The (Bio)political Novel

Some Reflections on Frogs by Mo Yan

YINDE ZHANG*

ABSTRACT: The political concerns underlying Mo Yan’s creative work come to the fore in his latest novel, Frogs (Wa), which gives the reader an unusual perspective on the complex relations between fiction and politics. This novel harshly criticises a state whose coercive population control policies are responsible for some murderous consequences. This denunciation is also aimed at the economic ultra liberalism that is complicit with the totalitarian inheritance in destruction of human dignity through the alienation and commercialisation of the body. The complex symbolic structure of this work brings out the need for life itself to be rehabilitated in accordance with basic human rights and membership in the human community, and to be strongly defended against political attack and moral decay. Far from being an essentialist communitarian ethics, however, the bioethics proposed by the author offers the possibility of social reconstruction of the bios.

KEYWORDS: Mo Yan, Frogs (Wa), the (bio)political novel

In the field of contemporary Chinese literature Mo Yan (1956-) has a special place owing to the continually striking and even bewildering images in his ongoing literary output. From his Wineland to Life and Death are Wearing Me Out, through Sandalwood Torture to Big Breasts and Wide Hips, his works invariably display scenes of cannibalism, cruelty, and violence that excite and divide critical opinion. These often-discussed aspects of his work actually conceal an underlying political energy, which comes to the fore in his latest novel Frogs (Wa), giving the reader an unusual perspective on the complex relations between fiction and politics.

From the very outset, this writer has recognised that his work is inexorably linked to politics, as is made clear in his introduction to The Garlic Ballads (Tiantang suantai zhi ge), a novel published in 1987: “The novelist always tries to keep clear of politics, but the novel itself inexorably draws closer to it.” (2) Although this declaration is toned down in subsequent editions, the author has never repudiated this inner conviction, which finds an outlet not so much in overt commitments as through its literary reconfiguration. While the basic impulse of this novel is a plea on behalf of the shamefully exploited peasants, it gives precedence to fiction over factual reporting, deliberately mixing the language of the media with a blind man’s song and tales of imagination. In this filtering and remoulding of politics, Mo Yan resembles Yan Lianke 闐連ordinateur ), author of The Dream of Ding Village (Dingzhuang meng), a committed work that avoids documentary realism. (3)

Frogs represents a further step in “testing the political” within a dialectic that refracts politics through the prism of literary discourse. (4) The novel is divided into five sections, but in reality it consists of two halves, the first of which presents the dramatic events arising from the compulsory abortions of the 1960s, and the second the no less tragic story, in a more recent context, of a surrogate mother deprived of parental rights. The drama revolves around the personality of a politically committed gynaecologist who is the narrator’s aunt and has accomplished heroic deeds in applying the birth control policy in Gaomi 女子 , which combines the author’s own birthplace with his imagined republic. It is an epistolary novel in which the narrator writes to a Japanese writer friend, who is called Sugitani Yoshii 何理工 ), but whose barely concealed identity is really Kenzaburo Oe. (5) However, the fifth and final section marks a shift into drama, incorporating a play with the same title as the novel. This sophisticated shifting across genres is nonetheless organised in a way that leaves no doubt about the work’s actual field of reference; the freshness of certain events in the collective memory makes it impossible to read it as pure fiction. It is also quite transparent in its allusion to certain episodes in recent history, such as the abusive compulsory sterilisation and abortion campaigns conducted in Linyi 果台 , Shandong Province, which is in fact the author’s birthplace. (6) Similarly, the name given to Chen the Eyelash (Chen Mei 瞳人 ), the

---

* Yinde Zhang is a professor of Chinese studies at the Sorbonne Nouvelle-Paris 3, where he is also senior researcher of the Centre for comparative research studies and a member of the Centre for the study of modern and contemporary China (EHESS/CNRS). His own research is in the field of contemporary Chinese literature and Sino-Western relations in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

1. Mo Yan, Wa (Frogs), Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 2009; French translation, Grenouilles, by Chantal Chen-Andro, Éditions du Seuil, 2011. Throughout the present article, my bracketed page references are to these two editions, the first being to the Chinese version and the second to the French.

2. Translated into French as La Mélée de l’ail paradoxique by Chantal Chen-Andro, Seuil, 2005. Her translation of the introduction differs slightly from ours. For the original version, see Mo Yan, “Preface to Tiantang suantai zhi ge,” Beijing, Dangdai xiyue chubanshe, 2003, p. 1.


7. I have given the translated names of the characters, followed by their original names in brackets, when they are first mentioned.
pregnant mother disfigured in a fire that destroyed the Dongli cuddly toys factory (Dongli maorong wanjuchang 东丽毛绒玩偶厂) in Southern China (pp. 230 and 275), unmistakably recalls the fire on 19 November 1993, that destroyed the Zhili toy workshops in Shenzhen (Shenzhen Zhili wanjuchang 深圳中力玩偶厂), when 87 male and 85 female workers lost their lives. (8) These dramatic events can easily be identified, whereas others form part of a diffuse range of facts that are perhaps of greater concern because of the way they continue to nag at the social unconscious, as can be seen by the profitable trade in artificial insemination. This openness to political and social realities does not result in a roman à clef or a work with a message, but rather in a whole network of meanings in which the political underlies a far-reaching reconfiguration.

Criticism in mainland China dealing with Frogs tends to focus on its moral aspects, by taking the aunt’s tale as an allegory of redemption. (8) Some commentators try to read it as a description of the catastrophic consequences of the repressive population control policies, by applying Foucault's theory of biopolitics. (9) But to limit this novel to a theme already somewhat outdated by a relaxation of the corresponding policies in the real world, and focusing only on its criticism of state coercion, is to cut the work off from its infinitely more complex narrative web woven around the figure of the surrogate mother, and to water down the critical power and social realities does not result in a roman à clef or a work with a message, but rather in a whole network of meanings in which the political underlies a far-reaching reconfiguration.

Criticism in mainland China dealing with Frogs tends to focus on its moral aspects, by taking the aunt’s tale as an allegory of redemption. (8) Some commentators try to read it as a description of the catastrophic consequences of the repressive population control policies, by applying Foucault’s theory of biopolitics. (9) But to limit this novel to a theme already somewhat outdated by a relaxation of the corresponding policies in the real world, and focusing only on its criticism of state coercion, is to cut the work off from its infinitely more complex narrative web woven around the figure of the surrogate mother, and to water down the critical power and social realities does not result in a roman à clef or a work with a message, but rather in a whole network of meanings in which the political underlies a far-reaching reconfiguration.

Criticism in mainland China dealing with Frogs tends to focus on its moral aspects, by taking the aunt’s tale as an allegory of redemption. (8) Some commentators try to read it as a description of the catastrophic consequences of the repressive population control policies, by applying Foucault’s theory of biopolitics. (9) But to limit this novel to a theme already somewhat outdated by a relaxation of the corresponding policies in the real world, and focusing only on its criticism of state coercion, is to cut the work off from its infinitely more complex narrative web woven around the figure of the surrogate mother, and to water down the critical power and social realities does not result in a roman à clef or a work with a message, but rather in a whole network of meanings in which the political underlies a far-reaching reconfiguration.

Criticism in mainland China dealing with Frogs tends to focus on its moral aspects, by taking the aunt’s tale as an allegory of redemption. (8) Some commentators try to read it as a description of the catastrophic consequences of the repressive population control policies, by applying Foucault’s theory of biopolitics. (9) But to limit this novel to a theme already somewhat outdated by a relaxation of the corresponding policies in the real world, and focusing only on its criticism of state coercion, is to cut the work off from its infinitely more complex narrative web woven around the figure of the surrogate mother, and to water down the critical power and social realities does not result in a roman à clef or a work with a message, but rather in a whole network of meanings in which the political underlies a far-reaching reconfiguration.

Criticism in mainland China dealing with Frogs tends to focus on its moral aspects, by taking the aunt’s tale as an allegory of redemption. (8) Some commentators try to read it as a description of the catastrophic consequences of the repressive population control policies, by applying Foucault’s theory of biopolitics. (9) But to limit this novel to a theme already somewhat outdated by a relaxation of the corresponding policies in the real world, and focusing only on its criticism of state coercion, is to cut the work off from its infinitely more complex narrative web woven around the figure of the surrogate mother, and to water down the critical power and social realities does not result in a roman à clef or a work with a message, but rather in a whole network of meanings in which the political underlies a far-reaching reconfiguration.

Criticism in mainland China dealing with Frogs tends to focus on its moral aspects, by taking the aunt’s tale as an allegory of redemption. (8) Some commentators try to read it as a description of the catastrophic consequences of the repressive population control policies, by applying Foucault’s theory of biopolitics. (9) But to limit this novel to a theme already somewhat outdated by a relaxation of the corresponding policies in the real world, and focusing only on its criticism of state coercion, is to cut the work off from its infinitely more complex narrative web woven around the figure of the surrogate mother, and to water down the critical power and social realities does not result in a roman à clef or a work with a message, but rather in a whole network of meanings in which the political underlies a far-reaching reconfiguration.

Criticism in mainland China dealing with Frogs tends to focus on its moral aspects, by taking the aunt’s tale as an allegory of redemption. (8) Some commentators try to read it as a description of the catastrophic consequences of the repressive population control policies, by applying Foucault’s theory of biopolitics. (9) But to limit this novel to a theme already somewhat outdated by a relaxation of the corresponding policies in the real world, and focusing only on its criticism of state coercion, is to cut the work off from its infinitely more complex narrative web woven around the figure of the surrogate mother, and to water down the critical power and social realities does not result in a roman à clef or a work with a message, but rather in a whole network of meanings in which the political underlies a far-reaching reconfiguration.

In this context, Frogs gives rise to three lines of reflection needed for grasping the possibility of a truly insightful reinvention of (bio)politics. Firstly, the novel fiercely criticises the coercion by a state that, burdened by a heavy totalitarian heritage, instigates population policies leading to murderous consequences. The compulsory abortions show government oversight and the absence of political liberalism, are shown as threats to individual liberties and human values. Finally, the political theme of the single child appears in embryonic form in Mo Yan’s work as early as 1985 in a novella entitled Baozha (Explosion). This title refers both to the explosive demographic situation intensified in the 1950s. So it was the initial political incoherence that gave rise to the series of outrageous counter-measures later. At first, the operations were conducted in a progressive and flexible manner, but in the face of the unwilling population, they hardened to the point of forcing people to undergo compulsory sterilisation and abortion.

China Perspectives No. 2011/4

The criticism of bio-power as a totalitarian heritage

The deadly bio-power denounced by the author is embodied in the strange character of the aunt. In effect, she is a personification of the incoherent population policy that, while improving the population’s standard of living, paradoxically degenerates into a “thanatopolitics.” The accuatory posture adopted by the author is nonetheless accompanied by a nuanced attitude that reveals the aunt as an ambivalent figure combining midwife with murderer who undergoes a complicated act of expiation.

Firstly the writer provides a temporal framework for her characterisation, and this contextualises her repressive acts. His scrupulous attention to periodisation allows him to be precise in dating and closely tracing the vaccinations and shifts towards radicalisation in government policy. The novel introduces a clear break in this chronological record, because it describes the draconian birth control measures implemented in the late 1970s as the direct consequence of their opposite, the anti-Malthusian policies that intensified in the 1950s. So it was the initial political incoherence that gave rise to the series of outrageous counter-measures later. At first, the operations were conducted in a progressive and flexible manner, but in the face of the unwilling population, they hardened to the point of forcing people to undergo compulsory sterilisation and abortion.

The life story of the aunt, who remained long unmarried, is closely matched with this wider history, and her experience merges with that of the People’s Republic that used her as a law-abiding, servile, and efficient tool. (14) Daughter of an anti-Japanese resistance hero, and trained in a nursing school set up in the liberated zones, after 1949 she served as an obstetrician before becoming head of the gynaecological service attached to the clinic of a People’s Commune. The political shifts of fortune of which she herself has been a victim — the flight of her fiancé to Taiwan in 1956 and the public humiliation sessions during the Cultural Revolution — have only a superficial effect on her saintly image as a midwife to whom all the babies of the narrator’s generation in the township owe their birth. Her un-
challengeable pedigree and her unflagging loyalty to the Party give this venal midwife a legitimacy above suspicion, but they also demand from her a moral blindness that very soon degenerates into an uncontrollable destructive madness completely in thrall to ideology and to a state apparatus devoid of all traces of humanity.

This revolutionary executioner carries out her lofty deeds in three successful commando operations that illustrate the breadth and the violence of the disaster caused by the repressive policy. The sterilisation of males, which takes on a burlesque tone, is only a prelude to the unconditional destruction of foetuses, which culminates in some murderous dramatic incidents. In three separate stories, the same macabre and deadly scenes are repeated: Geng Fenglian, the venerated midwife is dressed in black (pp. 280 and 323), hinting at the ambivalence of her vocation as saviour and destroyer, 2,800 lives cut short are set against nearly 10,000 births (pp. 269 and 322). Do these statistics amount to mitigating circumstances in defence of the officials? At all events she does not hesitate to subordinate the rationality of the State to her own less implacable logic. Admittedly, she is almost unbearable in the way she shows no concern over the often advanced stage of the pregnancy because, according to her, until a foetus has crossed the “threshold of the pot” (guomen 沛門), it has no existence and must not cause any hesitation over its destruction. Nonetheless, this total absence of bio-ethical considerations contrasts with the compassionate cords of her being when she decrees that once a baby is born it deserves every protection; that is why she adopts Wang the Bile’s orphaned daughter, abandoned by a father disinclined to bring up a second female offspring. (17) The banality of evil is excised by compassion.

This protagonist’s complex character leads the author to raise the question of individual and collective responsibility, making his writing an expiation that also accuses the totalitarian system. The novel’s bipartite structure makes the shifts between crime and penitence quite explicit. The first half sees the aunt caught up in a hyperactive life that contrasts with that of the recluse later when, in the last two sections, she gives herself up to meditation. Her heroic and criminal acts are relayed via the guilty memories that torment her and plunge her into fear and remorse. This repentance only arises gradually, having been overlaid for so long by a mixture of cold indifference and feelings of sacrifice under whose guise the executioner, forgetting the persecution she has unleashed on the population, adopts the stance of a martyr, mistreated by the recalitrant villagers who promise her the torments of hell (pp. 124 and 162). At the beginning of the fourth section there is a gap, bringing up a hitherto unknown fear: the aunt who had never retreated before anything is struck with panic at the sight of the frogs. Her terror, often assuming fantastic forms, in fact reveals a feeling of guilt that will pursue her until the end of the novel. Disturbed in her sleep, haunted by ghosts and the piercing croaks that evoke the cries of babies more than the sounds of those tailless amphibians, the penitent aunt only justifies her continuing existence by the need to “redeem her faults” and to “undergo suffering and sorrow, like a fish being turned over and over on a grill, or stock being boiled in a pot” (pp. 339 and 408).

This unending repentance is shared, however, by the narrator, who links it to collective responsibility. This man, known as Tadpole (Kedou 青蛙), re-

15. But while abusing her authority, the aunt uses an expression that is somewhat ambiguous, to say the least: the meyou deal, which might mean either “I know that this is not a reason” or “no explanations have to be given.”
16. The verb pide notes moreover a hand brought sharply downwards, “splitting the air.”
repeatedly runs through his mea culpa towards his wife, being as much a vic-
tim of his own callousness as of that of the gynaecologist, having been be-
fuddled by his ambitious desire to acquire the glorious status of model of-
cer, thanks to his rejection of that second pregnancy. However, this re-
morse encapsulated in the letter just before the dramatic section of the novel seems to go beyond reflections on individual responsibility. This shift is already introduced by the questions raised at the end of this contrite missive: "Will blood-stained hands remain dirty forever? Will a soul tor-
tured by guilt never be free?" (pp. 281 and 335). These questions are aim-
ed at turning the reader’s moral reflections towards more specifically political questions, in the sense that they raise once again the issue of the sta-
us of the individual within a definite political system, totalitarian in this instance. This sets up a division in the reader’s judgement of the aunt’s behaviour: she is to be condemned for her zealous acts that defy moral sense and go beyond externally imposed constraints, but she is justified in terms of her personal choice, which ultimately leads her to transform her reduction to mere instrumentality into an act of individual freedom. The novel brings out this paradox, which is underscored both by events and the narrator’s literary reminiscences, specifically the emphatic references to Les Mains Sales (Dirty Hands) and Les Mouches (The Flies) with which the novel opens.

The opening reference to these two plays by Sartre turns them into an epigraph summaising the author’s dual attitude towards the aunt. His con-
demnation means that she will be pursued by the avenging flies drawn to the putrid blood covering her; moreover she is dressed in black (p. 269), no doubt as a sign of mourning and penitence towards her victims, like the in-
habitants of Argos. (19) The recourse to the image of the invading flies clearly expresses a condign punishment of the aunt’s frenzy that had in-
creased the efficiency of the repressive machine. At the same time, this play between these intertextual references allows the author to re-
verse the perspective by likening the aunt to Sartre’s version of Orestes’ willing assumption of his act, thus revealing her capacity for freedom. This takes the aunt beyond her conditioned status to become a paradigmatic full in-
dividual, able to oppose the meaning of her existence to the political con-
straints imposed on it. The ending of the novel exemplifies this split be-
tween political power and individual autonomy. The aunt’s symbolic death through a failed suicide affirms the death of the totalitarian regime while resurrecting her as a version of Sartre’s Hoederer: she reaffirms her identity, sense and go beyond externally imposed constraints, but she is justified in terms of her personal choice, which ultimately leads her to transform her reduction to mere instrumentality into an act of individual freedom. The novel brings out this paradox, which is underscored both by events and the narrator’s literary reminiscences, specifically the emphatic references to Les Mains Sales (Dirty Hands) and Les Mouches (The Flies) with which the novel opens.

The opening reference to these two plays by Sartre turns them into an epigraph summaising the author’s dual attitude towards the aunt. His con-
demnation means that she will be pursued by the avenging flies drawn to the putrid blood covering her; moreover she is dressed in black (p. 269), no doubt as a sign of mourning and penitence towards her victims, like the in-
habitants of Argos. (19) The recourse to the image of the invading flies clearly expresses a condign punishment of the aunt’s frenzy that had in-
creased the efficiency of the repressive machine. At the same time, this play between these intertextual references allows the author to re-
verse the perspective by likening the aunt to Sartre’s version of Orestes’ willing assumption of his act, thus revealing her capacity for freedom. This takes the aunt beyond her conditioned status to become a paradigmatic full in-
dividual, able to oppose the meaning of her existence to the political con-
straints imposed on it. The ending of the novel exemplifies this split be-
tween political power and individual autonomy. The aunt’s symbolic death through a failed suicide affirms the death of the totalitarian regime while resurrecting her as a version of Sartre’s Hoederer: she reaffirms her identity

Bio-ethics in the face of liberalism

Mo Yan does not stop at his sharp criticism of dictatorial politics by sit-
uating them at the centre of episodes relating murderous compulsory abor-
tions. He links them to the scandals around the issue of surrogate mothers in a symmetrically balanced section that uncovers the way in which the totalitarian heritage mutates into a destructive liberalism. The commercialisation of the body under the cover of surrogacy seals the new alliance between the State and unrestrained capitalism. It unveils the so-
cial inequalities camouflaged behind the prosperous ostentation, and even further behind that, the unsuspected connivance between official ideology and popular beliefs.

The practice of surrogate motherhood is denounced in Mo Yan’s writing because it implies the commercialisation of the body, even in a worthy cause: Chen the Eyelash (Chen Mei) hires out her belly in order to pay the costs of caring for her sick and ruined father. This artificial pregnancy, sup-
pessedly to help a sterile couple who are in fact the narrator himself and Little Lion (Xiao Shizi (小狮子)), (20) his menopausal second wife, is organised clandestinely by a front company breeding bull-frogs (niuwa (牛蛙)) (rana catesbiana). By means of an abominable subterfuge, the surrogate mother is deprived of her promised fee. This episode draws on a well-known story: “The legitimate prince replaced by a cat” (Limaohuan zhu (猫换主)), also known as Limaohuan zhu (猫换主). (21) While giving it an ironic twist. So the old palace intrigues are replaced by a modern drama that competes with them in an ignominious register. In the source text, the rivalry be-
tween two concubines pushes one of them to deprive the other of her new-born son by making her believe that she has given birth to a mon-
strous cat, so that the instigator can put her own son on the throne; sim-
ilarly in this tale, the surrogate mother is given a cat skinned to make it look like a still-born baby.

This trade in bodies with its mafia-like extortions is just the beginning of a scenario with considerable legal and bio-ethical consequences, because the new-born son is the cause of a merciless war between the biological mother and the prospective couple. In handling this unprecedented situa-
tion, which currently faces Chinese society as it is swept off its feet by bio-
technological progress without any legal framework, the author feels the need to fall back on archaic symbolism. The legend of the skinned cat is in effect overlaid by the story of the judgement of Solomon, as the novel takes the sting out of the conflict by suspending the decision over the ownership of the baby. There is to be a trial. In the middle of the dramatic fifth section, this trial involves a theatrical parody full of meaningful and far from innocent allusions.

The scene that takes place in the eighth act presents a visual simulacrum of justice, which immediately strikes one with the falsity of the situation. At first a sophisticated overlapping of frames is set up for the reader, be-
cause some broadcast television scenes are represented within a theatrical setting, which itself forms part of the novel’s diegetic universe. To this al-
ready overloaded tale a major chronological dislocation is added, because

---

18. This translation follows that of Zhang Yingde’s article, since the French translation of the novel abbre-
viated the original Chinese.

19. While blaming the aunt, Mo Yan is in fact deploring the repressive policy of the state. But in this respect his attitude is also rather ambiguous, because even as he condemns the policy, he advances some mit-
gating circumstances: the radicalism involved is seen as a necessary evil, amounting even to a sacrifice that China was willing to make towards lightening the population pressures on the planet (the French translation of this passage is abbreviated). Starting from a patriotic, even nationalist, standpoint, which is to be found in other works such as Sandowood Torture in particular, Mo Yan defends China’s record on population policy and attacks Western critics: “Western criticism of China’s birth control policy is unjust.” But this patriotic pride, which he shares with official pronouncements, does not mitigate the author’s statements on the domestic scene, especially as, unlike the political Machiavellianism that one might regretfully expect, he levels his criticism at the policies that rely on collective amnesia: “History only attends to ends and disregards the means, just as when we contemplate the Great Wall, the Egyptian pyramids, and other wonders of the world, we do not see the heaps of whitened bones.” (p. 177) – in the original text of A Fire (Fuego), Mo Yan, op. cit., p. 145.

20. We should recall the emblematic figure at the centre of Les Mains Sales (Dirty Hands), a play written by Jean-Paul Sartre in 1948: Hugo is a young bourgeois who joins the Communist Party in its fight to fight against Nazism, and has to undertake a delicate mission in order to gain the confidence of his comrades. That mission is the assassination of Hoederer, a Party leader accused of collaborating with the bourgeoisie. Hugo becomes his secretary, gradually discovering in him a friendly protective figure who justifies his actions on the ground that the ends justify the means. Nonetheless, Hugo resolves to kill Hoederer, whom he discovers embracing his wife. After two years in prison, Hugo declares him- self to be “non-recoverable” to his comrades, who have by then made Hoederer a hero and adopted his line of action.

21. I am quoting the French publication here, while recognising that she could be called “Lioness” (Fr. Li-
onne), since the Chinese does not mark the gender difference.

22. It is taken from an anonymous Yuan dynasty play, Jinshiqiao Chen Lin bao zhuanghe (Chen Lin carries in his arms a makeup casket on the Golden Stream Bridge) in Tang Linshu (ed.), Selected Yuan dynasty plays, http://club.xuku.com/wave9999/ploykey=955844-30783.html?PHPSESSID=a8c0586561423ed1f
4e206662bf (consulted on 9 September 2010).
the visual décor of the Republican period is supplemented by further anachronistic signs: the court uses the old imperial nomenclature, such as the "residence of the sub-prefect" (xianya 襄陽), while court guards dressed in the uniforms of Sun Yat-sen’s time carry an ancient weapon, a red and black painted “water and fire stick” (shuishugong 水火棍). Moreover, the heralds who announce the action defend these distortions, calling such extravagant costumes simply “comic” (pp. 328 and 393).

The layering of the two visual genres, the theatrical and the cinematic, in the arrangement of these scenes supports the establishment of a trompe-l’oeil effect suitable for representing the travesty that the trial is. The scene in Act Three turns out to be a false duplication: Chen the Eyelash (Chen Keyanzhu 與原) is also wishing to kidnap the under-age legitimate inheritor. Haitang is accused of the murder and is deposed of her veil, it is basically less out of “compassion” than out of his fear of seeing the hideous social reality in her disfigurement. From the outset, the denial of Chen the Eyelash’s situation as victim is due to her socio-economic status, about which the trial is silent. In this way she belongs among the surrogate mothers without any defence in case of litigation, as was shown by the Baby M affair, when a New Jersey court ruled in favour of the prospective parents in the name of “the interests of the child” against a claimant with limited means. Indeed, how could the child have been awarded to a migrant woman (mingong 孕婦), give her double handicap, both physical and economic? Is there another pressing detail as well: why does the frog-rearing business take such trouble to keep its trade secret, when in reality the sector as a whole is prospering legally, there being no legal requirement, and therefore no official prohibition, interfering with the agencies and websites offering babies as though on a menu, cataloguing the choice of sex and the belly for hire? The real shame belongs to the firm that unscrupulously exploits those disfigured young female workers, now living as pariahs, who no longer have anything but their bodies to sell. These criminal motives, foreseen by the policeman in Act Three, arise precisely from the uncontrolled slide into gangsterism on familiar ground: the networks of prostitution and child-trafficking under cover of legal surrogacy. The candid narrator has the various kinds of service on offer explained to him, including, among others, “insemination by physical contact” (youxing huaiyun 性懷孕) between the prospective father and the surrogate mother (pp. 302 and 304). Chen the Eyelash, who had earlier re-

23. For the French translation, see Li Xingdao 紫陽, Actes du cirque de crise, translated by Stanislas Julien, London, Oriental Translation Fund, 1832. This Yuan drama tells of a poor girl, Zhang Hailing, who becomes the concubine wife of a rich man, Ma Junqing, and bears him a child. The legitimate first wife is driven by greed to murder her husband with the complicity of her lover, while also wishing to kidnap the under-age legitimate heir. Hailing is accused of the murder and is deposed of her child. Judge Bao, who is famous for his wisdom and impartiality, orders a court official to draw a chalk circle on the ground, and to put the child in the middle the child is to be awarded to whichever of the two women manages to pull him out of the circle. The poor Hailing loses this “game” because she is afraid of breaking the child’s arm, and this convinces the judge of her maternal love and her innocence.

24. Bertolt Brecht, The Caucasian Chalk Circle, trans. Alastair Beaton, London, Methuen, 2010. We should remember that Brecht was inspired by Li Xingdao’s play, which was translated into German and adapted by Klabund. On the figure of the corrupt judge in relation to Brecht’s play, see Sebastian Veg, Fictions du pouvoir chinois. Editions EHESS, 2009, p. 167.


26. In fact, there are currently no legal provisions covering this area. Rationing and administrative measures forced hospital staff and services from undertaking such practices, but apart from that, the “contracts” are drawn up quite legally, on the free initiative of the two parties via rather murky agencies or other organisations. See “Renlei fushu shengji jishu guanli banfa” (Regulations on the management of medically assisted pregnancy), published by the Ministry of Public Health, 20 February 2001, and “Renlei fushu shengji jishu renlei jingziku xiangguan jishu guifan, jiben zhunze he lunli yuanze” (Technical rules, and basic norms and ethical principles concerning medically assisted pregnancies and the sperm bank), published by the same Ministry in 2003. At the same time, there are websites offering “fully legal” contracts or “co-operation agreements” such as the following: “Aixin dayan hezuo xieyi” (A co-operation agreement entitled “Undertaking pregnancy for another out of love”), http://www.dayunchina.com/newsview.asp?id=123 [consulted on 16 November 2010].
fused to become rich in Southern China by selling her charms, does not manage to escape this equally dubious trade in bodies (pp. 237-238 and 284).

The courtroom comedy unintentionally replays a social drama and revives an ancestral practice, revealing its affinity with the anthropological basis of modern State ideology. The verdict in favour of Tadpole and Little Lion, to the detriment of Chen the Eyelash, revives an ancient concern with perpetuating patrilineal descent. The recognition of the parental rights of the prospective couple in some ways renews the practice of "therapeutic adoption," according to which, in order to grow up in good health, a baby must be separated from the birth mother, since she is a woman who has been rendered unbalanced, on even been contaminated, by giving birth. Separating the child from this dangerous being in order to entrust it to nurses or adoptive parents becomes a necessity that, while conforming to a certain medical discourse and set of popular beliefs, is no less determined by a social structure that treats the young woman as a being not fully separate from the influence of the alien clan. The prophylactic intention behind separating her from her child consists in "neutralising the deregulating power of feminine sexuality and rooting the children firmly in their paternal line."

Accordingly, in this novel, the demonic nature that disqualifies the birth mother from her rightful claim to parenthood is expressed in her "madness," coupled with the monstrous face that debarhs her from public life: she knows that she is condemned to remain a veiled human being. By way of contrast, it appears quite reasonable to award the child to Little Lion, not so much as a prospective mother, but as a dried-out, desexualised grandmother, which makes her a reassuring figure raised above the disturbed feminine condition. Her status as a protective nurse figure is not only a consequence of her age – she is well into her fifties – but more because of the generation gap concealed beneath the worrying confusion caused by artificially aided pregnancy. Little Lion, who disputes the ownership of the child with Chen the Eyelash, is none other than the latter's adoptive mother: an assistant nurse she had joined with the aunt in adopting the new-born baby abandoned by her father (pp. 187 and 224), and moreover had later bought a little figurine modelled on the baby's features. The attitude of the narrator reinforces the patrilineal order. He has a premonition of the final and definitive opinion that must be separated from the birth mother, since she is a woman who has been rendered unbalanced, on even been contaminated, by giving birth.

The supremacy of the agnatic kinship (patrilineality) order reflects in reality an established consensus that is continually reaffirmed: the principle of male descent justifies the single and unalterable body of the father and the son by excluding the disturbing sexuality of the birth mother and the death-dealing relations between mother and child. Above all, the wish for a child is defined as the wish for a son. Every case of infraction in the novel is explained by this imperative, which in the rural context corresponds to material concerns, which but also mediates the deepest dream of power. This is exercised in a rather unexpected fashion by artificial pregnancy, revealing a fantasy of dominance shared by the state, society, and individuals alike. From the outset, the birth control policy has been accompanied by overt eugenics, which the state justifies in terms of the need to modernise and strengthen the country, and by a "bio-nationalist project" calling for high-quality births. As for the general population, particularly in the countryside, they spontaneously link this way of thinking with the freedom to opt for male descendants rather than with sexual equality. That is how Chen the Eyebrow is flattered, by the assurance that she is carrying an embryo of the stronger sex with "noble genomes." Little Lion resorts likewise to the same arguments to calm her husband when he is surprised to find that his sperm has been filtered and implanted in the belly of another woman (pp. 247-248 and 296). If these two parallel pregnancies, the one of the surrogate mother and the imagined or nervous one of the prospective mother, are at the centre of attention, they are linked primarily to the sex of the future child. From this point on, the artificial construction of male primogeniture becomes paradigmatic of the dream of power that reaches into every field of activity, each being dedicated entirely to the glorification of the nation. So the company that conducts this bio-technical feat boasts proudly of the way its financial and technological performance brings honour to the motherland. Yuan the Cheek, its managing director and a former prisoner sentenced for illegally removing contraceptive coils, proclaims this triumph by having a little national flag put on his desk. This display is aimed at disarming the incredulous, as though he were announcing, "Well, lads, I may be a bandit, but I, too, have the right to be patriotic" (pp. 274 and 328).

Mo Yan seeks to "locate" this generally shared power fantasy by giving it a topographical shape. From this point of view the close proximity between a medical centre and a livestock breeding company introduces an overarching connection between an archaic dream and its resurgence as a modern reinvention in its most terrifying form. The cohabitation of the Sino-American joint capital Family Treasure Hospital for mothers and babies ( Zhongmei hezi fuying yiyuan ) and the aquatic breeding company establishes a disturbing analogy between industrial livestock production and gynaecology, completely merging human pregnancy with a technical form of production contemptuous of human laws. It was her fascinated visit to the Sino-American hospital that made Little Lion decide to become a worker in the factory, with her husband's agreement, and to give birth later amid the frog tanks, at the end of a pregnancy miming that of the surrogate mother. According to the psychoanalyst Monette Vacquin, technical mastery that separates procreation from sexuality and hence from otherness is the indirect expression of the most archaic infantile fantasy of omnipotence, namely the power of reproducing without the other. If one is to give credence to the etymological permutation of the two words for "descent" ( sǐ ) and "resemblance" ( si ), which form the touchstone of filial piety, the continuity from father to son, thanks to bio-technology, now frees itself from all engagement with differ-

---

27. Françoise Lauwaert, "Abandon, adoption, liaison. Réflexions sur l’adoption thérapeutique en Chine traditionnelle," L’Homme, no. 137, 1996, p. 143. This is also made manifest in vernacular literature, brilliantly analysed by this author.

28. The questions that the aunt and the narrator put to themselves at the end of the novel (pp. 337 and 405), over whether it would be right to entrust the child to a "mazard"woman and moreover one with a "repulsive face" (zhengming 郴夢), remain unanswered. While the aunt certainly recognises that madness does not prevent anyone from "loving children," this assertion can at best be considered as little more than a confession of remorse over the false testimony she had given to support the dubious claim of Little Lion.


ence into a desexualised self-engendering. This is enough to flatter “the most archaic unconsciousness within the most cutting-edge science” (31) and to satisfy the maddest desire within the heroes of contemporary success stories, whether in the domain of patriotism, business, or private life, as is shown in this novel by the instructive anodyne pleasanties handed out by a financial sales clerk from the company during a tour of the aquatic facilities. (pp. 224-230 and 268-275).

**Social reconstruction of the bios**

Mo Yan chastises the totalitarian order, which is still very much alive and remains a source of moral corruption through its connivance with unrestrained capitalism. But instead of building an alternative political model, he investigates the displacements at work in order to reformulate the ways of questioning the political sphere through a consideration of its social and anthropological implications. Working through a dense network of symbols, he is able to examine the possibilities for rehabilitating human life in its inalienable integrity without sacrificing the bodily realm, envisaged as an integral part of a reconstituted community capable of defending human life against all depredations by liberating modern atomised individuals from their insularity. This new social space heralds a bioethics capable of supporting human dignity.

Through its metaphorical approach, this novel stands first of all for the rehabilitation of life, which is the basis of fundamental individual rights. The murders it charts call at least for a rebuilding, if not for total regeneration. The emotional life of the aunt seems to obey this imperative for – her husband is called Hao Big Hands (Hao Dashou) – already refer to the generous healing touch with which, in fact, he has modelled all the babies in the township. Sculpting replaces the gestures of mourning, neither more nor less, while the workshop is turned into a sanctuary (pp. 268-270 and 323-325). The 2,800 figurines, which give a face to the same number of victims of foeticide, are lined up on box shelves with an altar to receive prayers. The ritual is conducted with solemnity despite the intimate setting: the aunt, followed by impromptu visitors, prostrates herself before the altar after lighting “three incense sticks.” The mourning is also accompanied by the work of increasing individuation when a name that confirms its identity is added to these already differentiated faces. The baptism thus goes beyond the harm done to affirm a rebirth. The bestowal of each name engenders an etiological narrative that places the aura that surrounds them brings to mind the Frog God of Pu Songling, (36) – already refer to the manner of creating life. The valuables they bring are similar to those associated with the cult of the Frog God. The totemisation set out in this quasi-didactic passage is spread throughout the work via intertextual references and a network of motifs that mix the sacred with ecological considerations. The tailless amphibians are in effect assimilated into a species that must be protected, or even worshipped, on account of the living being incarnated in them. The sacred aura that surrounds them brings to mind the Frog God of Pu Songling. (36)

The totemisation set out in this quasi-didactic passage is spread throughout the work via intertextual references and a network of motifs that mix the sacred with ecological considerations. The tailless amphibians are in effect assimilated into a species that must be protected, or even worshipped, on account of the living being incarnated in them. The sacred aura that surrounds them brings to mind the Frog God of Pu Songling. (36)

The resurrection of the murdered foetuses by means of the modelled figurines derives from rewriting a myth. It refers to Nüwa, who created mankind does not only have biological and individual meaning. By fashion-
an author worshipped by Mo Yan: as benevolent deities, the frogs engender and bless humankind provided that there is a reciprocal relationship that imposes the duty to establish a cult for them, to show them respect, and to protect them. This feeling overcomes the narrator when he passes by the statue of the bull-frog at the entrance to the breeding factory: the “mournful gaze of his two bulging eyes seemed to wish to convey to me something arising from the depths of time” (pp. 196 and 234). The narrator’s aversion to eating the creature – he turns down an invitation to the statue of the bull-frog at the entrance to the breeding factory: the “mournful gaze of his two bulging eyes seemed to wish to convey to me something arising from the depths of time” (pp. 196 and 234). The narrator’s aversion to eating the creature – he turns down an invitation to the statue of the bull-frog at the entrance to the breeding factory: the “mournful gaze of his two bulging eyes seemed to wish to convey to me something arising from the depths of time” (pp. 196 and 234). The narrator’s aversion to eating the creature – he turns down an invitation to the statue of the bull-frog at the entrance to the breeding factory: the “mournful gaze of his two bulging eyes seemed to wish to convey to me something arising from the depths of time” (pp. 196 and 234).
preserve the social space in which individuals can develop within their shared humanity.\footnote{39}

It should be emphasised that the hunt for the mutant, just like the expulsion of filth in the form of this “seed of evil-doing” from the township of Dongbei (pp. 254 and 304; pp. 236 and 314) only takes place in a contrastive mode, insofar as the solidarity of the former comrades is established to revive the resistance of a moral community. The helping hand extended to the lame beggar, Chen the Nose, emanates less from individual qualities than from a resurgent collective conscience when his former comrades have their own humanity revealed to them through the reactivate of their social role. This humanism turns away from a Manichean view that would assign character to a predetermined nature. Principles such as compassion, tolerance, and solidarity are brought into being through the demand that also arises out of a situation of violent change, and the consequential need for them to be realigned with the human condition. Humanitarian gestures, in the wake of Kenzaburo Oe – there is a Japanese writer cares for (pp. 267 and 319) (40) – are intended to stimulate a view that would assign character to a predetermined nature. Principles such as compassion, tolerance, and solidarity are brought into being through the demand that also arises out of a situation of violent change, and the consequential need for them to be realigned with the human condition. Humanitarian gestures, in the wake of Kenzaburo Oe – there is a transparent reference to the example of the handicapped son that the Japanese writer cares for (pp. 267 and 319) (40) – are intended to stimulate inter-personal relations, which are particularly important in the moral crisis affecting the whole of contemporary Chinese society.

So the author expounds a humanism based on relationships, doubled by a criticism of society. The final episode, far from being a mere contrivance, acquires a reflexive dimension in which the social scene and the theatrical scene confront and merge into each other. The theatrical space thereby partakes in a real forum, a public space in which around 15 social “protagonists” enter into a “conflictual” dialogue that reshapes inter-personal links. The “ethics of discussion,”\footnote{41} which gives rise to more tension than the illusion of social cohesiveness, sets Mo Yan’s work apart from a regressive fantasy of omnipotence.

It should be emphasised that the hunt for the mutant, just like the expulsion of filth in the form of this “seed of evil-doing” from the township of Dongbei (pp. 254 and 304; pp. 236 and 314) only takes place in a contrastive mode, insofar as the solidarity of the former comrades is established to revive the resistance of a moral community. The helping hand extended to the lame beggar, Chen the Nose, emanates less from individual qualities than from a resurgent collective conscience when his former comrades have their own humanity revealed to them through the reactivate of their social role. This humanism turns away from a Manichean view that would assign character to a predetermined nature. Principles such as compassion, tolerance, and solidarity are brought into being through the demand that also arises out of a situation of violent change, and the consequential need for them to be realigned with the human condition. Humanitarian gestures, in the wake of Kenzaburo Oe – there is a transparent reference to the example of the handicapped son that the Japanese writer cares for (pp. 267 and 319) (40) – are intended to stimulate inter-personal relations, which are particularly important in the moral crisis affecting the whole of contemporary Chinese society.

So the author expounds a humanism based on relationships, doubled by a criticism of society. The final episode, far from being a mere contrivance, acquires a reflexive dimension in which the social scene and the theatrical scene confront and merge into each other. The theatrical space thereby partakes in a real forum, a public space in which around 15 social “protagonists” enter into a “conflictual” dialogue that reshapes inter-personal links. The “ethics of discussion,”\footnote{41} which gives rise to more tension than the illusion of social cohesiveness, sets Mo Yan’s work apart from a regressive fantasy of omnipotence.

To conclude these considerations on the demographic dictatorship, the uncontrolled development of bio-technology, and the social rebuilding of bodily experience, one should be wary of any attempt to reach a definitive conclusion, given the play with displacement and slippages of which Mo Yan is a master. The juxtaposition of the epistolary form, which underpins the sense of the real thanks to its illusion of sincerity, and the dramatic form that imposes the apparent certainty of its illusion, sets up a textual indeterminacy that disturbs the diegesis. As the curtain falls, a series of questions remain unanswered. Basically, who is the young menacing and slippery villain of the village? Has the author moved into a catastrophic world-view by embracing a post-human imagery \footnote{44} and destroying thereby every humanist conviction, or, on the contrary, does this malevolent figure perhaps function rather to reintroduce an axiological otherness capable of awakening our conscience over the urgent need to rediscover shared values, grounded in communicational action transcending family limitations? But this strange being, with a power to harm and exponential ability to dominate that simply overwhelm the innocent and unarmed narrator, may perhaps offer another way of approaching the inexhaustible meanings of the title of the novel. The myriad amphibians ultimately allow us to suspect a message encrypted in the palimpsest figure of Jean-Baptiste Grenouille,\footnote{45} the hero of Perfume by Patrick Süskind, whose relationship to Tadpole is less metonymic than oxymoronic: unlike that creature lacking in humanity and puffed up with his dream of conquest, Tadpole resolves to grow up as a child, refusing to become an infantile adult imprisoned by a regressive fantasy of omnipotence.

Translated by Jonathan Hall

\footnotesize


40. In addition to the two writers’ shared enthusiasm for Sartre, who is discussed at the beginning of this novel.


42. A television series in 30 episodes directed by Chen Weixiang (Malaysia) and broadcast by Jinan television from 4 June 2010. See “Xuemai kaibo daiyun mama huati yingping yin zhengyi” (The broadcast of the Bonds of Blood arouses a lot of polemic about surrogate mothers), www.26lady.com (consulted on 20 June 2010).

43. This is observable in the debates around the issue of cloning, where it is the main cause of reluctance to condone it. Cf. Mireille Delmas-Marty, “Le Débat en Chine sur le clonage humain,” in Mireille Delmas-Marty and Pierre-Etienne Will, La Chine et le démocratie, Fayard, 2007, pp. 663-680, esp. p. 673. See also the special issue: “Chine” in the Journal international de la bioéthique, op. cit.
