# Mo Yan's Work and Magic Realism

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**Abstract:** *Mo Yan's work has been widely considered a Chinese type of magic realism, this label also alluding to the total reshaping that took place in the 1980s in China's contemporary literature, due to an unprecedented opening to western culture, especially in the humanities. Nevertheless, labeling always does more harm than good, so the critics, especially in China, are divided into two opposing groups, with views often dismissive of each other, concerning Yan's style. One group tends to regard the author as living proof of the huge influence of the West, while the other one emphasizes that receiving western influences was just a short spell of madness at the author's beginnings, and that as he matured, he returned to the Chinese tradition in composition and style. Both positions are exaggerated, and this paper tries to set a few guiding lines concerning the influence of magic realism on Mo Yan's work and conciliate some of these rather groundless controversies.*

**Keywords:** *literary influence, comparative literature, Mo Yan, Chinese literature, magic realism*

Mo Yan (莫言) is one of the most praised Chinese authors, having already been translated all over the world. His fame mostly owes to winning the Nobel Prize in 2012, a huge achievement for contemporary Chinese literature. Mo Yan's world is dystopic and sometimes cruel. The author exerts himself in revealing the ugliness, hunger and extreme poverty of the Chinese village, especially throughout the modern history of the country. Mo Yan's style is also often related to the huge influence that magic realism and other western artistic formulas have had on contemporary Chinese literature.

Even though such an influence shouldn't really raise any questions about an author's originality and power of expression, there seems to be a tendency, especially in the Chinese studies on this author, to "save" him from the shadows of doubt about his originality and his "Chinese-ness."

Mo Yan was influenced, as he himself has acknowledged, by the wave



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of translations from North and South American, European and Japanese literature, which China witnessed beginning with the 1980s, the very same period when he started to write. But that shouldn't imply that the author goes against his tradition. In fact, a case can be made that actually magic realism has deeper connections with the Chinese understanding of literary creation than it might be expected. On the other hand, Mo Yan's style somehow overlaps and surpasses the Latin American influence simply because of his extremely wide range of interests among the different and new ways of expression and his continuous experimenting.

The two problems are actually related. What really happened in the 1980s with Chinese literature was an amazing phenomenon in which while reaching out to the West for a breath of fresh air, Chinese authors were mostly attracted by some artistic forms that would hide patterns similar to those from their own culture. Magic realism is a modern form of fantastic literature that finds its place somewhere between cruel unforgiving reality and the world of magic, usually meant only for fantasy. This mélange between two contradictory styles that made magic realism possible in the West is very weird as a *raison d'être* in China, where fantasy would always find its place in the classic, "realistic" literature of the major trend. Therefore, it is extremely difficult to have a clear image to what extent and how exactly the western influence reshaped the Chinese writing style from socialist realism to the surrealistic experiments of Can Xue or the absurd world of Yu Hua.

Leaving the complicated theoretical issue of magic realism and the Chinese cultural paradigm aside for now, we intend to concentrate in this article mainly on the style of Mo Yan's work as one that can shed a new light on this controversy.

Mo Yan started publishing in the early 1980s, when the landscape of Chinese literature was beginning its remodeling. But before discussing Mo Yan's work a brief understanding of the Chinese "New Era" / *xinshiqi* (新时期) literature might be needed.

## 1. The rebellious spirit of the Chinese *New Era* literature

After the Cultural Revolution came to an end, there was really the beginning of a whole new chapter for Chinese literature. From the perception of western culture to the very role that literature and art in general are to play in society, huge changes were about to reshape the landscape. A whole series of new literary magazines and newspapers, conferences and meetings of the Writers'



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Association began to take place to openly discuss issues such as the relation between literature and politics, social realism and its shortcomings and so on, at the same time enforcing the idea of transformation that is needed for the healthy development of contemporary Chinese literature (Hong Zicheng / 洪子诚 188).

It is also the best time for new translations from all modern literature, from the beginnings of existentialism in France to the Kafkian and Joycean novel, or the later Latin American genres, with *magic realism* as one of the most important influences (Chen Liming / 陈黎明 1). Suddenly, in just a few years, many different styles and art forms have taken the main stage. How could such a different culture with such a different history and social conditions take in so much in such a short time is of course a matter left for discussion. The most important here is the *spirit of the age*, where writers begin to search for new ways of expression, leaving behind, for the first time in thirty years, the requirements for the literary writing set by the Maoist Communist Party at the beginning of the 1950s.

The new wave is all about rejecting the “realist” social novel that was meant first as a tool and then as a propaganda weapon. This was the general idea, but in fact the situation was more complicated. Writers from different generations had different views on the subject. There were first the old socialist idealists, very famous around the foundation of the People’s Republic, rejected afterwards as the policies of the Party became stricter and stricter, such as Ai Qing (艾青), Wang Zengqi (汪曾祺), Niu Han (牛汉), Lu Yuan (绿原), Zheng Min (郑敏), Tang Shi (唐湜), Wang Meng (王蒙), Zhang Xianliang (张贤亮), and Chang Yao (昌耀). Their attitude mostly goes around “regretting the mistakes made” (Hong Zicheng / 洪子诚 190). They are not revolutionary in the real sense, they still believe in a communist reform and ongoing revolution, and have been through some hardships due to a series of mistakes. It is the old doctrine that “we must criticize with no fear, both the others and us, in order to improve” (Hong Zicheng / 洪子诚 190). This way of rethinking communism was not actually entirely new. It had already begun in the underground literature, mostly with the essay, and had been greatly empowered by the confessions of the famous Ba Jin,[1] one of the greatest socialist writers from the 1930s, who pointed to the fact that as an intellectual one has a shared responsibility for one’s country, as the political power has. Of course, every

[1] 巴金 (Ba Jin, 1904-2005).



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author might need a closer analysis as, especially with this period, groups tend to lose their homogeneity. Wang Meng is one good example that proves this, through his getting away from the usual style of his friends.

The second "group" is composed of "the young intellectuals" / *zhiqing* (知青), people now maybe in their thirties, who had to go through the horrors of the policies which took place during and soon after the Cultural Revolution. One of these policies was the so-called "climbing the mountains and going down to the villages" / *shangshanxiaxiang* (山上下乡), which required the young graduates to put on hold their careers for a while and "willingly" go to the farthest and most underdeveloped areas of the country or to the poorest villages to help the peasants with their manual labor. The idea was for the intellectuals to get closer to the inferior layers of society and therefore feel more for the poor and the disadvantaged. It didn't have, of course, the expected result; on the contrary, many intellectuals, unfit for the physical labor and for living in very insanitary conditions either died or got ill wasting their youth in places that didn't have any connection with their previous lifestyles and with their families. However, the measure did get the intellectuals closer to the countryside, just not really in the way it had maybe been intended, like praising the idyllic world, but, on the contrary, they felt the need to show out all the misery and hunger that lurked in unknown corners of the country. Of course, this couldn't be openly shown during the Revolution, when such activity could only take the path of underground poetry and short essays but now, under the banner of an unprecedented "opening" and relaxation of political authoritarianism, it could be subsumed under the notion of "revising the mistakes of the past" to become official literature. Writers such as Han Shaogong (韩少功), Zhang Chengzhi (张承志), Shi Tiesheng (史铁生), Jia Pingwa (贾平凹), and Wang Anyi (王安忆) are representative for this description; the literature they write tends more towards exploring the unknown territories of the subconscious, magic realism, subjectivism, and more decisive satire on past realities.

The third group is comprised of the youngest writers, who usually debuted right at the beginning of the 1980s. This is a very interesting group, whose members are brave, extremely free in expression, but also lacking in the social awareness of their peers in the first two groups. They usually refuse to deal with politics and society anymore, or, if they do, they do it in a manner that places the esthetic purpose above anything else. They therefore write a very interesting literature, being extremely conscious of their choices of form,



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genre, style, and so on. They are also even more tightly connected to western modernist literature, which they sincerely admire and imitate. Obviously, their only problem comes from their lack of experience, which makes them sometimes fall into mannerisms or shoot for easy targets. Nevertheless, there are among this group a few names that have made received international accolades such as Mo Yan (莫言), Can Xue (残雪), Ma Yuan (马原), Yu Hua (余华), Su Tong (苏童), Ge Fei (格非), and others. These authors combine different styles such as the French *nouveau roman*, the Joycean stream of consciousness, the Kafkian absurd, Andre Breton's surrealism, and, of course, the queen of them all, Latin-American magic realism. Their works are perfect examples of alchemical labs in which more than thirty years of western esthetic and literary experience, mixed with the Chinese modern and ancient elements have all boiled down to something completely new. It is also the most heterogenous group, each author avoiding, sometimes on purpose, any fixed artistic identity.

Now, even if the three groups are so different, there is, however, one point which unites them, and that is their rebellious spirit, complete with a will to change. For the oldest writers, there is the last chance to reform the socialist ideals that seem to be tightly connected to the First Republic and to the greatest reformers of Chinese literature like Lu Xun and Lao She, or with the classical realism of Mao Dun. For the younger generation there is a huge need to denounce the horrors of the Cultural Revolution, The Great Step Forward and other famous policies that they witnessed themselves as young adults. For the youngest of them, the whole subject is overdone. They still treat historical and social themes, but there is a breath of fresh air about them. They take distance from the events and treat them with black humor, a touch of the absurd or under the complicated narrative schema of the fantastic.

The first two groups rebel against the deviations and the weird role that literature has come to have in the past fifteen years. The third one rebels against playing the victim too much and treats these themes with more serenity, and despite their youth, in a more balanced manner. Even the names that literary historians have given to their activities reflect these positions. The first two groups will mostly write *fansi wenxue* (反思文学), a literature of the "reconsidering" or "rethinking," or, the more famous *shanghen wenxue* (伤痕文学), a "scar" literature, viz., trauma literature. Their work is very interesting historically because they describe in detail many social realities of the past thirty years. The third group though, even if they take their "grief source" entirely from their eldest comrades, have shaped it completely differently. And



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this was sometimes called *xungen wenxue* (寻根文学), a literature of the "searching of the roots," that is their own cultural routes; while at other times, another term was used, a bit derogatorily, mostly in order to separate the boisterous mannerists from everybody else: *xianfeng* (先锋), *the Avantgarde.* Leaving the latter term aside for a moment, the idea of rebelling by searching their roots is rather interesting, for it almost looks like a very late form of romanticism, with the urge of exploring "Chinese-ness" among the older layers of usually folk culture and oral literature.

It is one of the reasons why especially the young authors became mesmerized by magic realism. This Latin American style of writing was actually based on the encounter of an old culture such as that of the South American continent, with the modern techniques of the French surrealism, the avant-garde, or the new modernist novel. What the Chinese authors all needed was virtually the same thing, a new literature, full of Chinese spirit, but fresh and sophisticated. Moreover, as we have already alluded to, Chinese literature had already had the right gene for the fantastic and even for a kind of before-its-time magic realism. Any short survey of Chinese traditional and folk literature may easily discover extremely interesting things. Even the Chinese four great classics,[2] the most praised novels of their literary history, have at least one or two fantastic elements or even stories that take part in the main development of the plot, not to say much of the most famous collection of fantastic stories edited by Pu Song Ling in the sixteen century and reedited to this day.

But still, or just because of that, the Chinese authors couldn't blindly copy the western style of writing. The latter was more of an inspiration, even though one of a great extensive, which would reorient them towards their own traditions without seeing the modern or western influence as a menace to the "purity" of the traditional way of writing. It is the case of most of the young writers considered either as *avant-garde* or as "searchers of the roots." Mo Yan has been classified in both categories, as his style is extremely hard to describe in one definite way.

## 2. The rebellious style of Mo Yan

Mo Yan boldly uses modernist techniques in his writing, combining elements

[2] *Journey to the West* (*Xi You Ji*, 西游记), *Three Kingdoms* (*San Guo Yan Yi*, 三国演义), *Outlaws of the Marsh* (*Shui Hu Zhuan*, 水浒传), *Dream of the Red Chamber* (*Hong Lou Meng*, 红楼梦).



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of surrealism, the stream of consciousness and complicated points of view in the narrative. At the same time, the settings he usually chooses are from the rural world, especially Gao Mi, a district from his hometown province Shandong, while the plots are a mixture of social observation and deep questioning on ethical or existential issues. His style leans towards black humor, parody, and satire, but there is also a constant undercurrent of fantasy and magic in almost any plot. As with the magic realists, there is no contradiction whatsoever in Mo Yan's novels between the sharp social observation or satirical depiction of history and the magic element or the supernatural.

Briefly speaking, the author's process of creation can be divided into three stages. There is the formation stage, which started in 1981 and culminated with *The Red Sorghum* (1987), *The Garlic Ballads* (1988), *Thirteen Steps* (1989), and *Herbivorous Family* (1989); the "quiet" period of the 1990s, with *The Republic of Wine* (1993), *Big Breasts and Large Hips* (1996), and *Red Forest* (1999); the third period, from 2000 to 2012, often called "the golden age" or the age of maturity, when he published *The Sandalwood Death* (2001), *Pow* (2003), *Life and Death are Wearing Me Out* (2006), and *Frogs* (2009). There is also a long series of short novels and short stories that extend over all these periods, together with dramatic plays and script versions.

If the first period is mostly marked by exploring western techniques of writing, like the stream of consciousness, magic realism, surrealism, the fantastic, naturalism, and the parable, the second one is a self-declared return to the Chinese "roots." The author feels the need to find his own voice and identity, therefore trying to break with the styles he explored before. (The extent to which this really happens is still rather a matter of debate.) It has been called the "quiet" period because of the author's retreat from public appearances, after a wave of unfavorable criticism mostly about *The Republic of Wine.* The novel is a modern parable about an unknown place from China where the officials are suspected of eating human flesh in the form of infants. The babies are born and raised precisely for this purpose. The hero who goes to solve the case, Ding Gou'er, fails miserably, finding his own end in a ditch full of manure. The novel is a dystopia aimed at the corruption of the officials and the inhumanity of all the inhabitants of this pseudo-fictional county. Read as a realistic novel, it seemed unfair and outrageous for many Chinese readers, including critics. Moreover, the metaphor of cannibalism also hints pretty obviously to Lu Xun's work, where this was a symbol of the "feudal era" (viz., dynastic China).



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Mo Yan's third period does not really differ too much from the previous ones, or maybe it does more in reducing the long and blurry inner monologues, also sliding towards a more postmodern approach such as in *Life and Death are Wearing Me Out* or in *Frogs*. What we mean by that is the use of the supernatural as an important element of the plot, as in *Life and Death…* and also in many short stories and sketches where the author explores all kinds of styles and variants, from surrealism and magic realism to the traditional fantastic tale. *Life and Death are Wearing Me Out* is a humorous parable about a landowner who is executed by the Red Army and goes to Yama, the Lord of the Underworld. He makes a scene there, infuriated as he is for having been mistreated and wronged, so he gets the chance to reincarnate himself by turns into a donkey, an ox, a pig, a dog, a monkey, and finally also as Blue Face, the narrator of the story. With the animals that think, talk, and have inner monologues, Mo Yan enters the realm of the fable and parable, another dystopia of the Kafkian world during the 1950s and afterwards during The Great Leap Forward, and the Cultural Revolution. Situations, language, activists and peasants, everybody falls under the mockery of the narrator disguised as a pig or any other animal. Mo Yan also uses self-reference and becomes one of the main characters of the novel.

The story told to the monk in *Pow* also approaches the realm of parable and fantasy. All the lusty adventures with foxes and all sorts of characters that have magic powers accompanies the backstory about the recent history of China. *The Sandalwood Death* and *Frogs* go more towards the realistic depiction, but all in all, one might fairly say that the author didn't understand letting go of the western influence as akin to leaving aside the fantastic and magic. The main reason is of course that fantasy is not a way of writing borrowed from the West.

The Chinese tradition is, as we have mentioned, extremely rich particularly in this case. What the author does is to find his own style and voice by using these roots. One of the ways to do that is searching for the Chinese short-story collections and then developing a style of writing that should emerge from the old Chinese way of storytelling. It is therefore not at all by chance that one of his own short-story collections was called in Chinese *xuexi pusongling* (学习蒲松龄), "learning from Pu Songling." In one of its stories, "Strange Encounter," the narrator meets, on his way home, one of his uncles, only to discover by the end that the uncle had already been dead. In "Iron Boy," set during the Great Leap Forward, the protagonist, a poor boy, makes friends



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with another kid just like him but who is capable of masticating and ingurgitating metal objects. In "The Clan of the Sniffers," another hungry child meets a new race of people, who live underground and become satiated only by sniffing the rich food they are making. The collection includes many other fantastic tales such as "The Shoemaker's Hut," "Hovering Above," and "Fishing at Night."

Mo Yan's rebellious spirit is evident in all of his writing. Sometimes it takes the form of sarcasm, mockery, and social satire. Other times it manifests itself by using the intricate and special narrative of the fantastic. It is thus very hard to distinguish, from a theoretical perspective, between magic realism and fantasy or between the typical Chinese weird story and the western version of the fantastic tale. But, and the aim of this article also is to address this question, do we really need to do that? Wouldn't it be more useful and practical to admit that different cultural backgrounds can resort to similar narrative structures that exploit similar ways of expression? We can take a look for ourselves and analyze whether this is true or not.

## 3. Magic and fantasy in Mo Yan's short stories

Mo Yan's short tales are intricate mixtures of realism and fantasy, magic realism and hallucinatory realism in which the hidden hints, allusions and parables are usually more important than the plot itself. In "Radish" (*touming de hong luobo*, 透明的红萝卜), a sickly and hungry child is hallucinating over a red radish he had stolen for his blacksmith master. The whole reality, even though deeply rooted in contemporary Chinese history, becomes wavery through the eyes of the boy. By using the free indirect speech style, the author seems to coopt the boy as a narrator of the story. This boy is himself extremely peculiar. He is very emaciated, looking more like a specter than a human being, and yet he seems to have superhuman powers in terms of sensitiveness towards nature. He can see, smell, and feel things that other people cannot. He is called *hei hai* (黑孩), "the Black Kid," which is actually a nickname owing to his dark skin and scars on his back. The production team leader, who is in charge with distributing the labor force, makes fun of him all the time, but even he sees the boy as a *pitiful creature*. Undoubtedly, under the image of an uncanny child, the author hides several allusions to the harsh Chinese realities during the 1950s and the 1960s, when mass collectivization in the rural areas led to starvation and hatred. Nevertheless, in the story the reality seen from the child's perspective looks very different from the grey one of an adult's experience. It



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suddenly becomes full of mystery and magic. He is sent by his blacksmith master to steal radishes and melons from another property, but he doesn't seem scared at all. He is one with the dumb and irrational forces of nature, he is almost a kind of feral human being. Leaving aside the socio-political allusions, the atmosphere is magic and fantastic, while the motif is an old literary Chinese one, which shows the child turning slowly into a spirit because of his sufferings.

Relatively similar in its logic is "The Iron Child" (*tie hai'er*, 铁孩儿). During organized manual labor, the protagonist of the story ends up half-delirious, face down in a puddle. After he takes a sip, he discovers that the water is filthy. Thinking it might be infested, he tries to get up and go find something else. At that moment the iron-eating child appears in front of him. He is very friendly and offers to teach him the secret of eating metal. At first the hungry child cannot figure out what is happening but eventually, to his amazement and joy, he finds himself eating all kinds of metals together with the "iron child." They thus become enemies of other people who need all the metal to feed the melting furnaces and make steel. The story takes place right during the Great Leap Forward, when even the rural communities had to sacrifice all their metallic belongings to reach high steel production quotas. After befriending the iron child, the boy doesn't want to go back to the human world. People are mean and full of hatred, and they eat smelly and filthy food. He doesn't even miss his parents anymore, and decides to go along living a life of iron-eating vagrant. The socio-political allusions are more than obvious, but again we are more interested in the type of narrative Mo Yan approaches. The undecidedness of the statute of the "reality" that is depicted is similar to the western fantastic story as theorized by Tzvetan Todorov in his famous *Introduction à la littérature fantastique* (1970). However, the supernatural does not have some of the necessary features identified by the Bulgarian-French theoretician. The allegorical meaning can sometimes prevail over the direct interpretation of the story, which for Todorov would bring the whole narrative outside the genre of the fantastic. It surely fits better the definitions given for magic realism, where the supernatural is usually a "solidified" metaphor. As for the portrait of the iron child, this begs inquiring into the depths of the Chinese supernatural.

The fantastic in Mo Yan's work is indebted to the Chinese literary tradition and to folklore tales. The author often talks about how he used to "read with his ears" when he was a child, as there were several uncles and old men who exceled in telling stories of the old times. These oral anecdotes were of



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course full of wonders and fantasy, ready to bewilder a child's mind. Mo Yan's short stories and novels therefore will abound in magic foxes, the yellow weasel, hedgehogs and spirits, revenants and other supernatural apparitions, all bearing the mark of the Chinese imaginary. From the narrative point of view, the old Chinese fantastic or weird stories had roughly the same structure as the western fantasy and fantastic: the protagonist encounters situations impossible to explain without a supernatural intervention. Sometimes the encounter becomes an adventure in which the main character can prove his or her good nature and boldness; at other times the story keeps the mystery on till the end just as in the classical Todorovian definition. The difference, though, owes to more permissiveness concerning the boundaries of realism and fantasy in the Chinese stories. Fairylike apparitions and the marvelous can emerge in perfectly realistic environments, which in the West occurs later, maybe in magic realism. This is the main reason why, after being inspired by the Latin American style, even when he consciously returns to his own Chinese traditions, Mo Yan has no way to show the difference to the readers. What magic realist literature brings new in the western world resembles what the Chinese already had, one way or another, and which they just lost during the tumultuous years of the collectivization of literature, and of the transforming an art form into a political tool.

Mo Yan of course, in some way, cannot get rid of the western influence, and fairly speaking he doesn't really need to. The differences between the two cultures are evident, but *the fairytale way of writing* of the Anglo-Saxon world, or *Le Fantastique* from the French school are not incompatible with the traditional fantastic Chinese literature.

## 4. Conclusion

The discussion whether Mo Yan is a writer who follows the new western style of writing or whether he has already returned to the traditional Chinese way of writing is not at all useful, but, on the contrary, might be rather harmful for further research in this domain. Fantasy and the fantastic literature are not new styles on which the West has any cultural monopoly. The fantastic as it is discussed in western scholarship does not usually include the Chinese variant simply because of lack of knowledge. Also, there are not enough Chinese studies that could shed light on an otherwise fairly simple problem.

Besides, an author has all the freedom to become transcultural in his/her work. In this day and age any such requirement for purity should be seen as



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rather outdated.

Thirdly, this article is an invitation to read Chinese literature and discover not only the differences and the exotic, but also those universal features that can always shed a light on our humanity and sensibility.

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