultural cooperative, his wife Yingchun has to leave him. She only reunites with him in the 1980s, when the political atmosphere has totally changed. Fearing the loss of his status and prospects, his son Jiefang, who initially followed him, eventually decides to betray his father. As the guideline of social governance, class theory is thus utilized to cut the society into two consciously antagonistic camps, and a family has to disintegrate accordingly. The mechanism of exclusion has an enduring effect. For many years, Lan Lian is excluded from normal social life. He exists like a ghost. To paraphrase critical theorist Zhang Xudong's words, Lan Lian is forced into a subterranean world beyond light and language.<sup>17</sup> In his solitude, the donkey and ox (both are Ximen Nao's reincarnations) become part of his family. His only friend is the moon, and Lan Lian salutes it: "Moon, you've

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 503.

<sup>13</sup> Such a change has caused traumatic experiences in many people's consciousness. Sun Li (1913–2002), a veteran writer who is basically regarded as a loyal socialist writer, expressed his discontent to his comrades for their assigning a "rich peasant" class identity for his family, despite the fact that his father helped them wholeheartedly.

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<sup>14</sup> Mo Yan, *Life and Death*, 41.

<sup>15</sup> Shelley Chan, *A Subversive Voice in China*, 167.

<sup>16</sup> Mo Yan's obsession with violence against animals, observable in many of his works, such as *Red Sorghum*, *Sandalwood Death*, and *POW!*, deserves separate treatment.

<sup>17</sup> Zhang Xudong, "Zuowei lishi yiwang zhi zaiti de shengming he tudi," 12.

accompanied me in my labors all these years, you're a lantern sent to me by the Old Man in the Sky. I've tilled the soil by your light, I've sown seeds by your light, and I've brought in harvests by your light.... You say nothing, you are never angry or resentful, and I'm forever in your debt."<sup>18</sup> As such, the moon takes the place of the sun in his life, and the private land he owns is no longer a sheer commodity or a piece of productive capital. Rather, it becomes his ontological home—a place in which he can be a “white crow” in a world of black ones.

With the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution, physical violence comes back into broad use in political struggles. Political antagonism dominates and infiltrates not only people's deeds, but also their thoughts in everyday life. In this unprecedented revolution, nobody, including those once in power and the rising stars in politics, is safe anymore, needless to mention the “bad elements” such as the widow, Ximen Bai. All, from the county mayor Chen to the revolutionary Hong Taiyue, become the targets of harsh criticism and public humiliation. Jinlong—who has worked hard to force Lan Lian to join the cooperative,—is also marginalized after he accidentally drops Mao's badge into a toilet. By profaning the chairman's image, he gives his comrades grounds to strip him of power. Only with the secret help of Hong Taiyue, who regained power due to his revolutionary class background and his contribution to a pig-raising project, can Jinlong regain his position. Meanwhile, Hong Taiyue and Ximen Bai must conceal their love for one another, since longstanding class boundaries keep party leaders and upper-class widows from establishing formal love relationships.

Hong internalizes class consciousness. It becomes his sole article of faith, sustaining him even after the Cultural Revolution. When Hong Taiyue all but rapes Ximen Bai during his drunken frolic, he still cannot forget about his ideological faith and condemns Ximen Bai, who insists that she is no longer a landlord but a citizen, telling her that her social class is “in your blood, poison running through your veins!” He goes on to say she “will always be our enemy,” and insists that she is “still target of the dictatorship.” For him the political doctrine seems to feed and inflame his erotic desire. For her it is just the pretext for his act of physical and symbolic violation. This is when Ximen Nao intervenes as Ximen Pig: “As a pig, my mind was clear, but as a human, there was only confusion. Yes, I knew that no

matter how I'd died all those years ago, justly or not, fairly or not, Ximen Bai had every right to be intimate with another man, but I could not endure seeing Hong Taiyue do it to her while he was cursing her. What an insult, both to Ximen Bai and to Ximen Nao.” Ximen Pig then bites Hong's penis.<sup>19</sup> As it turns out, the Communist dream for seeking happiness for all the suffering people gives birth to a nightmare for everyone, and it cannot be more sarcastic that only a pig has the power to end it. For Ximen Pig, however, it is already an agony to witness his wife's intimate relationship with another man, but it becomes unbearable for him to see the symbolic violence Hong inflicts on her. Defining her as “our enemy” while seeking intimacy with her not only ostracizes her from the society, but also turns such intended intimacy into a humiliation. Eventually, Ximen Pig's bloody attack sets him free from the accumulated anger and hatred in the collective unconscious, paving the way for his more peaceful reincarnations as Ximen Dog and Ximen Monkey.<sup>20</sup>

It seems that everything, be it human or animal, from way of life to way of thinking, is subjected to the revolutionary logic except for Lan Lian. In such a hostile setting, how is Lan Lian's resistance still possible? In reality, it is difficult.<sup>21</sup> Standing “against both political fanaticism and social pressure,”<sup>22</sup> Lan Lian succeeds in keeping his private lot more out of luck than personal heroism. He owes his victory to the fissures and contradictions in the system itself (evinced by the softliners' influence) rather than to his act of resistance. *Life and Death* does not idealize Lan Lian as an anti-social superhero using his individualism as a magic weapon against the collective. Rather, it shows the complexity of his relationships with the system. As he repeatedly emphasizes, what is problematic for him is his distrust of human nature: “Even brothers are dividing up family property, so what good is putting strangers together to eat out of the same pot?”<sup>23</sup> As such, he just does not want to live under others' regulation. But he is not against the socialist system. During the early 1950s it is the district director Chen (later the

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 362.

<sup>20</sup> Chen Sihe, “*Shengsi pilao*: Renchu hunza, yinyang bingcun de xushi jiegou jiqi yiyi,” 154–55.

<sup>21</sup> The landlord upon whom Mo Yan modeled his character Lan Lian died at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution (Mo Yan and Lin, “Six Lives in Search of a Character: The 2009 Newman Prize Lecture,” 26–27). In the novel, a landlord from a neighboring county is killed by the masses for refusing to join the cooperative.

<sup>22</sup> Sabina Knight, “The Realpolitik of Mo Yan's Fiction,” 100.

<sup>23</sup> Mo Yan, *Life and Death*, 26–27.

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<sup>18</sup> Mo Yan, *Life and Death*, 306.

county mayor) who allows him to compete with the cooperative to see which side is more productive. The hero returning from the Korean War also expresses more understanding of his choice. It is the provincial department of countryside affairs that grants him the statutory right, ordering that no coercion or illegal measures can be taken to force him to join the commune. However, his strongest spiritual support comes from Mao himself, in that Mao once ordered that joining the cooperative is fully voluntary. Although Lan Lian is cursed by the villagers for not crying for Mao's death, he argues that the Chairman is dead but "I have to keep on living. There's millet that needs harvesting." Calling others imposters, he eventually bursts into tears, claiming that he is the one who loves Mao the most. It is Mao who allowed him to follow his own path.<sup>24</sup>

### Violence to Be Continued

From the revolutionary era to the era of reform and openness, people's attention was channeled from external struggle for political causes to satisfaction of their inner desires in the quotidian world. Long-repressed libidinal and social energies were released by the new policies. Soon the oppressive political culture gave way to the new liberalist culture epitomized in the slogan "getting rich is a glory." With its less enthusiastic and more tranquil tone in describing the post-revolutionary era, *Life and Death* offers a way for us to observe such an inward turn in people's lives. We see the new era's problems through the eyes of Ximen Nao as a dog. In the first half of the novel, with his deep attachment to the farmland, Lan Lian's dissent from the socialist system gained most of the novel's critical attention from reviewers. However, *Life and Death* truly distinguishes itself in the sobriety of its vision. Mo Yan acknowledges that waking up from the nightmare of the past does not necessarily mean entering a bright future. In other words, the end of the revolutionary era does not mean the birth of a problem-free society. Instead, as depicted in the novel, the new liberal logic of development itself is inherently violent.

Violence continued in the new era, but transposed from political to social and domestic spheres, and from being state monopolized to being used by "everyone against everyone," as Hobbes puts it.<sup>25</sup> In the novel, violence is represented as an inherent part of the social scenes that intertwine corruption,

kidnaping, prostitution, riots of farmers losing their farmland, and gang-related fights. Being capable of swiftly adapting himself to the new environment, Ximen Jinlong collaborates with his lover, the County Party Secretary Pang Kangmei, in his ambitious construction projects to turn his village into a theme park, and he embezzles from numerous public funds. The corruption case leads to Pang's death sentence, which, despite being reprieved, eventually drives her to kill herself. Their problems linger, blighting the next generations. The bribes they receive also spoil their children. Jinlong's foster son Ximen Huan becomes a gang leader; he organizes gangster wars to kill others, but is eventually killed by another gangster. Kangmei's daughter Fenghuang becomes disillusioned and cynical about what the adults say, abandons herself to a life of depravity, and dies during labor. These descriptions, of course, are in accordance with the Buddhist epithet the author cites: Mundane desires lead to transmigration weariness.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, if the purpose of the old political violence is to erase people's desire, the new form of violence must derive from people's insatiable desire that is mobilized in the consumer society itself.

In this "brave new world" so highly praised by the state media,<sup>27</sup> people's suffering did not decrease, but instead took new forms. This is particularly the case with women. They work in the coastal area factories as cheap labor boosting the economic development, and in the reemerged "entertainment industry" as sex workers, a profession that had long been eradicated during revolutionary era. Meanwhile, they also suffer *enormously* in domestic relationships. The whole fourth part of *Life and Death* focuses on Lan Lian's son Jiefang as he divorces his wife Huzhu and runs away with his lover Pang Chunmiao, the Party Secretary's little sister, who is 20 years younger than he is. Jiefang's marriage was arranged during the Cultural Revolution at the instigation of the eponymous character "Mo Yan," whom the author includes in a gesture of postmodern self-mockery. Jiefang has no feeling for his wife. To avoid having sex with her, he even pretends to be busy with reading *Selected Works of Lenin*. Huzhu, being a typical good wife and mother, takes care of the family and does not make any mistakes. She suffers

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 333–34.

<sup>25</sup> Quoted from Lubienski, "Hobbes' Philosophy and Its Historical Background," 9.

<sup>26</sup> Mo Yan is not the only author who depicts the new era negatively. Similar attitudes can be found in the works of Yu Hua and Jia Pingwa, among others.

<sup>27</sup> For example, towards the end of the year 2008, Chinese media teems with articles and news celebrating the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the reform and open up, it features numerous compliments on its achievements, while almost nothing can be read about its negative sides.

the cold violence from Jiefang but never complains. Yet she feels desperate and outraged upon hearing her husband's decision to divorce her. Humiliated to find herself discarded like old socks, she uses her blood to write a sign on a tree asking for Chunmiao to leave her husband, and threatening Jiefang with such words as "[...] if she won't leave you, then she and I will go down together! [...] I'll bite this finger again and expose this scandal of yours by writing it in blood on the gates of the county office building, [...] ... until I run out of blood!"<sup>28</sup> But she eventually fails to win him back, and dies of cancer while suffering depression. The last words she has for her father-in-law Lan Lian are, "I was born a Lan and will be a Lan ghost after I die,"<sup>29</sup> the conventional, if archaic, expression of wifely loyalty to a spouse's family in premodern China.

The mobilized desire and passion is a double-edged sword. It is the "natural" expression of humanity. Meanwhile it violently disturbs the existing social order. Jiefang, however, followed his innermost feelings and desires to pursue his true love at the cost of almost everything: His job as vice county mayor, his Party membership, his mother's life, and his son's love. Attracted by the ghostly charm of his blue face, the inherited physical marker from his father, Chunmiao can no more step back from their relationship than he can. Some criticize the novel, arguing that their relationship is unfounded. However, the point is exactly that the unfoundedness of their relationship, which invokes the Buddhist concept of predestined ties from a previous life 缘, becomes possible only after the Mao era. Jiefang not only inherited his father's blue mark on face, but also his "stubbornness." Regarding himself as a classical or conservative figure, he confesses his inherent ties to earth and his traditional way of thinking. In a time when money and power talk, he is fully aware that there are more convenient, inexpensive ways to satisfy his desire. Following his mind, however, he'd rather choose to be beaten up by his father and son, and by strangers presumably hired by Jinlong, because a public scandal would both shock his associates and threaten his business. To Jiefang, accepting the punishments is a way to reduce his sense of guilt. However, suffering itself cannot save him from the predestined network of sin that runs through the family. Jiefang and Chunmiao run away and suffer material poverty, yet regard the site of their temporary escape as Eden. Still, his emotional

suffering continues: He is responsible for his mother's death, and for being absent from her funeral. After his legal wife's death, they eventually return home and are accepted by their families as a legal couple, but Chunmiao dies in a car accident. In the rather hastily written final part of the novel, Jiefang's son Kaifang, who also has a blue mark on his face, falls in love with Fenghuang, and wants to win her at any cost. Kaifang eventually takes his own life upon discovering that he and his lover have the same grandfather, Ximen Nao. Here, not only does correcting a past mistake create new detrimental consequences, but also the "evil seeds" of the new mistakes had already been planted by previous generations. There seems to be no hope for escape from this network of predestined causality. This anti-progressive, pessimistic fatalism is symbolized by the farmland Lan Lian owns when it eventually turns into a graveyard for humans and animals. Later still, it becomes a virtual wasteland.

## The Aesthetic Costume for the Revolutionary Carnival, and Its Decline

Being traumatic notwithstanding, the tragic events during the revolutionary years are not naked exercises of violence. Rather, they bear an undeniable comic dimension rooted in frantic passion. It is the desire for the ideal society that makes this novel into a tragicomedy. Although it has been widely discussed in the works of Lu Xun and Mo Yan himself, the theatricality of public violence sees no better demonstration than in the years of the Cultural Revolution.<sup>30</sup> Facing the absurd world, Lu Xun might respond with ironic silence, and Zhou Zuoren tends to insist that doggerel is a better literary response than "literature of blood and tears." Writers of "scar literature" usually render their traumatic experiences during the Cultural Revolution as purely tragic and attribute such tragedy to the evildoing of a particular political cult. With a different agenda, Mo Yan creates a violent carnival that is full of playfulness in *Life and Death*. Zhang Xudong comments that, with its austere moral concerns of commoners, there is a tension between the playfulness and reality as well as history in Mo Yan's novels. As a novelist, Mo Yan cannot let the sense of tragedy dominate. Rather, he maintains the tragic

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<sup>28</sup> Mo Yan, *Life and Death*, 439.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 505.

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<sup>30</sup> Michel Foucault regards the theatricality of public violence as a premodern way of punishment, which has been replaced by the modern way of normalization based on more calculated approaches since the end of the eighteenth century in Europe. See Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, 3–69.

moral and emotional feelings at the level of playfulness and comedy.<sup>31</sup> My concern here, however, is more content-related: A life and death struggle, revolutionary violence is a celebration for some, but only at the cost of the lives of others. The seamless combination of extreme seriousness and comical factors might be less related to literary form or rhetorical considerations than to demonstrating the inherently theatrical and carnivalesque aspects of the cannibalistic violence during the revolutionary years.

Political movement is a play in which power relationships are manifested. Inheriting the techniques of parading the criminals on the street, and the people's justice during the years of land reform, the Cultural Revolution develops the performing aspects of revolution to the point that it becomes a "cosplay" engaging both the self-proclaimed revolutionaries and their political enemies. In many cases, public violence as a governing device has to put on an aesthetic costume and make its execution into a play to attract a broad audience on one hand, and to use the play as a deep structure to sustain the exercise of violence on the other. The revolutionaries who inflict violent punishment might (in the case of Hong Taiyue) or might not (in the case of Jinlong) genuinely believe that what they do is revolutionary and will have an impact on the audience. As for the audience, they are present to witness the funny scenes, while no one troubles himself with labeling an act as revolutionary or counter-revolutionary. This seems to be resonating with the May Fourth criticism of the bystanders, particularly that of Lu Xun. Here the genuineness of faith does not matter. What matters is the continuous show of the carnivalesque play structuring the practice of violence.

The absurd effect generated by the seamless combination of fanaticism, violence, and playfulness reaches its peak during the Cultural Revolution, when Ximen Nao is reincarnated as a pig.<sup>32</sup> His unconstrained personality and outrageous accusations set the relentlessly boisterous tone for the novel.<sup>33</sup> Battling the historical injustice imposed on him, he unsettles the existing order of the world, clamoring against history in his successive animal forms. Living in the human society as voiceless non-humans, his

tragic resistance and pleas for justice are full of playfulness. Such playfulness is juxtaposed with the fanatic world in which nobody notices his presence as a participant observer. A defamiliarized world of absurdity and violence unfolds before our species-shifting protagonist. To borrow Slavoj Žižek's words, it is "the domain that is somehow outside or, rather, beneath the very elementary opposition of the dignified hierarchical structure of authority and its carnivalesque reversal, of the original and its parody, its mocking repetition."<sup>34</sup> There is no longer opposition as such, in that such oppositional elements are two sides of the same coin.

By granting a "revolutionary" identity to the everyday life and the naked bloodshed, the new forms of performance create the aura of a transcendental dimension beyond the banal reality of the poor countryside. With his opportunism, Jinlong soon becomes the rising star in the political life of Ximen Village with Hong Taiyue, whose power is restored, as his mentor. His revolutionary activities start with an unwitting patricide, when he ruthlessly kills Ximen Ox, and when he orders his foster father's blue face painted red, almost turning the latter into a blind man.

When the village road is cut off from the rest of the world, Jinlong becomes the new king of the chaotic revolutionary world. However, such nakedly violent activities themselves cannot be recognized directly as "revolutionary." Instead, as Shelley Chan argues, they expose his hysteria and turn him and his followers into clownish figures.<sup>35</sup> To become revolutionary, these activities demand certain forms of performance with designated symbolic meanings. The closest model he can rely on is Chang Tianhong, another political rising star with musical talents at the county level. Jinlong imitates Chang's way of speaking and body language, while Chang himself might have copied from films the styles of the top political leaders such as Lenin. The very basic source of their revolutionary model, of course, is the People's Liberation Army.<sup>36</sup> Jinlong governs the village in a quasi-military style with mock-army uniforms and wooden guns, and lives like a Spartan together with his revolutionary comrades. The

<sup>31</sup> Zhang Xudong, "Zuwei lishi yiwang zhi zaiti de shengming he tudi," 11.

<sup>32</sup> The name of Ximen Nao reminds us of Ximen Qing, the rascal figure who embodies sexual desire and capitalist entrepreneurship in the Late Ming novel *Golden Lotus*.

<sup>33</sup> Chen Sihe, "'Lishi-jiazu' minjian xushi moshi de chuangxin changshi," 140.

<sup>34</sup> Slavoj Žižek, "Laugh Yourself to Death: The New Wave of Holocaust comedies!" 1999.

<sup>35</sup> Shelley Chan, *A Subversive Voice in China*, 164–65.

<sup>36</sup> The People's Liberation Army became the role model for Chinese people before the Cultural Revolution through Mao's nationwide campaign "Learn from the PLA" in 1964. For the influence of the PLA on people's daily life, see Xu Ben, "Wenge shiqi de wuzhi wenhua he richang shenghuo zhixu."

theatrical style of his revolutionary life reaches full bloom with the introduction of the model drama, into which he sublimates his violent libidinal drives. Mixed with the inexhaustible energy of puberty, an imagined sense of the sublime, and blind faith, their version of revolution is children's play that is both innocent and violent. This play, of course, lacks genuine innovation, and is only the shadow of shadows. Nevertheless, cultural hegemony, or the legitimacy of revolution, is disseminated, albeit in forms that freely adapt their models.

Jinlong's true innovative idea of revolution is the pig-raising project for the village, and the story of Ximen Nao as the pig in Part Three becomes the most exuberantly developed episode in *Life and Death*. But in what ways can such dirty and dumb domesticated animals be associated with the greatness of revolution? It is neither Jinlong nor the pigs, but Chairman Mao himself, who mobilizes a nationwide campaign to promote the pig-raising endeavor. Jinlong shrewdly catches the opportunity to ascend the power ladder, and meanwhile puts his village under the spotlight of political attention. In this highly politicized everyday reality, nothing is apolitical and nothing can be anti-political—even pigs. Ximen Nao as the reincarnated pig senses the atmosphere and claims that the best days for pigs in human history are coming. In Hong Taiyue's mind, a pig is no longer a dirty and dumb animal, but "a bomb flung into the midst of the imperialists, revisionists, and reactionaries. So this old sow of ours, with her litter of sixteen piglets, has presented us with sixteen bombs. The old sows are aircraft carriers that will launch all-out attacks against the world's imperialists, revisionists, and reactionaries."<sup>37</sup> Here a sense of absurdity infuses the link between political and everyday discourses, where the former fully rules the latter.

The story becomes more absurd when a conference on raising pigs, the only one in human history, is held in Ximen village. Paralleled with the serious talks on the political significance of pig-raising during the conference are the fictional Mo Yan's playful tricks. These include licking the pot for sweets and stopping the generator, which brings a frantic event to an anti-climax. The pigs survive a harsh winter, and people are enjoying Chang Tianhong's model drama *Tales of Pig-Raising*, in which "Chang let his imagination soar for this contemporary Cat's Meow production, giving the pigs speaking parts and separating them into two cliques, one of which advocated extreme eating and shitting to get fat in the

name of revolution; the remaining pigs were hidden class enemies, represented by Diao Xiaosan [Ximen Pig's rival], with Butting Crazy and his friends, who ate without putting on weight, as accomplices. On the farm it wasn't just humans pitted against humans; pigs were also pitted against pigs, and these swine struggles comprised the production's central conflict, with humans as the supporting cast." Artistically, it is a product "integrating local and Western traditions, brilliantly merging romanticism and realism, creating a model of serious ideological contents and moving artistic form that brought out the best in each."<sup>38</sup> Here the product is so earnestly described that it creates a surrealistic effect. However, the sudden death of Mao terminates the absurd carnival. The profane style of writing implies that not only everyday life, but also art production, are kidnapped by politics, and when theatrical performance takes the place of the routine of everyday life, life itself becomes a trivial attachment. Featuring the pig as the central figure in revolutionary life eventually profanes revolution itself.

In the novel, the theatrical factors soon fade from everyday life when the political carnival of the Mao era gives way to the economic carnivals of the post-revolutionary years. The new era, declaring a total negation of the past, is dominated with pragmatic concerns and materialistic desires.<sup>39</sup> The changing of the historical stage makes its actors ludicrous except for Lan Lian, whom the passage of time does not change. In the new era, all the former class enemies become rich and even hold a dinner party to celebrate their eventual liberation. With his opportunistic maneuvers, Jinlong restores his real identity as Ximen Nao's son. In the new era, he proudly claims what he once endeavored to hide, trading on the prestige of the Ximen name. Soon he even displaces his father as the hero of the novel. He interprets the goal of revolution as bettering people's lives, not eliminating the political enemies such as the KMT. He now regards the beating he gave Jiefang for forcing him to join the cooperative as a ridiculous joke: Things once held sacred are now only dog shit. Jinlong ambitiously plans to repackage the heritage of the revolutionary past as sites of interest for the

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<sup>37</sup> Mo Yan, *Life and Death*, 224.

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<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 327–28.

<sup>39</sup> Other literary works such as Yu Hua's *Brothers* tend to see a continuation of such theatricality in contemporary China. In his recent film *A Touch of Sin* (2013), Jia Zhangke borrows heavily from martial arts films and traditional operas in staging the vengeful violent acts of the protagonists Dahai and Xiaoyu, adding a surreal dimension to the film.



nostalgia-seeking urban residents. Everything becomes a commodity. As such, the disappearance of the sublime from people's everyday lives creates a void that is soon to be filled by greedy, materialist desires, which sustain the cycle of violence.

Here commodification functions as the best approach for disengagement from the past, and the best route for the resacralization of social life, which has grown plain and trivial. Meanwhile, it blurs the line between the sublime and the farcical, the heroic and the clownish, the tragic and comic, the just and unjust in a new fashion. The assemblage of such a postmodern collage is based on the violent seizure of the farmers' land, which provokes their resistance and their calls for justice. Violence continues, but to Jinlong it no longer needs to be clothed in dramatic garb. True believers in revolution like Hong Taiyue are traumatized by the new era. He does not want to accept the fact that he has erred for years by defending his Communist ideal. Caught up in appealing his case with the upper-level government, arguing that the current policy is counter-revolutionary, he draws mockery for being a clown. This is the largest irony in the bloody divinity of the past: What one once defended with his life now becomes nothing more than a commodity exchanged in the hope of monetary gain.

A new twist solemnizes the absurdity when Hong commits suicide with Jinlong by detonating a bomb together. His death is an extreme case among the riots for the deprived farmers defending their interest in the era of reform. However, it is unique in form: In a revolutionary costume with all his badges, he dies after giving an anachronistic speech: "Comrades, proletarian brothers, foot soldiers for Vladimir Ilyich Lenin and Mao Zedong, the time to declare war on the descendant of the landlord class, the enemy of the worldwide proletarian movement, and a despoiler of the earth, Ximen Jinlong, has arrived!"<sup>40</sup> What disappears with him is the residue of the sublime revolutionary past, along with its theatrical costumes, hyperbolic speeches, and violent martyrdom.

### The Politics of Remembering

In *Life and Death*, history progresses, but often in an absurdly violent manner, just as the triumphal march towards paradise often detours through hell. History, as gargantuan machine, seems to have crushed all individual life without mercy and left nothing to hope for. As Wu Yaozong argues, history creates a situation in which the partisans of neither side gain, whether they be Lan Lian, who claims to have made the

correct choice; the ox, who dies on his private farmland; or Hong Taiyue, who is marginalized in the post-revolutionary years and perishes together with Jinlong. Nothing can retain its value, meaning, certainty, or justice. No one can escape the absurd violence of history. All pay a high price, no matter which side one takes or what historical objective one chooses.<sup>41</sup> This Zhuangzi-style nihilism cancels all differences and the meaning of human agency.

Or so one might think. But scrutiny of Mo Yan's novel reveals a subtler design. Historical violence, in its various absurd forms, constitutes the fundamental predicament—one in which individuals not only find their ways to survive, but also manage to rationalize their essentially traumatic experiences.

To some extent, *Life and Death* is more concerned with the ways in which the bloody past is remembered than with the past as historical facts. The recurrent issue of memory runs through the six lives of Ximen Nao. After his execution, he refuses to drink Madame Meng's tea of forgetfulness, later finding that, in any case, the tea has no effect on him. However, with his human memory, his every effort to relieve the traumatic moment of his execution pushes him further away from it. Meanwhile, Ximen Nao's alternating efforts to remember and forget symbolize a separate struggle: Mitigating historical violence. His attempts to seek justice, although constantly failed, come to prove his active agency rather than his victimhood. Since the 1980s, the state shifted its ideology dramatically from class struggle to economic construction. It promoted the idea among the people to put things past in the past and look forward to modernizing the nation. To people like Jinlong, who victimized numerous others without a sense of guilt or self-reflection, it is the best choice. To borrow from Hannah Arendt, "The greatest evildoers are those who don't remember because they have never given thought to the matter, and, without remembrance, nothing can hold them back." However, for victims like Ximen Nao, it is not that easy to overcome. The traumatic past keeps coming back to haunt him, in that memory of the past is all he could have. The loss of memory would be the total erasure of his existence. To continue borrowing from Arendt, "For human beings, thinking of past matters means moving in the dimension of depth, striking roots and thus stabilizing themselves, so as not to be swept away by whatever may occur—the Zeitgeist or History or simple temptation."<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 498.

<sup>41</sup> Wu Yaozong, "Lunhui, baoli, fanfeng: *Shengsi pilao de huangdan xushi*," 78.

<sup>42</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment*, 95.

Being trapped in various animal bodies, Ximen Nao is split between dual identities and memories. In his animal forms, he lives freely in the semi-autonomous realm of animals, whose presence forms a critique of the human world. As Ximen Donkey, he wins the heart of another female donkey for protecting her. As Ximen Pig, he becomes the king by vanquishing others, and as a dog he becomes leader of the citywide pack. The joy and freedom of the animals (especially as donkey and pig) contrast sharply with the human world, which is filled with terror, agony, and despair borne of political, economic, or personal causes. However, the main issue here is that residual memories of Ximen Nao's human life keep him from fully enjoying his animal lives. Being the direct reincarnation of Ximen Nao, Ximen Donkey has a strong memory of his previous life, and he vacillates the most between enjoying his current life as a donkey and returning to his painful human past. As such, he also becomes the most vengeful toward his human enemies. As a pig, his human consciousness and pig consciousness often interpenetrate. He is further away from interacting with humans, and tends to forget whatever cannot be understood. He enjoys his chances to have sex with his "concubines," and forgets past and future in the glory of his reign over the pigs. His human memory has been fading away with the increasing presence of animal instinct and desire along the cycle of reincarnation. What is left is only a feeling of unrest. However, there are moments that his human memory is stimulated. This happens especially when he witnesses his two wives suffering, but such memory often appears as a mixed feeling of excitement and sadness without concrete reference to their past relationships. The split symptomizes his schizoid struggle between obsessing with the past and identifying with the present.

Here the Buddhist cycle of reincarnation can be read allegorically as a succession of painful nightmares and fragmented fantasies from which Ximen Nao cannot wake. He is haunted by a Kafkaesque anxiety of metamorphosis: He is allowed to return to the world, with the hope of regaining his past identity. Yet he can only return as an alienated object in the eyes of humans. Even Lan Lian, who instinctively regards him (in the form of donkey and ox) as family, cannot fully understand or recognize his old landlord, for he has lost his human voice: All Ximen Nao's attempts to communicate come out as meaningless animalistic screams. If his bloody death (half of his head is blown away) is the origin of his traumatic journey, his loss of human language is

more detrimental, in that without language his human consciousness and memory will be lost. Such loss is not only the symbol of losing power and agency, but also indicates that he is totally expelled from the Symbolic order. His memory thus is continuously pushed back to the realm of the Real in an amorphous, fragmented existence.

As filled with anguish as it can be, reincarnation offers the soul a chance to rehabilitate itself through reflection and confession. Ximen Nao's innermost agony abides in his failure to understand why he, as a benevolent landlord, should have had to die. He believes that he is an innocent casualty in an unprecedented tragedy. Over time, however, as he recalls his life as human, he gradually realizes that he didn't extend the benevolence he showed his tenants to his own family. He may not be fully responsible, but it is his own son Jinlong who becomes the definitive evildoer in the novel. Ximen Nao also treated his wife Ximen Bai with cold brutality, and refused to have sex with her as soon as she reached 30. He regarded his concubine Yingchun as a mere sex object, and a highly efficient breeder. No love passed between them. However, his biggest mistake is his relationship with Qiuxiang, a former actress whose youth and beauty earned her the largest share of his attention. Nevertheless, it is she who betrayed him, alleging that he raped and sexually enslaved her. The allegation leads directly to Ximen Nao's death. Here remembering for the purposes of revenge and justice is transformed into confession, which is no longer for seeking absolute truth about the past, but, as an affective act, for trying to amend what has been ruined and cannot be amended. What is the most important is not wealth or bodily pleasure, but the love he shared with Ximen Bai and Yingchun, an emotion that he learns to appreciate and treasure only after its loss.

A full rationalization of the past only becomes possible when obsession with the past gradually disappears. It is painful for Ximen Nao to accept the fact that, as the underworld king Yama says, when time passes, nothing can be corrected. In Buddhism, the world is in flux, made up of fleeting elements that endlessly conjoin and part. Repeating a lost life only ends with a repeated effort to repeat. Memory can only increase pain, but cannot change destiny.

Following this quasi-Buddhist logic during his incarnations as a pig and a dog, Ximen Nao gradually realizes that he is detaching himself from his past. As a rebellious pig, he appreciates Ximen Bai's taking care of him: "I'll never forget the look of tenderness in her eyes as she bent down to watch me, and I'm certainly aware of how well she treated me."

However, he does not “want to dwell on that, since it was years ago and we went our separate ways—one human, the other animal.”<sup>43</sup> There exists affective intimacy, but it cannot cross that boundary, since expressing such feelings directly turns out to threaten humans. When he visits Lan Lian during the night, he is only perceived as a dangerous animal, a pig demon. In his late years, when revisiting the Ximen Village as Ximen Dog, he thinks to himself,

After four reincarnations, although the memory of Ximen Nao has not fully disappeared, it is suppressed to the bottom by the later occurrences. Obsessing with such remote events, I am afraid, will disturb my mind, and may cause me to become schizophrenic. Like a book, affairs of human life are turned over page by page. Humans should look forward and avoid bringing up the unhappy things in history. Dogs also should progress with the times and face reality.<sup>44</sup>

Ximen Dog is still struggling with how to face the original trauma. At Yingchun’s funeral, however, all the repressed human memories of Ximen Nao come up and make him sad. It is impossible to forget about the past, but there is no vengeful action that needs to be taken, in that everything has changed and the human affairs have nothing to do with him as a dog.<sup>45</sup>

Remembering becomes an act of erasing attachment and hatred through forgiveness. To quote Hannah Arendt, “Forgiveness is the key to action and freedom. Without forgiveness life is governed by the repetition compulsion, by an endless cycle of resentment and retaliation.”<sup>46</sup> The pages that cannot be easily turned over in history eventually cease to matter. As Yama the underworld king says, only when hatred is gone can Ximen Nao be reborn as human.<sup>47</sup> Only forgetting permits a full embrace of the past as the past, and not as the object of obsession. Lan Jiefang seems to follow the same line of reasoning in reality: When his son dies, he comments, “The dead cannot be brought back to life, and everyone else has to keep on living, whether they do so by crying or laughing.”<sup>48</sup> Here the strategy is to remember, but still overcome. Forgiveness is based on remembering instead of amnesia, or what Lu Xun calls “spiritual

victory,” a self-deceptive mechanism for forgetting about one’s actual defeat and rendering it as imagined triumph, as Ah Q does in Lu Xun’s *The True Story of Ah Q*.

The purpose of remembering is to make peace with history. In this sense, *Life and Death* might bear a pessimistic fatalism about an ever-violent history, but it also bears a reserved optimism about emancipating oneself from the past trauma. For individuals, is undoing evil the precondition for healing past trauma? Will undoing the evil work in this case? If so, how should that be accomplished when everything has been changed over time? Will undoing the evil create new evil? Politically, a farewell to the traumatic past is a controversial point that might displease some readers who prefer to seek a just revenge through subverting the Party-State as the initial evildoer, an approach that might bring new bloodshed to the world. This Buddhist discourse of forgiveness, which is also shared by Christianity and other religions,<sup>49</sup> grants *Life and Death* the power to transcend political antagonism, despite the difficulty of doing so. However, there is a pessimistic undercurrent beneath the optimistic surface: It is almost impossible to bid such a farewell to the past completely: Ximen Nao’s reincarnation as a human being, is eventually accomplished, but as Lan Qiansui, the posthumous son of Kaifang by Kaifang’s true love (and sister) Fenghuang, he is reborn disfigured with an incurable disease, hemophilia. Almost a century ago, Lu Xun called to save the children in his “A Madman’s Diary,” but with this millennium child Lan Qiansui who is destined to suffer from past generations’ mistakes, such a mission seems to be unlikely. Meanwhile, the hope is, this child remembers all his past, and finally can put it into human language.

## Conclusion: Writing as an Ethical Act

*Life and Death* inspires us to make sense of the past in terms of the present, and vice versa. Blurring the boundaries between human and animal, past and present, life and afterlife, the novel can be read as a philosophical reflection on the dialectic of historical violence through specific individual experiences. The entire novel is driven by the tense dynamic between individual persistence and historical necessity. Going beyond a simple condemnation of a bloody reality, *Life and Death* provides a means for reflecting on both the Communist and the new liberalist practices and their traumatic consequences in a time-honored

<sup>43</sup> Mo Yan, *Life and Death*, 271–72.

<sup>44</sup> Mo Yan, *Shengsi pilao*, 497. Cited from the Chinese edition. For reasons unknown, the English translator basically omitted these lines of self-reflection. Translation is mine.

<sup>45</sup> Mo Yan, *Life and Death*, 493.

<sup>46</sup> Sam Keen, *Voices and Visions*, 217.

<sup>47</sup> Mo Yan, *Life and Death*, 510.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 538.

<sup>49</sup> Rye and McCabe, “Religion and Forgiveness of Others,” 303–18.

Buddhist context. In Lacanian terms, if the traumatic violence forms the Real that resists representation, and its theatrical play forms the Imaginary, memory is thus the unfinished endeavor to bring the Real into the Symbolic.

The novel endeavors to provide a complicated and ambiguous picture of history. As the character “Mo Yan” comments, it is not fair to deny the accomplishments of Kangmei and Jinlong in improving the standard of living in Ximen’s village. By the same token, it is also prejudicial to deny the accomplishments of the Mao era, although the human cost was high.<sup>50</sup> The novel reveals some nostalgic sentiments about the past, when all foods were organic and the environment, exemplified by the charm of the apricot woods, had not been destroyed. To some extent, it even shows some sympathy for Hong Taiyue’s revolutionary delirium in the post-revolutionary era. The novel refuses to accept a progressive view of people’s changing character: “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.”<sup>51</sup> Although we cannot take this view to represent the tone of the novel, still, with its ultimately pessimistic philosophy, *Life and Death* refuses to view history as a teleological course running from the dark past to the bright present and brighter future: The reincarnation process eventually restores the humanity of a wronged soul. However, the result might defy expectation, just as it does when Ximen Nao is reincarnated in a different and imperfect form.

As Paul Cohen points out when discussing the writing of the Boxer Movement in his *History in Three Keys: Boxers as Event, Experience, and Myth*, history can be written as experience, as subject of knowledge, and as myth to serve different political ends. The last approach is especially true in the case of *Life and Death*: Different political camps offered different versions of history regarding the socialist era. While there is no point in denying the man-made disasters, it is also no longer meaningful to regard history as a settled and enclosed totality or label it as such. Rather, it is like what David Der-wei Wang

calls a “historical space” referring to “how writers like Mo Yan three-dimensionalize a linear historical narrative and imagination, placing concrete people, events, and places into a flowing, kaleidoscopic historical coordinate.”<sup>52</sup> It has become a cliché to wholly dismiss the legacy of Communism in China. However, it is necessary to make clear that Communism, as an overloaded term, does not only refer to the all-encompassing social movement imposed from above, but also the ever-shifting stage on which the individuals perform all kinds of dramas of self-interest. The commonality shared by “history as experience” and “history as story” is the emphasis on the individual, subjective aspects of people, their desires, dreams, agonies, and faiths that constitute the historical changes. Engels’s comment on Hegel’s view of evil is illuminating in understanding the fifty years of violent history represented in *Life and Death*. He writes that in Hegel, “evil is the form in which the motive force of historical development presents itself.” This seems to be a historical necessity beyond individual control. He then explains the twofold meaning of this view. The first, that “each new advance necessarily appears as a heinous deed against what is sacred, as a rebellion against conditions, though old and moribund, yet sanctified by custom,” perfectly portrays how the revolutions have worked. The second meaning, “it is precisely the wicked passions of man—greed and lust for power—which, since the emergence of class antagonisms, have become levers of historical development,”<sup>53</sup> can be read as the philosophy beneath new liberalist reform and years of increasing openness.

Written as story, history is transformed into a space for individuals to deal with the so-called historical necessity, and personal memory can be constructed and negotiated for them to playfully get along and get over their historical trauma. With the presence of a fictional Mo Yan in the novel, and the continuously shifting narrative perspectives, *Life and Death* highlights the uncertainty and openness of history, and “challenges the existence of any unitary truth.”<sup>54</sup> History proceeds beyond individuals’ control, so that people may rationally weigh gains and losses to make their choices, put the past in the past, and enjoy a collective memory that might be invented by someone else. However

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<sup>50</sup> For examples of scholarly treatment of socialist achievements, see Maurice Meisner, *Mao’s China and After: A History of the People’s Republic*, 413–26, Gan, “Zhongguo daolu: Sanshi nian yu liushi nian,” and Han Dongping, *The Unknown Cultural Revolution: Life and Change in a Chinese Village*.

<sup>51</sup> Mo Yan, *Life and Death*, 266.

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<sup>52</sup> David Der-wei Wang, “The Literary World of Mo Yan,” 488.

<sup>53</sup> Friedrich Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach and the Outcome of Classical German Philosophy*, 37.

<sup>54</sup> Sabina Knight, “The Realpolitik of Mo Yan’s Fiction,” 104.

personal memories—particularly traumatic ones—change in content or presentation, “the language of trauma, and *the silence of its mute repetition of suffering*,”<sup>55</sup> remain faithful to its original cause. Although justice is ultimately deferred, and lost life cannot be regained, it is still meaningful to allow the opportunities for the silenced voices to speak repeatedly. Therefore, as a means of constructing personal memory and as a way for people to heal old wounds, writing is an ethical act beyond either statist oblivion or dissident revenge and hatred.

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