

Unfathomable Intrigues Post-Modern Mysteries:
A Three-Point Analysis of Mo Yan's novel *Life and Death are Wearing Me Out*

Mark Morrison
V00620096
PAAS 521
6 December 2011
Cody Poulton

Mo Yan's novel "*Life and Death are Wearing Me Out*" is a bold literary work that demonstrates the author's prowess in narratological techniques, his unique knowledge of Buddhism, and his keen sense of post-modern thematic structures. Jonathan Spence, the world-renowned Sinologist, has described the novel as a "wildly visionary and creative novel" that is "constantly mocking and rearranging itself and jolting the reader with its own internal commentary."¹ The post-modern nature of the novel makes it particularly interesting, as there are several venues possible for exploration. For the purposes of this paper, only three rather general avenues will be discussed and explored, and will provide a general introduction to the novel and an understanding of what this unusual novel has to offer. First, Mo Yan's narratological styles in the novel will be examined and discussed, and will ultimately show the uniqueness and post-modern methodologies of the narration used in this novel. Secondly, an analysis of Ximen Nao's character and the events that happen to him chronologically throughout his various reincarnations will reveal some of the Buddhist themes hidden within the text, and with even a cursory understanding of Buddhism, some of the most interesting points about the themes and structure of the book can be discovered. The third and final section shall largely go beyond the novel and look directly at Mo Yan and the post-modern themes and structures apparent in this novel, as well as their applicability in other of Mo Yan's works.

The Queer Question of Narrative Styles

Mo Yan uses three separate narrators for the different sections of the story, and in each section uses the narrators in very different ways, although the majority of the

¹ Jonathan Spence, "Born Again," *New York Times*, May 4, 2008, accessed September 3, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/04/books/review/Spence-t.html?pagewanted=all>.

narration is done in the first person. Narratologically, Mo Yan's use of the narrators is both interesting and entertaining, providing the reader with a variety of viewpoints from which to see this epic tale. It is fair to say that Mo Yan is a master of creating narration in a non-linear post-modern style that criss-crosses both time and memory and is undaunted in his experiments with a wide variety of differing narrative styles.² These styles are quite post-modern in function, as they break apart the grand narrative of the novel into smaller, mini-narratives for each separate section.

The story begins in *medias res* as the reader is immediately thrust into Ximen Nao's predicament in the underworld, being tortured by the minions of Lord Yama in atonement for his crimes during his life. The reader soon learns that Ximen Nao was a landlord who was sentenced to death by communist revolutionaries. In the first chapter, Ximen Nao desires nothing more than the opportunity to ask the people in the village why he was proclaimed guilty, as he vehemently believes that he was innocent and wrongly charged. Lord Yama has pity on Ximen Nao and thus allows him to be reincarnated. In a cruel twist of fate, however, Ximen Nao is unexpectedly reborn in the body of a donkey. Thus begins Ximen Nao's journey in the first section of the novel, "Donkey Misereries."

In "Donkey Misereries," it first seems as if the narration is being told directly to the reader by Ximen Nao, in what appears to be a first person focalized narration. The reader comes to quickly realize, however, that this is not entirely the case, as there are several small points that give away the seemingly standardized nature of Ximen Nao's narration. Ximen Nao is telling his story in the past tense, an indication that he is talking to someone, which the reader will probably believe to be himself or herself. This use of the

² David Der-Wei Wang, "The Literary World of Mo Yan," 490.

past tense in "Donkey Miseries" also makes the reader assume that Ximen Nao survived to tell us his tale. This is not the case, as the reader realizes in a tiny section at the end of Chapter Two that brings into doubt that it is the reader that Ximen Nao is talking to. Ximen Nao mentions the birth of Lan Jiefang in the building nearby his, and he asks, "Do you know who Lan Jiefang...is?"³ At this point in time, the narration appears to abruptly switch away from Ximen Nao for three lines, although there is no indication of a new narrator. There is not even an indication that Ximen Nao has not stopped talking. The lines read: "This Lan Qiansui, the teller of this tale...asked me out of the blue. Of course I know. Because it's me. Lan Lian is my father, and Ying Chun is my mother. Well, if that's the case, then you must have been one of our donkeys."⁴ This line is not said by Ximen Nao, and is therefore by Lan Jiefang, as the lines specifically indicate. This also tells the reader that the teller of the tale is not Ximen Nao, per se, but Lan Qiansui, a character that the reader assumes to be Ximen Nao's human reincarnation at some later point. At the beginning of Chapter Three, in the first paragraph, it becomes completely obvious that it is Lan Jiefang to whom Lan Qiansui is speaking; for example, Lan Qiansui says, "Lan Jiefang, son of Lan Lian, do you understand what I'm saying?"⁵ Clearing this matter up brings out one of the truly distinctive narratological features of the novel, that the entirety of the story is not told in the present, nor does the reader even matter to the narrators at first, but rather the majority of the story is framed around a conversation between Lan Qiansui and Lan Jiefang as the two reminisce about their pasts.

An interesting feature of Lan Qiansui's narration in "Donkey Miseries" is his ongoing internal monologue, as the reader receives a delightfully detailed look at Lan

³ Mo Yan, *Life and Death are Wearing Me Out*, New York: Arcade Publishing, 2008, 19.

⁴ *Life and Death are Wearing Me Out*, 19

⁵ *Life and Death are Wearing Me Out*, 20.

Qiansui's, or more appropriately Ximen Nao's, thoughts and feelings. Indeed, the narration takes a much more personal turn when Ximen Donkey is allowed to see all of the people he knew in his former life. Often times, just seeing one of the other characters sends the narration onto a tangent about the character, where the reader comes to understand exactly what Ximen Nao thought about them, and the relations he had with them. Throughout "Donkey Miseries", the reader is introduced to various characters who Ximen Nao knew when he was a human and we get to see how their lives have changed since his death, mostly for the better. For example, his former concubines Yingchun and Wu Qiuxiang have married and both given birth to children, the former to Ximen Nao's young farmhand Lan Lian, and the latter to Huang Tong, the leader of the Ximen Village militia and the man who executed Ximen Nao. What is utterly horrifying for Ximen Donkey is that he has been reborn as Lan Lian's donkey, thereby becoming subservient to his former farmhand. The unremitting hatred Ximen Nao expresses for almost everyone demonstrates just how bitter, angry and betrayed Ximen Nao believed himself to be at that time.

The first few years of Ximen Donkey's life are very adventurous, as Ximen Donkey becomes quite famous for the various things he does, including jumping over a large wall, and biting and kicking people who threaten Lan Lian. Ximen Donkey's life happens to coincide with the call for agricultural collectivization, something that Lan Lian does not wish to partake in. This puts both Lan Lian's family, and vicariously Ximen Donkey, on the opposing side of most of the village, who continually pressure Lan Lian to join the collective. Lan Lian and Ximen Donkey survive through various trials and tribulations, though sadly Ximen Nao's life ends ingloriously during the Great Leap

Forward when the starving villagers from the commune swarm Lan Lian's farm and eat Ximen Donkey.

Ximen Nao's hatred in his narration gives the reader a glimpse into how Ximen Nao perceived the world as a donkey. For example, when Ximen Donkey is born, he sees both Lan Lian and Yingchun together, at which he has "murderous urges..." and continues by saying how he "could have chopped Lan Lian into pieces...." and that Lan Lian is "an ungrateful bastard, and an unconscionable son of a bitch!"⁶ His hatred for Yingchun is every bit as vitriolic, as he calls her a " little slut" and remarks how his "bones weren't even cold before you went to bed with my hired hand...In the underworld you deserve to be thrown into a snake pit reserved for adulteresses!"⁷

The fact that his memories as a human are still strongly inside his donkey body only brings him further problems. Indeed, it is sometimes hard to tell whether or not the reader is reading Ximen Nao or Ximen Donkey narrate. For instance, Ximen Nao says to Lan Jiefang, "I see your father, Lan Lian, and your mother Yingchun, in the throes of marital bliss, I, Ximen Nao, am witness to sexual congress between my own hired hand and my concubine, throwing me into such agony that I ram my head into the gate of the donkey pen, into such a torment that I chew the edge of my wicker feedbag..."⁸ The lingering feelings of possessive love Ximen Donkey still has for Yingchun can be felt whenever he talks about her at first, seeing her as his property that has been wrongly stolen away from him by fate.

Another interesting feature of Ximen Nao's narration "Donkey Miseries" is that Ximen Nao continually attempts to distance himself from his donkey body, only to

⁶ Life and Death are Wearing Me Out, 16.

⁷ Life and Death are Wearing Me Out, 17.

⁸ Life and Death are Wearing Me Out, 20.

repeatedly have himself mix up his designations. This occurs particularly in the first section of "Donkey Miseries", where Ximen Nao attempts to make the distinction that his soul is still that of a human, and that it is just his body that is a donkey's. Shortly after Ximen Nao is reincarnated as a donkey, he attempts to loudly proclaim his humanity by calling out, "'I am not a donkey!' I roared. 'I am a man! I am Ximen Nao!'"⁹ Ximen Nao cannot talk, of course, and no matter how hard he tries, Ximen Donkey cannot speak; all his words come out as donkey brays. Ximen Nao's narration keeps switching between talking about himself and talking about the donkey as if the donkey were a separate entity. In Chapter Four for example, Ximen Nao discusses how he is being lead by Lan Lian through the village. Ximen Nao first says "...my master led me - or should I say, Lan Lian led his young donkey..."¹⁰ Later on in the passage, Ximen Nao mentions the place where he had been sentenced to death, self-righteously proclaiming his innocence, and saying "I, Ximen Nao" to designate himself.¹¹ In a later passage of the same Chapter, however, Ximen Nao forgets momentarily that he and the donkey are separate beings, and proclaims himself to be "I, Ximen Donkey..."¹² This struggle between Ximen Nao attempting to remain human and fight his animal instincts remains a constant throughout the narration of "Donkey Miseries."

With the third section, "Pig Frolics," the reader returns to Ximen Nao's narration from Lan Jiefang's in "The Strength of an Ox," which will be discussed soon. Ximen Nao's first person narratological style in "Pig Frolics" is noticeably different from that in "Donkey Miseries." For the first time in the novel, Ximen Nao's reincarnation is not

⁹ Life and Death are Wearing Me Out, 13.

¹⁰ Life and Death are Wearing Me Out 32

¹¹ Life and Death are Wearing Me Out 33

¹² Life and Death are Wearing Me Out 34

directly connected to either Lan Lian or Lan Jiefang. Instead, Ximen Pig is born in the communal farm, the sixteenth pig of a large litter. Ximen Pig quickly adapts to his surroundings and becomes the "Pig King," the most dominant and beloved pig in all of Gaomi county. Through various adventures, Ximen Pig eventually escapes the pig farm and lives as a king with his fellow pigs, having many adventures with them; however, Ximen Pig's glorious life comes to an end when he saves Lan Jiefang's and Lan Jinlong's children from drowning in a river.

As previously mentioned in "Donkey Miseries," there are hints that Ximen Nao's reincarnation, Lan Qiansui, is talking to Lan Jiefang, although it is never completely stated outright. In "Pig Frolics," it is very obvious that Lan Qiansui is talking to Lan Jiefang, as there are several instances where the focalization of Lan Qiansui's narration abruptly moves away from his narration about his reincarnation as a pig, and the reader is instead pulled into the present between Lan Qiansui and Lan Jiefang. For example, at the beginning of Chapter Twenty-Three, Lan starts the chapter by saying "brother, or should I say, Uncle, you seem upset. Your eyes are hooded by puffy lids, and you seem to be snoring, Big-head Lan Qiansui said harshly. If you're not interested in the lives of pigs, let me tell you about dogs."¹³ Immediately after this, the narration switches away from Lan Qiansui, to an entirely new paragraph, this time narrated by Lan Jiefang and his response to Lan Qiansui, telling him to not "give another thought to my puffy eyelids..."¹⁴ This abrupt change in narration breaks the reader away from the story and further distances the reader from the pig story, emphasizing that the true audience for the story is Lan Jiefang alone. The reader is instead the complete outsider looking in.

¹³ Life and Death are Wearing Me Out, 232.

¹⁴ Life and Death are Wearing Me Out, 232.

Another distinctive narratological departure from "Donkey Miseries" to "Pig Frolics" is Ximen Nao's apparent comfort at being a pig, with no loud squealing protests, or boisterous head banging. Ximen Nao remarks shortly after he has been reincarnated as a pig on his first meeting with his son, Ximen Jinlong, that "I'd gone several rebirths, our father-son relationship had weakened, until it was little more than a faint memory, a few words inscribed on a family register."¹⁵ Indeed, at a later point in "Pig Frolics," Lan Qiansui remarks to Lan Jiefang about the unsightly nature of a groups of wild pigs that are taken from their home on Mount Yimeng and brought to the pig farm where he lived. Lan Qiansui notes rather revealingly that "...I might have had the spirit of a man somewhere inside me, but I'm still a pig..."¹⁶

The second narrator in the story is Lan Jiefang, who narrates, in first person, the second section, "The Strength of an Ox," in its entirety. The second section, "Strength of the Ox," is told from the perspective of Lan Jiefang talking to the human reincarnation of Ximen Nao, Lan Qiansui. As a result, the reader never gets to go inside the head of Ximen Ox's reincarnation, and does not get to see what Ximen Ox thinks. Several years have passed since Ximen Donkey was eaten, and Lan Lian and Lan Jiefang have not yet joined the collective. Much of this section shows the strife and conflict between Lan Jiefang and the rest of the village, particularly with his half-brother Jinlong, who joined the commune with their mother Yingchun. The pressures from his family and the Cultural Revolution become so great, that Jiefang decides to join the commune as well, taking Ximen Ox with him, though Lan Lian adamantly refuses to leave his plot of land. While Ximen Ox goes with Jiefang to the commune, he refuses to work for anyone but Jiefang

¹⁵ Life and Death are Wearing Me Out, 224.

¹⁶ Life and Death are Wearing Me Out, 236.

or Lan Lian. Jinlong is so enraged by this that he viciously beats Ximen Ox, and Ximen Ox staggers over to Lan Lian's small plot of land and expires.

Lan Jiefang's narration differs greatly from Ximen Nao's. Lan Jiefang is not at all boisterous or proud in any of his narration, is instead just quite descriptive throughout. For instance, in Chapter Seventeen, Lan Jiefang gives a detailed description of when his father, Lan Lian, and Ximen Ox were publically paraded around and humiliated during the Cultural Revolution, describing how one of the people being paraded, Fang Tong, is forced to eat a turnip that has been carved and covered in black dye to resemble a donkey penis: "He scooped up the turnip and bit off a chunk. Faster, eat faster! He bit off another chunk. His cheeks bulged so much he couldn't even chew, so he tried to force it down his throat and ended up choking himself until his eyes rolled back into his head."¹⁷ His mimetic narration provides a darker perspective on the world of Gaomi County for the reader, as his narration is more detailed and humourlessly introspective than Ximen Nao's more diegetic and comically summarized style.

Similarly to Ximen Nao's narration, however, is the understanding that Lan Jiefang is not telling the story for the reader, but rather as his version of the time that Ximen Nao spent as an ox for Ximen Nao's own benefit. There are only a few times where Lan Qiansui breaks back into the narrative, and though these times are rather unexpected, they provide the reader with a brief glimpse of what Lan Qiansui no doubt thought about the time of the Cultural Revolution during which the ox lives. For instance, there is a point in Chapter Seventeen where Lan Jiefang is describing a scene where he has to fetch his sister, Lan Baofeng, because Lan Jinlong poured red paint in their father's eyes and he may go blind if not immediately treated. As Lan Jiefang is describing the

¹⁷ Life and Death are Wearing Me Out, 160-161.

heart-wrenching scene, Lan Qiansui sarcastically bellows out, "Another accomplishment of the Great Cultural Revolution!"¹⁸

The fourth section, "Dog Spirit," takes a radically different road from the three preceding sections, as both Lan Qiansui and Lan Jiefang are the narrators of the tale. This brilliant narratological device brings an entirely new dimension to the novel, as both of the main characters are alternating between chapters, and therefore telling two different sides of the same story. Through Lan Jiefang, the reader sees Lan Jiefang's own personal story and experiences with his extra-marital affair and the effects these have on him. Through Lan Qiansui's narration, the reader sees the stories of not only Ximen Dog, but also of the rest of Lan Jiefang's family and the impact that Lan Jiefang's affair have on his family, particularly his wife, Huang Hezuo, and his son, Lan Kaifang. Lan Qiansui's narration is aimed solely at Lan Jiefang, and is identical in style to Lan Jiefang's narration of "The Strength of the Ox." Lan Jiefang's narration, on the other hand, is not completely directed directly at Lan Qiansui. In the latter chapters of "Dog Spirit," the two narrators even share chapters, as their narration parallels one another in a creative back-and-forth style that presents the reader with the challenge of piecing together the two narrators' stories being told at exactly the same time.

The third and final narrator, a fictionalized version of Mo Yan, takes on a completely different narratological method from the previous two narrators in the fifth and final section, "An End and a Beginning." This fictionalized Mo Yan narrates in the voice of a traditional Chinese storyteller, talking directly to the audience, and referring to the reader as "dear reader."¹⁹ Interestingly, neither Lan Jiefang nor Ximen Nao's monkey

¹⁸ Life and Death are Wearing Me Out, 165.

¹⁹ Life and Death are Wearing Me Out, 515.

reincarnation are the subject of focalization in the section. Instead, Lan Kaifang, Lan Jiefang's son, is featured in a position of prominence, as the reader is told Kaifang's tragic story of his unrequited love with Pang Fenghuang. In addition, the fictionalized Mo Yan also utilizes more classical Chinese narratological methods, such as referencing someone else of stature and respect outside of the novel in the real world, and discussing his feelings about what that person says concerning a particular situation, and then relating it back to whatever situation is going on in the story at the time. This is apparent in Chapter Fifty-Seven, where Mo Yan discusses what love is from the point of view of another existing avant-garde author and screenwriter, Ah Cheng, and relates it to the budding love between Lan Kaifang and Pang Fenghuang.²⁰ Mo Yan's narration also departs from the first person perspective of Lan Qiansui and Lan Jiefang, instead opting for an omniscient narratological position, telling the reader everything there is to know about the story and the characters.

According to M. Thomas Inge in his article, "Mo Yan: Through Western Eyes," the real Mo Yan has always been an innovative writer when it comes to experimenting with different narratological forms and styles. In fact, Inge believes that Mo Yan is a master at writing what Inge calls "stories within stories," something which is a staple throughout Mo Yan's literary career so far.²¹ While Inge's discussion of Mo Yan's narratological innovations was written six years before "*Life and Death are Wearing Me Out*" was published, much of what Inge has written about is applicable to this novel, as the first four sections of the novel are really a "story within a story." Inge describes Mo

²⁰ *Life and Death are Wearing Me Out*, 529.

²¹ Inge, "Mo Yan: Through Western Eyes," 505.

Yan's narratological style as "post-modern," as Mo Yan's narration often falls into fantastical elements that are utterly detached from the "real world."²²

This is high lighted especially well in Chapter Seventeen, where Lan Jiefang describes how a flock of geese fall dead from the sky because of the loud screeching of the loudspeaker as Cultural Revolution slogans are loudly blared from it. What this demonstrates is, in fact, that the narration has slipped away from reality into absolute fantasy, because the only way to properly show the surreal nature of the Cultural Revolution is to underscore the complete absurdity of reality by blurring it through fantasy so the reader cannot see the difference. Indeed, Inge writes that "[w]hatever truth resides in the narrative is the truth of the human heart, not human events."²³ Not only that, but this scene from Chapter Seventeen demonstrates the post-modern understanding that the past must be revisited through an ironic lens, something discussed in detail in Qiao Guoqiang's article, "The Narrative Strategy of Chinese avant-garde novels: The Case of Mo Yan." Qiao himself notes that an innovative strategy of Mo Yan's is to create an entirely new understanding of Chinese Communist history, as he refuses "to negotiate with the authoritative version of history" and instead uncovers "the negative...the inhuman side of the so-called [history of] class struggle" that "runs counter to the established cultural and political values."²⁴

Buddhist Themes Through Ximen Nao's Various Rebirths

Ximen Nao's character changes dramatically throughout the course of the novel, going from a vengeful, narcissistic man to a much more caring and understanding

²² Inge, "Mo Yan: Through Western Eyes," 505.

²³ Inge, "Mo Yan: Through Western Eyes," 503.

²⁴ Guoqiang Qiao, "The Narrative Strategy of Chinese avant-garde novels: The Case of Mo Yan," 217.

individual. At the very beginning of the novel, Mo Yan provides a Buddhist quotation that gives an interesting meaning to Ximen Nao's change in character, saying "Transmigration wearsies owing to mundane desires/ Few desires and inaction bring peace to the mind."²⁵ What this infers is that people can only find true peace once they have rid themselves of their desires, and have instead allowed themselves to accept whatever happens to them without a desire for vengeance, a Buddhist theme found throughout the whole of the novel. This is something that Ximen Nao's character experiences repeatedly on his journey. In addition, the connection between Ximen Nao's animal forms and his human soul are also symbolic of Ximen Nao's own struggle between letting go of his past and accepting himself, so that when he stops fighting with himself and embraces his animalistic nature, he gains true peace.

Beginning with "Donkey Miseries," Ximen Nao's character is reincarnated with nothing but the single-minded desire to prove his innocence to those people who brought about his execution. This single event is the critical incident that drives Ximen Nao from one incarnation to the next attempting to find resolution and justification. There is a point in Chapter One, wherein Ximen Nao is given the opportunity to have his memories of his human life utterly wiped away, thus giving him the freedom to life in peace. One of Lord Yama's attendants in hell hands a bowl of some "black, foul-smelling liquid from a filthy steel pot" and tells Ximen Nao to "Drink what is in this bowl, and your suffering, your worries, and your hostility will all be forgotten." Ximen Nao's response tells the reader everything they need to know about Ximen Nao's motivations and resolve, stating, "No...I

²⁵ Life and Death are Wearing Me Out, the quotation appears on the page preceding the copyright/cataloguing information page.

want to hold on to my sufferings, worries and hostility. Otherwise, returning to that world is meaningless."²⁶

As has been previously mentioned, one of the unique features of the narratological style in the section is how Ximen Nao continually confuses his designations between the donkey and himself. On occasion, Ximen Nao refers to himself as Ximen Nao, but there are occurrences throughout the novel where he considers himself to be the donkey. Some of these times, Ximen Nao will promptly correct himself, yet other times Ximen Nao fully embraces his animalistic donkey nature, becoming Ximen Donkey. Chapters 6 and 7 are prime examples of this, where Ximen Donkey runs away from Ximen Village, and chases after the scent of another female donkey Ximen Donkey nicknames "Huahua."²⁷ Ximen Donkey utterly abandons his humanity during this brief tryst, suggesting to Huahua, "[l]et's become wild donkeys and live among the meandering ridges of sand, among the lush tamarisk of bushes, alongside the clear water of this worry-free river."²⁸ During these two chapters, no human aspect of Ximen Nao is visible, as he has completely embraced his animalistic side, and for only a short time, finds peace.

While Ximen Nao is not the narrator for "Strength of an Ox," what little the reader sees of his commentary is enough to give a good reading of his personality, which conveys the misery and bitterness Ximen Nao feels at that time. More importantly, Ximen Ox's actions at the end of the section, in Chapter Twenty, bring one of the most tragic and painful scenes in the entire novel that speak to the changes in Ximen Nao's personality. Even though the novel is far from finished at this point in the story, the scene underlies the Buddhist notion that one must let go of their hatred and ambitions to

²⁶ Life and Death are Wearing Me Out, 6.

²⁷ Life and Death are Wearing Me Out, 53.

²⁸ Life and Death are Wearing Me Out, 60.

achieve true peace, and demonstrates just how much Ximen Nao's character has changed by the end of the first two sections.

In Chapter Twenty, Lan Jiefang has decided to leave his father and join the commune. Lan Lian orders Jiefang to take Ximen Ox with him, to which Lan Jiefang reluctantly agrees. Since Ximen Ox becomes property of the commune, it means that he must obey the orders of anyone he is assigned to for farming. Ximen Ox decides to fight against this by adopting that most unique of donkey characteristics - stubbornness. By doing absolutely nothing that the workers try to make him do, he achieves a small, but temporary victory. One of Ximen Ox's holders even asks if "Lan Lian use[s] magic incantations to get it to do what he wants?"²⁹ Lan Jinlong, who is Ximen Nao's biological son, decides the best way to get the ox to cooperate is by viciously beating it into submission. The scene is both descriptive and tragic, as Jinlong gives Ximen Ox "twenty lashes and only stopped from exhaustion... you [Ximen Ox] lay there, head on the ground, hot tears squeezed out of your tightly shut eyes... you [Ximen Ox] didn't move and you didn't make a sound... with a steady stream of curses on his lips, [Jinlong] walked up and kicked you [Ximen Ox] in the face."³⁰ Jinlong's beating becomes ever more vicious, as Jinlong continues in vain to make Ximen Ox move. Jinlong becomes so determined, that he piles up cornstalks behind Ximen Ox and lights them ablaze. Finally, Ximen Ox gets up and walks slowly back to Lan Lian's piece of land, as bystanders "gaped silently, wide-eyed and slack-jawed," where Ximen Ox finally dies. Lan Jiefang notes that "as an ox, you [Ximen Ox] will likely gain immortality."³¹ Ximen Ox's last heroic stand gives an excellent example of the Buddhist themes present in "*Life and Death are Wearing Me*

²⁹ *Life and Death are Wearing Me Out*, 210.

³⁰ *Life and Death are Wearing Me Out*, 211.

³¹ *Life and Death are Wearing Me Out*, 215.

Out," as Ximen Ox must pass through absolute torment to finally find peace, like a living Buddha.³²

In "Pig Frolics," Ximen Nao is, initially, furious about being reborn as a pig, and immediately plans to starve himself so that he can die in order to confront Lord Yama once again in the hopes of being reborn as a human. This rage quickly subsides once Ximen Pig gives in to his animal instincts and drinks his mother's milk. From this point on, Ximen Pig becomes completely comfortable with his pig self, and crowns himself the "Pig King," as he is the biggest and strongest pig in the Gaomi Pig Farm. Also, interestingly, since Ximen Pig is so at peace with himself as a pig, he becomes more fulfilled and happy, referring to his life as a pig as his "glorious" life, as if it were the greatest of all his lives, even though he was nothing more than a filthy pig.³³ Ximen Pig embraces his pig nature so much that he runs away from the pig farm, living with his fellow pigs in the wild. The scene itself is very similar to the time Ximen Donkey ran away from Ximen village to find the female donkey, but in this case, Ximen Pig does not return to human civilization. Instead, Ximen Pig furthers his "King" moniker by becoming the leader of a group of pigs near to Ximen village. As the Pig King, Ximen Pig even goes to war with the people of Ximen village, who attack his group of pigs. Ximen Pig does retain some of his humanity in the end, however, as he valiantly sacrifices himself to save the lives of Lan Jiefang's and Lan Jinlong's children from drowning in a river in Chapter Thirty-Six.

Throughout "Dog Spirit," Ximen Nao's dog reincarnation finds loyalty towards both his fellow animals, in this case dogs, and to his human owners. Ximen Dog becomes

³² Yinde Zhang, "The Fiction of Living Beings: Man and Animal in the writings of Mo Yan," 127.

³³ *Life and Death are Wearing Me Out*, 314.

especially loyal to Lan Jiefang's son, Lan Kaifang, whom Ximen Dog escorts to school each morning. "Dog Spirit" also provides an interesting case of being "humanimal," a term that Yinde Zhang creates and discusses in her work, "The Fiction of Living Beings: Man and Animal in the Work of Mo Yan." According to Zhang, Mo Yan's fictional works are especially good at creating what Zhang refers to as a highly Buddhist view of the world, one where man and animal are able to not only coexist in harmony, but also to have a mutual understanding of one another.³⁴ Indeed, the animal in Mo Yan's works become much more "humanized" so as to allow the reader to further identify with their situation. This is something that can arguably be found in the three preceding sections of *Life and Death are Wearing Me Out*, but nowhere in the novel is it better demonstrated than in this section in Chapter Fifty-Three.

By Chapter Fifty-Three, Ximen Dog has become very elderly and is living with Lan Lian, also an old man. Lan Qiansui's narration tells the reader that Ximen Dog would spend most of his time in Lan Lian's room, and "the old man [Lan Lian] and I [Ximen Dog] would just look at each other, communicating with our eyes and not our mouths." Lan Qiansui goes on saying that "There were times when I assumed he knew exactly who I was...." Lan Lian says things to Ximen Dog that do indicate this possibility, saying "Old Master, you shouldn't have died the way you did, but the world has changed over the last ten years or more, and lots of people died who shouldn't have..."³⁵ In a strangely touching scene, Lan Lian takes Ximen Dog to the family grave site, located on the small piece of farmland that Lan Lian refused to give up during collectivization, and the two beings pick out where they wished to be buried together. Lan Lian says to Ximen Dog that "you and

³⁴ Yinde Zhang, "The Fiction of Living Beings," 127.

³⁵ *Life and Death are Wearing Me Out*, 504.

the moon are my witnesses...It's [the gravesite's] mine, and no one can take it away from me."³⁶ At the very end of their lives, both Lan Lian and Ximen Dog lay down in their mutual grave sites, and Lan Lian says to Ximen Dog, "You can go too, Master."³⁷ Lan Lian and Ximen Dog have developed a true understanding between one another that goes beyond the connection between man and animal, and it appears by this point in the novel that Ximen Nao's soul has finally rid itself of desire, and has finally achieved the Buddhist ideal of peace. Lord Yama disagrees with this statement, however, as he orders Ximen Nao to be reincarnated once more as a monkey to "purge [his] heart of hatred" and desire.³⁸

The final section, "An End and a Beginning," bringing the story to both an end and a beginning simultaneously, is representative of the cycle of Buddhist life, death, and rebirth. More accurately, this final section is the Buddhist representation of *samsara*, the human experience. It is the cycle of karma, essentially, an eternally cyclical process that the scholar John Hicks refers to as "a self-propelling, causal cycle in which old age and death are produced by birth..."³⁹ Amusingly, Ximen Nao's monkey form plays little important role in establishing this perfect Buddhist cycle of life, death and rebirth. Rather, it is Lan Qiansui, Ximen Nao's post-monkey human reincarnation, that plays a bigger role. The narrative has faced a total role reversal, also symbolic of this cyclical nature, where Lan Jiefang has become the elder to Ximen Nao's reincarnation, Lan Qiansui.

³⁶ Life and Death are Wearing Me Out, 504.

³⁷ Life and Death are Wearing Me Out, 510.

³⁸ Life and Death are Wearing Me Out, 510.

³⁹ John Hicks, *Death and Eternal Life*, 345.

Mo Yan as an Author

Much of the narrative technique Mo Yan utilizes in this novel can be described as post-modernism mixed with Buddhist themes, and this section will provide a more detailed look at Mo Yan in particular. As stated earlier, Mo Yan puts a fictionalized version of himself in the novel. This fictional Mo Yan, like the real Mo Yan, is a literary author; however, the fictional Mo Yan is generally despised and mocked by all of the major characters in the book. The fictional Mo Yan is seen as being a generally terrible author who has nothing but "deviant talents."⁴⁰ The other characters, and the narrators Lan Qiansui and Lan Jiefang, in particular, take great pleasure in making fun of the stupidity and tomfoolery that Mo Yan partakes in. Lan Qiansui takes time to say how Mo Yan "was unbelievably ugly and carried on in the most peculiar ways."⁴¹ In "Pig Frolics," the reader is told the "infamous" story of Mo Yan's birth by Lan Qiansui, recounting that Mo Yan's father had a dream on the night Mo Yan was born, about how an imp dragging a big writing brush came into their house. When the father asked who the imp had come from, the imp replied that he came from the halls of hell, where he was Lord Yama's personal secretary. This story gives Lan Qiansui the chance to refer to Mo Yan as "Lord Yama's personal secretary."⁴²

This strange designation is rather appropriate for the fictional Mo Yan when looking at his use in the novel. The character is, at first, used for nothing but parody purposes as the real Mo Yan is using this as an avenue to both make fun of himself and to give the reader some amusement. There is, however, much more depth to the fictionalized Mo Yan than merely a parody of the author. In fact, the fictional Mo Yan is

⁴⁰ Life and Death are Wearing Me Out, 248.

⁴¹ Life and Death are Wearing Me Out, 248.

⁴² Life and Death are Wearing Me Out, 249.

the source of a great deal of information throughout the novel, as both of the narrators, Lan Jiefang and Lan Qiansui, constantly reference fictionalized literary works written by the fictionalized Mo Yan. For example, in "Donkey Misereries," while Lan Qiansui is narrating the story, he continually references a fictionalized play written by Mo Yan called *The Black Donkey*, which is, for all intents and purposes, the story of Ximen Nao's donkey form. The use of a fictional tale is also used to great effect in "Pig Frolics," where Lan Qiansui references Mo Yan's story *Tales of Pig Raising*, which, in identical fashion to *The Black Donkey*, tells the story of the pig farm where Ximen Nao's pig reincarnation lived. This consistent referencing of these simulacra-style fictionalized works functions quite similarly to a Greek Chorus, which helps to summarize the story and provide commentarial insight onto various scenes.

This post-modern use of authorial self-referentiality and self-parody in this novel is not a completely new experimentation for Mo Yan. In Mo Yan's novel *The Republic of Wine*, much of the tale is narrated by a fictionalized version of Mo Yan, who consistently derides himself for being a seemingly talentless author, humorously stating that "only those without talent and skill become writers."⁴³ Mo Yan's use of a fictionalized version of himself gives the real Mo Yan the ability to remove himself entirely from the novel, and ultimately allows the work to exist independently of his authorial intention. Indeed, in *The Republic of Wine*, Mo Yan is consistently talking about his first, and most famous, literary work, *Red Sorghum*, which directly connects Mo Yan with the work. In *Life and Death are Wearing Me Out*, the use of fictionalized tales puts the novel into an entirely different universe free of the real Mo Yan, and thus

⁴³ Inge, "Mo Yan: Through Western Eyes," 503.

allows Mo Yan to write about whatever he so wishes, free from the confines of his own literary works, and finds it no longer able to impose himself on the novel's environment.

Another interesting ironically post-modernist device Mo Yan utilizes in *"Life and Death are Wearing Me Out"* is the brilliant use of chapter titles in the first four sections of the novel. The chapter titles are a "wink" to any reader who is more well-versed in traditional Chinese literature. In traditional Chinese literary works from *The Water Margin* (水浒传) to *A Dream of Red Mansions* (红楼梦), the chapters are divided into small, 2-part episodes, divided into matching pairs, and the chapter titles always provides a summary of the chapter the reader is about to undertake. In Mo Yan's case, however, the chapter titles do not always tell the entire story, and in some cases, mislead the reader into what is about to happen. Take, for instance, the title of Chapter Twenty: "Lan Jiefang Betrays Father and Joins the Commune/ Ximen Ox Kills a man and Dies a Righteous Death."⁴⁴ Lan Jiefang does leave his father, Lan Lian, to join the commune, but it could not be considered a betrayal because Lan Lian does absolutely nothing to stop his son. Lan Jiefang does feel terribly guilty, however, and that may be why the word "betrayal" is used in the chapter title. However, Ximen Ox does not kill anybody, rather, Ximen Ox shakes his head around to shake off a flowery wreath put on his head by the girl Huang Hezuo. Hezuo overreacts, shrieking that "the ox tried to gore me!"⁴⁵ Ximen Ox is completely innocent; instead, it is Lan Jinlong who is the real killer in the chapter. Also of interest is the chapter titles used in the fifth and final section, "An End and a Beginning," where Mo Yan has abandoned the use of faux traditional titles, and has instead opted for more classically western and modern titles, perhaps showing the ironic

⁴⁴ Life and Death are Wearing Me Out, 206.

⁴⁵ Life and Death are Wearing Me Out, 206.

move away from tradition in the novel, as the book ends with the dawn of the new millennium, and an uncertain future for both the characters in the novel and China as a whole.

Conclusion

"Life and Death are Wearing Me Out" is a work laden with many compelling themes and mysteries to be unlocked and explored by the reader. The post-modern narratological style of using three separate narrators in vastly different ways through the novel's five sections underscores the intelligence, boldness, and innovative imagination of the author, Mo Yan. These different voices jolt the reader into the new realities experienced by the ever-morphing protagonist from unexpected points of view. Not only is this narratological style uniquely post-modern, but there are post-modern themes and structures with an underlying current of Buddhism that can be threaded and knitted throughout the novel, particularly through the protagonist Ximen Nao in his various reincarnations giving this novel a more enriched and unique texture. These embedded techniques further enhance the post-modernity of the novel. Finally, several other post-modern structures and uses throughout the novel, including the insertion of a fictionalized Mo Yan, the strange use of authorial self-referentiality, and even the use of chapter titles, speak to the post-modern elements that make up this distinctly fine novel.

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