

# THE 20TH CENTURY WORLD OF MO YAN A CORPUS-BASED APPROACH

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## ABSTRACT

The 2012 winner of the Nobel Prize in literature, Mo Yan, employs literary techniques characterized by the return of realism, urban literature, and the popularization of avant-garde literary styles. He has been recognized as an important figure in contemporary Chinese literature. This paper examined the language in Mo Yan's *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*. Analysis of the language used in the novel, as it fits into the modern Chinese literary tradition, was conducted using the *AntConc* software for corpus analysis that calculates the frequency of the words used, how they are used, as compared to the corpus of contemporary English. The rest of the paper was focused on the methodology used in the analysis of the works of Mo Yan and how this particular method helped in analyzing the language used in the novels.

**Keywords:** *Contemporary Chinese literature, Mo Yan's literary style, corpus analysis*

Amidst controversy and intrigue, the People's Republic of China has managed to garner itself a government-acknowledged Nobel laureate in literature in the person of Guan Moye, Mo Yan. The prize finally came after years of what the Western world has perceived as China's "Nobel complex," or the country's "national psychological fixation" (Osnos, 2012). The win itself had both admirers and critics in and outside the Mainland to the point that "critics lobbied hard" when he was nominated and "intellectuals expressed disapproval" after he was officially awarded the prize (Osnos, 2012).

Officially seen as a benchmark of China's cultural development (Osnos, 2012), the Nobel Prize is considered the most prestigious award in the world ("The prestigious award that captures the world's attention," n.d.). Currently, there are only two Chinese national Nobel laureates at the time of awarding, both garnering controversy from all over the world. In terms of acknowledgement from the Chinese government regarding their winning the Nobel Prize, the winners' situations could not have been more different. The first Chinese winner of the prize, a Nobel Peace Laureate, Liu Xiabo, is currently still incarcerated for being the "key proponent of Charter 08" (Nobel Foundation, n.d.), a manifesto demanding "gradual political and legal reforms based on constitutional principles." Liu Xiabo was not allowed to receive his prize ("Liu Xiaobo," 2012). On the other hand, Guan Moye has been hailed by the Chinese propaganda chief Li Changchun as "reflecting the prosperity and progress of Chinese literature, as well as the increasing national strength and influence of China" and by the Foreign Ministry spokesman, Hong Lei as the prize also "reflects his outstanding literary attainments" ("Mo Yan wins Nobel Prize," n.d.).

The controversy surrounding Mo Yan's win of the Nobel Prize in literature is centered on his affiliation with the Chinese Communist Party, of which he is a member ("Nobel winner Mo likely to steer clear of China politics," 2012). Critics have said that awarding him the prize was odd and that he "carried the taint of government" ("Nobel winner Mo likely to steer clear of China politics," 2012). On top of this, the government itself celebrated the prize through a prime-time broadcast interruption by the state-run CCTV to announce the news, a special coverage by the Global Times, and an article in the government newspaper, the People's Daily that hailed the prize as "a comfort, a certification and also an affirmation – but even more so, it is a new starting point" (Jacobs & Lyall, 2012).

All this controversy clouds the author's brilliance in bringing to life the society that he writes about. This brilliance was emphasized by Peter Englund, a permanent secretary of the Swedish Academy whose members choose the Nobel winner for literature, when he said, "[w]e are awarding a literary prize, and it's on literary merit; the political fallouts and effects don't enter into it" (Jacobs & Lyall, 2012). In fact, the motivation for the prize states that he was awarded because "with hallucinatory realism [he] merges folk tales, history, and the contemporary" (Nobel Foundation, n.d.).

The literary success of his works comes in the form of initiating discourse in different areas of literary styles and techniques in his narrations. One of his techniques is his ability to bend and blend the historical space by making "three-dimensional a linear historical narrative, and how he locates concrete people, events, and places into a flowing, kaleidoscopic historical coordinate," "establish a contrast of values, juxtaposing city and country, development and

backwardness, civilization and nature,” and “represent the reappearance of various styles and features of a certain geographic environment...and represent the central symbol of another time and space” (Wang, 2000). Another feature of his writings is that they present the historical memory of the people in the story while working within the official historical narrative of the government, developing a “strange and heterogeneous flow of memory and narrative;” though the narratives themselves do not specifically follow as linear, chronological order (Wang, 2000). Lastly, the “I” in his novels are “varied and unique, their thinking twisted” redefining the “value of being human” (Wang, 2000). All these contribute to narratives teeming with historical dialogue that constitutes a “world brimming with vitality” as he attempts to “reconfigure memory and bring the past to life” (Wang, 2000).

At the time of the boom of anti-allegorical realism narrative technique in Chinese literature, different Chinese authors have made use of this new genre to voice out their critiques about the Chinese government (Yiwu, 1997). Speaking through the eyes of the masses, different narratives have come about deconstructing society, culture, and history and veering away from the official version put forth by the government (Yiwu, 1997). Despite this critique of the government, a Chinese author, Guan Moye, managed to win both the Nobel Prize in literature and at the same time still be acknowledged and celebrated by the government, notwithstanding the literary censorship implemented. Having said thus, this paper seeks to answer the following questions regarding the Chinese society, culture, and history in the recent past that is put forth by Guan Moye in the novel *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*:

1. What distinctive qualities can be seen about society, culture, and history put forth in *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*?
2. How can these qualities help in the construction and deconstruction of the contemporary Chinese society?
3. How do these qualities stand as compared to contemporary English society based on contemporary English literature?

The analysis of the novel *Life and Death are Wearing Me Out* aims to deconstruct the recent experiences of the Chinese from a globally accepted point of view, both hailed by the Western world through the Nobel Prize in literature and the Chinese government through their acknowledgement of the said prize. The analysis will address the nuances of Chinese society, culture, and history as presented in the novel and then compare it to its English counterpart.

The research on the deconstruction of the recent experiences of the Chinese from the point of view of their preeminent author aims to view these events apart from their official narrative. The study will cover distinctive qualities in these experiences that deviate from the official point of view of the government and their comparison to their English counterpart.

The main limitation of the study is that the version of the novel used for analysis is the translated English version thus some terms' nuances may have been lost in translation. Furthermore, the society analyzed is only reliant on Guan Moye's novel *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* and may not be reflective on the society as a whole.

Chinese literature written after 1900 has been categorized as modern Chinese literature and further categorized by benchmarks

events in the history of modern China. Recent Chinese literature falls under the Post-Tiananmen period that ranges from 1989 to the present day (“Periodization of Modern Chinese Literature,” n.d.). This period has been marked by a turning point in Chinese literature in the 1990s when years of cultural suppression was followed by the current trend of the commercialization of Chinese culture and the “blending of the elite and popular” (“Periodization of Modern Chinese Literature,” n.d.). This new phase in Chinese literature is manifested by the return of realism, urban literature, and the popularization of avant-garde literary styles (“Periodization of Modern Chinese Literature,” n.d.). The 2012 winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature, Mo Yan, is one such author employing these literary techniques and has “played a prominent role in contemporary Chinese literature since the mid-1980s” (Qiao Guoqiang, 2008).

### **Contemporary Chinese Literature: Post-Tiananmen Period**

The post-Tiananmen era for Chinese literature is a juxtaposition of literary styles, techniques, and messages. This era of Chinese literature started after the protests at Tiananmen Square in Beijing that had disastrous results and ended with the suppression of culture, freedom of speech, and basically all forms of anti-government sentiment right in all forms of literature (“Periodization of Modern Chinese Literature,” n.d.). This was followed by an unprecedented and widespread growth and development in the Chinese economy in the 1990s which infiltrated the lives of the masses (Yiwu, 1997). What was unique about this development was that it was not focused on a single city; it happened almost at the same time within China, making the emerging society multi-central and multidirectional (Yiwu, 1997).

This meant that history was happening concurrently in all parts of the country with a decrease in the gap between rich and poor that was manifested by the change in literary trend, from elite to popular literature (Wang Ning, 2004).

The new literary trend, popular literature, is deemed distinctive from those of the past as anti-allegorical realism is now the norm in narration style (Yiwu, 1997). A major feature of this literary style is the solid and imaginative way it “reflects on and investigates the nation-state and individual subjects” (Yiwu, 1997). Through this type of narration, Chinese literature took on new subjects and meaning, aiming for a “higher” meaning from its narration of history and hiding classical maxims in the name of a new literary technique (Yiwu, 1997). A distinctive feature that points towards this new literature as the literature for the masses is its highlighting of continuous development striking a commonality with the populace (Wang Ning, 2004). Furthermore, the use of language has changed from purely elite and culture to slang and political jargon mixed with the classical language thereby clouding the “higher” meaning in absurdity (Yiwu, 1997). All of these techniques succeed in presenting to the readers a new state of affairs of the nation-state, “breaking through old literary traditions of form, subject matter, and cultural position” (Qiao Guoqiang, 2008), while using language that “lashes out and shocks, commanding the people’s attention” (Yiwu, 1997).

### **The Case of Mo Yan**

Contemporary Chinese literature, dealing with anti-allegorical realism “advances some revolutionary concepts of narrative,



language, and human existence, directing its poignant query into the very truth of life, and attempting to exhaust the possible forms of literary expressions” (Qiao Guoqiang, 2008). One of the proponents of this school of literature is the 2012 Nobel Prize in Literature Guan Moye, writing under the pseudonym Mo Yan. His writing, identified as having a “great cultural and literary significance,” has been credited as providing “a sense of history that is sensitive to the links between man and society but unsympathetic to the tradition of theoretical elaboration or political ideology” (Qiao Guoqiang, 2008). The tendency, and his stance, is to deconstruct Chinese history and to undermine, mostly in an allegorical narrative, the government propaganda (Qiao Guoqiang, 2008). This is further emphasized as he writes as one of the people by using vernacular language rather than the classic language of the literary elites, which is contrasted as the former’s narration is equated with that of the experience of the masses while the latter determines how to influence them (Qiao Guoqiang, 2008).

One of the sources of intrigue about Guan Moye is the pseudonym that he chose for himself, Mo Yan, which means “don’t speak” (Jacobs & Lyall, 2012). This, however, seems to be in direct contrast to the fact that he is one of the most prolific writers of contemporary Chinese literature and “from his pen name emerges an endless cascade of words” (Wang, 2000). While this claim to silence is juxtaposed by numerous works, it is precisely this that makes a lot of literary writers cry in his support as it somewhat signifies a form of self-mockery (Wang, 2000). Mo Yan, himself, defined his nom de plume in the light of many of his works as a tribute, or throwback, to the time of his childhood when government censorship was as its



height (Jacobs & Lyall, 2012). He said, “[a]t that time in China, lives were not normal, so my father and mother told me not to speak outside...if you speak outside, and say what you think, you will get into trouble; so I listened to them and did not speak” (Jacobs & Lyall, 2012). Furthermore, his pseudonym is tied to that of the speechlessness of the peasants during his childhood, and oftentimes until the present day (Golblatt, 1995). This upbringing of his, is still reflected in his non-existent political stance as he believes that “[a] writer should express criticism and indignation at the dark side of society and the ugliness of human nature, but we should not use one uniform expression...we should tolerate those who hide in their rooms and use literature to voice their opinions” (Jacobs & Lyall, 2012).

Mo Yan lives up to his pen name of not speaking yet still writing about the “interplay between politics and culture” by using the anti-allegorical realism literary style wherein the fictional narratives are mixed with the realistic ones compromising with the government censorship (Qiao Guoqiang, 2008). His use of the non-linear narration, oftentimes mixed with fantastical events, offers readers a critical perspective on the historical aspect that he is deconstructing at the same time refusing to adhere to and the official historical account (Qiao Guoqiang, 2008). Oftentimes, inconsistencies with the narratives come about giving a dubious feel of unresolved conflict in the world created giving further credence to a deconstruction of the society recounted (Qiao Guoqiang, 2008). Some of his novels, although fantastical in nature, can be read as aimed at criticizing some aspects of the Chinese government though still working within the confines of the “censorship regime” (“Mo Yan’s Nobel means recognition for China at last, but critics air doubts,” 2012). This form

of critique is buried under the unchronological narration of the story, making readers piece together the story themselves and create from it their own interpretation making whatever is uncovered not a narration of events but a narrative of the “truth of the human heart” (Inge, 2000).

### 20<sup>th</sup> Century World of Mo Yan

A winner of the Newman Prize for Chinese literature, Mo Yan’s novel *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* speaks of the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the recent history (Goldblatt, 2009). It speaks of the “absurdities and absurd tragedies” of that part of the century bringing together a human face in the events of that period (Goldblatt, 2009). Encompassing the events of the last 50 years from the land reform movement of 1948 to the reform-era of post-Deng Xiaoping’s China of 2000, the novel is a “kind of documentary, carrying the reader across time” (Spence, 2008).

Remaining faithful to the events covered by the timeframe of the novel, it remains a “wildly visionary and creative work, constantly mocking and rearranging itself and jolting the reader with its own internal commentary” (Spence, 2008). Written from the point of view of five different animals, it “takes an aim at political and cultural ills that plague” the country (Block, 2008). It deals with the “major issues from Chinese history and reality” while all narrators observe the changing culture and society at that time (“Mo Yan - Interview,” n.d.). A novel that sweeps the recent history of China into a commentary about the lives of the “speechless,” *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* presents a “harsh and gritty, raunchy and funny” deconstruction of 50 years of Chinese history (Spence, 2008).

## Methodology

The novel *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* was analyzed using a corpus-based approach focusing on the study of the frequency of the occurrence of the words in the novel and then compared to that of the Corpus of Contemporary English. The analysis was done using *AntConc* software that calculates the frequency of words, collocates, occurrences, and percentages.

To perform analysis on the novel, the software *AntConc*, a multi-platform tool for corpus linguistics, was used. It was developed by Laurence Anthony (“Laurence Anthony’s Software,” n.d.). *AntConc* currently hosts seven analysis tools: concordance, concordance plot, clusters, N-grams, collocates, word list, and keyword list.

To start the analysis, a prepared file of the novel was loaded onto the software. Then the word list tool scanned the novel and generated a frequency count of all the words in it. Once the word list had been generated, the keyword list tool then produced a list of frequently used words, phrases, and expressions in the novel *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*. This list was compared to the words contained in the Corpus of Contemporary English. The concordance tool in *AntConc* made it possible to see how these words and phrases are commonly used. The results of the concordance tool were automatically plotted by the concordance plot tool, which then plotted the occurrences of these words and phrases as well as their position in the novel. When this was done the clusters tool then summarized the results generated by the concordance and the concordance plot tools. The keywords, phrases, and expressions were

then analyzed for their connotations about the Chinese experience and the implications of their frequency regarding the same subject.

The next step in this research project involves the analysis of the data. This type of corpus linguistics research involving the examination of the language used in a text such as Mo Yan's novel can be useful in studying the writer's style, leading readers and students of contemporary Chinese literature to a better appreciation of Mo Yan's award-winning work.

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**About the Speaker:** At the time this lecture was delivered, Ms. Amor C. Dimaano was an undergraduate student in the Chinese Studies Program of the Ateneo de Manila University. She graduated in March 2013.

**Editor's note**

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