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OTHERNESS FROM A CHINESE PERSPECTIVE AND MO YAN'S *HALLUCINATORY REALISM*

Marius-Virgil Florea *
Shanghai International Studies University, China

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Abstract

The purpose of discussing concepts such as "otherness" can be viewed as a need to deconstruct some of the incumbent elements of our own culture, surpass the limits of our own understanding, and bridge gaps, otherwise insurmountable. However, besides discovering biased elements and great metanarratives that can lead to skewed or wrongly framed discourse on the "other" from within our own culture, there is also value in taking the opposite stance. When placing the discussion on the Far Eastern cultural space, we are already beyond "orientalism", and have a different and new understanding of, or just repudiating ideas related to, different forms of exoticism. The following presentation aims at simply bringing forward into discussion the "view on otherness of the other". "Occidentalism" refers to the way established Eastern cultures may have their own narrative of understanding "the other". The emphasis is laid on Chinese history and literature, from the Opium Wars, going through the Maoist era, until the present day. As a case study, we shall take a glimpse at the Chinese critical perception of Nobel Prize winner Mo Yan, which tends to radicalise itself towards two conflicting ways of understanding his work, as either a product of the great Chinese tradition, with little to nonforeign apport, or, the other way around, as an imitator of the West. The more balanced views can be overwhelmed by these two radical opposing teams, this having to do with deeper issues in the Chinese theoretical space, such as Westernization and authenticity within Chinese contemporary Literature, Chineseness and foreign import, among others.

Keywords: Otherness; Other; Occidentalism; Mo Yan; Chinese literature.

1 "Realism" and Instrumentalisation

Mao's decree on literature from 1942 has shaped the whole landscape of Chinese literature at least from the early 1940s until the 1980s (Hong 2007: 8). The principles of *Yan'an Talks*, which were to be followed by all the writers' associations and by individual writers themselves, had three main points to take into serious examination: 1) what is the target audience of the writer? 2) how should he write?

* Corresponding author: floreamarius@foxmail.com

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and 3) about what? Or, more precisely, which were the preferred subjects for him to talk about?

The Maoist conception based its methods and principles on the fact that the country was in a semi-illiterate state and ravaged by continuous wars. Therefore, literature, as it had been written from the 4th of May movement to the present times (i.e. 1942), although had pointed out the social injustices, and had proposed a new order, was still read only by a small elite, and could not serve the educational and forming function intended by the Party. If what everything the Party was intending to achieve was for the People, then, as Mao Ze Dong had pointed out, the greatest part of this abstract concept of "people" was concretely composed of peasants, workers, and soldiers (Hong 2007: 10). These were the social groups who should first and foremost benefit from the new way of thinking, which was to be brought about by the new literature.

Secondly, writers should avoid the sophisticated style of the modern literature, highly incomprehensible for the groups mentioned, and stick to *the classical way of depicting reality from an objective point of view*. Their style should be direct and simple, easy to understand. Being objective was highly deemed as one important aspect of literature, which besides educating the people towards the socialist ideals, should also have a corrective aspect, pointing out the flaws, or the issues of the present society. This last part had proved false and dangerous in the 1950's when numerous campaigns against older leftists were developed, as it proved very difficult to make a separation between constructive criticism and critique on the system itself (Hong 2007: 45). Nevertheless, *realist* literature, as understood by the leftist party members and writers, was declared the main line to be followed in terms of fiction.

Thirdly, the writer should talk about "reality", by this meaning the social and political environment, the reaction of the masses under the series of reforms and commentate on the rationale of the ideology behind these changes. Any dive into the characters' conscience, or worse, into the subconscious, would afterwards be considered a sign of "individualism", because of placing one individual person above the collective ideals, and diving into a particular and irrational view on reality. "Realism" as a way of approaching fiction, having as a central theme society, mores, and inequalities, ethics and social classes, economy, and history, came from the Founding of the Republic period, with the 4th of May movement that imported it from the West. There is scholarly debate over this, but realism as we understand it through the classical Western canon was different from the Chinese traditional literature.

Realism had to undergo some changes for the "dangerous ideas" to be left outside (Jiang 2019), but it was still the great Western classics like Stendhal, Balzac, Thackeray, and Tolstoy that had to be recognized as the forefathers. Afterwards, "realism" gradually changes towards a propagandistic ideologised variant, and it will become so well integrated into the Chinese modern thinking, that later, with the emergence of "New Era Literature" from the 1980's, "realism" will be often linked to the traditional way of aesthetics, opposed to the modernist Joycean type of writing.

If in the West this is an inner process, with its own tensions, for China there is also another stake to be considered, and that is the national identity and the position that needed to be taken towards "the West" (Wang 2008: 784). Moreover, there is a long debate to be held on how 19th century realism would have appeared to the Chinese "Enlightenment" itself in the first place. The most striking part for the Chinese intellectuals was precisely the instrumental educational role in shaping the readers' way of thinking towards equality and freedom, together with a more democratic view on the structure of society. How fit was classical Western realist literature for such purposes has been discussed several times during the period, and the final conclusion was rather a negative one. This is also one of the reasons for Mao's taking initiative on the issue. It is true that when we talk about the Enlightenment and the later strong leftist tendency in the 1930s and 1940s, we actually speak about two different periods. However, the need for educating the masses, for saving the people through literature did not really change and can be considered as a constant that unifies them. This leads us to the second issue, which is instrumentalising literature in order to serve the political doctrine. In the West, this is familiar to some extent from the Soviet Communism and its expansions on the Eastern European Countries experience, with its corollary, *socialist realism*. After the communist block fell in the late 80's, such claims on literature have been quickly rendered as preposterous and replaced with the necessity of the absolute freedom of the artistic act as a principle. Still, just to have a more insightful starting point, we should not expect for China to have gone through the same thinking process, at least not in the first half of the 20th century, and this is not only because of the political regime, but also due to an existent tradition on this aspect.

This is not to suggest that literature was never seen as *free* in China, but at least from an official point of view, during the numerous dynasties from China's thousands of years of history, and due to the Confucianist culture as well, literature has not been considered primarily for personal entertainment or cultivation. The official court literature, the old classics to which the Chinese literati always referred, and that were requested at the imperial examinations, were meant to gain wisdom, were studied from a philosophical point of view, and thought to be useful for governing the state as well (Holzman 1978: 22). Although there has always been a mass culture and a folk culture that also flourished throughout the vast areas of the country, written literature was meant for learning. Confucius himself would "study" the Book of Poems, to grasp the deep meaning of the Rites, and not so to investigate their aesthetic value (Holzman 1978: 32).

By no means we should take this lightly or cast a doubt of practical shallowness upon it. Also, the huge prestige and importance of literature throughout the history of China was not related to its freedom from state, philosophy and the development of the self. There is no separation for the Ancient Chinese, between the political, the divine, and man. The latter achieves his spiritual altitude in perfect concordance with the other two aspects. The Rites, which are mostly courtly rituals, are highly important for Confucius because he tries to *incorporate*, as in *embody* the perfect harmony between man, state, and Heaven. As all these domains are

interrelated, literature as well is a fruit of spirituality to the extent that it contains things to be learned, pearls of wisdom that will be again used both spiritually and politically.

Obviously, I use the term "political" in a sense devoid of the "amoral" acceptance we give it today, since for the Chinese tradition the political was inseparable from the highly moral. If we want to understand this in Christian terms, as we would say that every prophet shall be judged according to his fruit, the fruit of the Chinese sage, at least in the Confucian view, is proved by his accomplishments in his duty to the state, as well as in his overall behaviour. There is a continuum and a reciprocal relationship between man and the state, between state, man and Heaven, with which one can connect the very old idea of the Mandate of Heaven. This notion could account for considering an imperial character worthy or not of his role as a ruler. This reciprocity between man and Heaven (*Tian*) reaches as far as the Book of Changes (*Yi Jing*), an ancient Chinese classic consulted by scholars and sages, where one could find records of several interpretations of divination practices. When the balance is broken, because the emperor fails in his duties as an emperor, the father fails in his duties as a father, and so on, everything, up to the natural calamities or abnormalities, will follow.

The correspondence between all the elements of the universe with man's behaviour is an ancient idea, common to many cultures, however, the emphasis on politics and state is rather particular to Chinese culture.

Understanding how Chinese intellectuals perceived realism and the use of literature may help us form a more accurate image of the way the West and the Western influence has been perceived in China. As mentioned, there has been a tension between the acceptance of the Western techniques and trying to adapt them to the existent realities of the Chinese society of the time. At least at the beginning, and even as late as the 1950's we will not find the heightened weariness against the bad mores and the decadence of the West. However, one thing must be kept in mind: in terms of intellectual and cultural identity, the very foundations of the great shift that China went through at the beginning of the 20th century, which mark its entire evolution, culturally and of course literary, came from the Western political, socio-economic and philosophical thinking.

2 The West as the Fascinating *Other*

The West as an idea of a matchable counterpart of the East did not really exist until the late medieval era in China. People from the Western tribes were *hu*, barbarians. They did not know anything about the Way, (Daoist concept that influences Confucianism as well, practically the counterpart of the Western transcendent and Logos ideas, without being analogous to them), they believed in local deities and lived in precarious conditions. Moreover, they would gladly use some of the Chinese expertise in governing or divination practices. As in so many great societies that reached a peak of their development in the bronze age, China was considered to be

situated at the very centre of the world. The Chinese name of China is up to this day Zhong Guo, which literally means "the kingdom from the centre". The name was not always officially China, as every dynasty had to become the very name of the country – one would name it "The Han", or "The Great Tang" in documents – but the perception of being the centre has been a long-lasting phenomenon.

This is the basis for the Chinese *Otherness*, or *Occidentalism*, as a counterpart to the notorious Orientalism. Is *Occidentalism* also a great narrative, where the so-called curiosity for *the other* remains in fact on an instrumental level, as in people trying to use Western technology and invention, but rejecting the deeper view on life and philosophical structure? The answer is rather obvious. What remains useful to us is acknowledging the issue, differentiating between approaches and subtleties, as well as avoiding unfair labelling, and rushed thinking on both sides.

The West has always been a dangerous place for the great empire. The *Xiongnu* tribes, ancestors of the Huns, conquered a huge territory during the Song dynasty and had their own rule over vast areas; the Mongols subdued China entirely during the Yuan dynasty, which was therefore a Mongol dynasty; the last dynasty of the Qing, was Manchu. During the various centuries of turmoil on this vast territory, one of the holy missions of the Chinese emperors was to pacify the West.

The West was at the same time a spiritual place. Buddhism came from there around the first century A.D. and exerted an enormous influence on the entire Chinese culture, the Tibetan Buddhism and Islam exert their influences to this day, and one of the Four Classics of the Chinese literature is called Journey to the West *Xi You Ji* ("Record of a Journey to the West"), having as its plot the bringing of the *sutras* from the West, for which a great priest from Tang undergoes a treacherous adventure.

The West was technologically advanced. This was only a much later conception, brought together with the earliest Western Christian missionaries and explorers who brought amazing things from these faraway places. The once uncharted map of the "monsters" gradually became another part of the world, "the other" emerging from its highly inferior perception, and at the same time becoming even more dangerous and fascinating than before.

Nevertheless, the West can also embody "the enemy", which can also serve as a unifying catalyst for the Chinese people. One of the fundamental moments of China's modern history started not in the 20th century, with the Civil War and the Japanese War, but with the Opium Wars, a direct clash with the West, after which the old great empire eventually showed its own weakness and started to be perceived by its own people as a country among other countries, that has to compete, survive and thrive in a much more populated world than how it was seen before. This is the era when the best Chinese scholars go and study abroad. An awareness of a certain degree of inadequacy of the educational traditions in China also takes shape in this period. There are thinkers who propose a radical change, an alignment with values such as reason, specialisation according to different domains of engineering and science, and who believe it is the only way China can keep up with the developing great powers of the West. It is also the period in which the cultural myth of the white

man becomes stronger than ever. Qingdao has become a small German burg, Shanghai is an international trade port with new French districts, Hong Kong becomes British, and the old Portuguese Macau is even more Portuguese. The *waiguo ren* (foreigners, or literally "people from outside the kingdom") are sometimes arrogant and ruthless, they have the power and the money, and an even harder truth to admit is that, life under them is easier than under Qing, the last Manchurian emperors. Nevertheless, they can always be deemed as the enemy.

The entire 20th century, an especially bloody and chaotic period in China, with the overthrow of the emperor and the establishment of the first Republic, with the fight between the Nationalist Party of the Guo Min Dang and the year-by-year stronger Communist Party, can be linked to the Opium Wars disaster, which led to a "century of humiliation", which is how the Chinese nationalists called the whole series of unequal peace treaties with the foreign great powers.

Coming back to the discussion on literature, the same type of paradoxes can be encountered here as well. China needed Western literature and Western ideas in order to break from its so-called "feudal" past (*fengjian sixiang*). At the same time, the need for keeping ties with the Chinese cultural roots was felt, perceived on many occasions as superior (Buruma, & Margalit 2005: 39). This literary turmoil was happening before the modern era, but with a more sinuous and intense attitude in the 20th century. The idea of using only the concrete technological improvements from the West is an old one. It applies to literature too, and it can be felt today within the various clashes with the international regulations. This does not imply that breaking the international laws is justified in this situation. It is well known already that Chinese culture, like other Asian cultures in general, is oriented towards the collective rather than the individual. If we add to this a certain probable feeling of spiritual superiority, in their sometimes *Occidentalist* understanding of the West, we might have a better grasp on how such behaviour can remain between their moral limits for the Chinese people.

The re-emergence of realism in the early 1980's, this time as a new attempt to rectify all the harm done by idealising the achievements of the Party and by hiding the truth (Zhang 2020:8), can be seen, therefore, not so much so as an artistic creed, but as a new way of using old techniques. The period also coincided with a third influx of the Western literature, this time with a higher level of acceptance towards modernist, Joycean stream-of-consciousness literature, and an immense acknowledgment and respect for Freud, Nietzsche, and Kafka (Hong 2007: 263). It is not a modernist era entirely for the Chinese landscape, as classical realism, such as that of Wang Meng, radical "avant-gardism" such as Ge Fei's, the so-called "scar" literature, and "searching for the roots" literature compete in the same temporal space of ten to fifteen years. It can be, however, fairly accepted that this is probably the "most open" period towards "the other" in the whole 20th century history for China. Writers are especially influenced by magical realism and Garcia Marquez, but they explore everything, in terms of reading, mimicking, or building their own style.

3 Chinese Perception on Mo Yan's Work

Again, the tension between searching for a national identity, accepting new ways of thinking, sometimes structurally different from the West, and finding a source of rooting themselves in a long-lasting great history was about to play an important role in the perception, and in handling of Western ideas and concepts. A good example is the problem of the reception of Mo Yan (Guan Mo Ye) in his own country, a reception that split both the public and the specialists into two opposing opinion groups.

There is a notable group of intellectuals, both inside and outside the borders, who sincerely believe that Mo Yan, the winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2012, is, at best, a mediocre creator, with negligent language and a sloppy composition of his novels and short stories, with an unjustified taste for gore and violent images, in all, a writer who does not deserve the prize at all (He 2014: 79). Without considering other accusations, like the political affiliation or even worse, that of the dubious intent of someone who tries to find edgy ways to obtain the prize, there are a few points that are worth to be discussed.

The second group, including other writers, the critics and the wide audience, consists of people who praise Mo Yan. They usually acknowledge the writer's taste for violent scenes, grotesque imagery, foul and sloppy language, but they manage to integrate all this in a particular aesthetic, related to the late Western realism, naturalism, as well as with the modernist ethos of shocking the reader and presenting him with a highly cruel but also highly metaphorical reality (He 2014: 79).

The result is that quite the same set of features are accepted or rejected fervently by two groups of people who integrate Mo Yan's work in a different manner. One view, also called "the traditional" aesthetic, is a mixture of classical realism, with old Chinese principles concerning the style of writing. The other is a foreignised perception, with an emphatic acceptance of everything that approaches the edge of aesthetic sensibility. There are of course the moderate voices, who acknowledge the sloppy language but also the sublime in Mo Yan's writings (Inge, Wang, He, Goldblatt, Klein), but they are not as interesting for our purpose as the radical views are. This is because, the quarrel around Mo Yan might have a deeper root.

Realism and common sense in terms of language, balance, and natural beauty of imagery are things that tend to be related to the Chinese style of writing. As already mentioned, the so-called tradition goes towards the beginning of the 20th century with the May 4th movement, and the early days of Chinese realism, which had its important influence also from the West. On the opposite side, violence, shock, inner psychological struggle, grotesque, and very strident language, are usually understood as a Western influence. Modernist literature appears more obvious as particularly Western than the realist view. Because of that, by praising Mo Yan, the notion that is also praised is, if not the Western influence itself, at least the idea that a Chinese "hero" – as Mo Yan has become over time – can use Chinese and Western

methods together, with no contradiction. It is an acknowledgement of the compatibility between cultures to say the least, if not a straightforward proof of the West's advancement in terms of literature and arts. On the opposite side, pointing out the departure of the writer from the so-called "traditional" or classical set of aesthetic principles, may be considered a patriotic act, an act of keeping the colonising culture of the West in check.

Additionally, out of the same discussion arose the issue of naming Mo Yan's style "hallucinatory realism", in an attempt to avoid the well-known magic realism, which better suits not only Mo Yan's work, but the work of many Chinese writers from the 1980's. Marquez, Borges, Cortazar and other Latin American writers had an enormous influence on the Chinese literature of the period, which is a fact accepted by the Chinese literary historians as well.

To make things worse, in translation, the term "hallucinatory realism" had, ironically enough, been changed to *mohuan xianshizhuyi*, which literally means *magical realism*, the same term used for the Latin American counterpart. Therefore, the initial attempt to avoid the problem was annulled by the translation, which put things in the proper order. As expected, this led to several discussions on Mo Yan's style, and was felt as unfair and misleading by many (Qiao 2020: 142). The reason is the same. The stake here is not Mo Yan's style, but whether he, as a symbol of Chineseness in the World, can or cannot be remembered as a magic realist writer, by this diminishing in a way the idea of the uniqueness of his own culture.

As a response to all this, the writer himself has in several occasions acknowledged the influence of writers like William Faulkner, Garcia Marquez and others, but has also expressed his wish to find a voice of his own, that should be closer to the traditional Chinese way of writing, which he actually did in the past years (Inge 1990: 22; Zhang 2020: 13). Despite the pacifying tendency coming from the writer himself, there are still articles that tend to absolutise one aspect or the other. Moreover, even though there is an extensive body of scientific literature in China on Mo Yan's literature, it is hard to find a clear analysis of the magic realist elements from the deeper point of view of the discourse. Instead, plenty of articles quantifying the number of Chinese fantastic static elements, like plots, motifs, or scenes, compete incessantly with another great number of articles that quantify the magic realist static elements, sometimes overlapping with the elements pointed out by the opposite group.

4 Conclusion

I find this dichotomy often drawn in some of the Chinese scientific articles between the Western and the Chinese-style Mo Yan, rather artificial and even harmful. As I understand from my own reading, and there are plenty of voices to confirm this, both from China and internationally, Mo Yan is the best vehicle to debunk the eternal myth of the incompatibility between the West and the East. His work, a masterful combination of fantastic (in a magic realism way and structure) with other modernist

techniques and with typical Chinese imagery, motifs and themes, is the perfect proof of this (Inge 1990: 18). His use of gore and grotesque images, violence, and despair are well balanced with black humour, vivid impressionist-like imagery, and a wonderful flow of storytelling.

Chinese *otherness* is an interesting concept for Westerners and there are more and more articles on the subject. I only tentatively touched upon it, but I find the topic a great opportunity to change perspectives when we discuss cultural narratives. The history of the Opium Wars, with all the economic interests and the unfair ceasefires is a difficult issue to accept and understand for a foreigner. Both Orientalism and Occidentalism are real, they are means for understanding and exploiting, with a tendency to emphasise differences, but at the same time, just like any narrative towards *the other*, they are incumbent to our nature.

I feel that seeing things from the opposite perspective brings out a more relaxed and rational way of approaching things. I understand the tendency for bias as a common feature of humans from any enclosed culture, a way in which people may define themselves, drawing an identity through opposition to what is different. But this does not mean that nothing can be done about it. On the contrary, by knowing about the mere existence of this proclivity, we can know more about each culture, check on our own biases in the process, and discover the things in common while accepting and understanding the differences.

A more relaxed discussion is to be made where the different sides would be able to understand dialogue as a transformational experience. There is no doubt that different cultures can learn from each other. Thus, there is value to be found in the proposal that, when discovering differences, instead of precluding that therefore truth is relative, we draw another conclusion, such as: perhaps there are things we do not know yet, as our own culture has a pre-established framework that we are not able to see through. By opening ourselves to different frameworks and trying to understand them from within, we can possibly come closer to a superior understanding, similar to a meta-framework that can unify the multiplicity of phenomena without levelling it out. Lastly, there is a possibility that the human capacity or transgression is also a real notion, and all the residue of misunderstanding and cultural distance can be surpassed without harming those particular cultures.

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