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# Exploring the Cultural Memory of the Common People: Desire, Violence, and Divinity in Mo Yan's Sandalwood Death

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This article examines Mo Yan's *Sandalwood Death*, a novel on Sun Bing, troupe leader of Cat Tune and participant in the Boxer Rebellion. Identifying more with localized folk culture than with the modern culture represented by either the new Westernized elites or the revolutionary Communist political class, Mo Yan, in *Sandalwood Death*, created a novel whose settings are the three interrelated realms of the everyday, the historical, and the divine. The first, "everyday" section of the novel focuses on the ways in which human desire is fulfilled and contested in the mesh of power relationships. With the outbreak of the Boxer Rebellion, the attention of the narrator shifts to the historical realm, in which institutional violence is exercised and challenged. The realm of the divine comes as the negation of the bodily and the historical. In this divine space constructed by the carnivalesque performance of Cat Tune, the boundaries between performers and spectators, human song and animal screams, the worldly and otherworldly, and even life and death are blurred. A psychological construction that exists in people's memory, this divine space uses the Cat Tune as its herald. For Sun Bing and his peers, the meaning of life is not found in self-gratification, but in becoming part of the people's eternal memory, a memory that is substantially different from any of the institutional versions. Creating, disseminating and transmitting such a memory, these people are not insensitive onlookers to scenes of bloodshed, but passionate activists who speak and sing on their own behalf.

## **Keywords**

everyday, history, divine, memory, enlightenment, revolution

## **Disciplines**

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## **Comments**

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## **Exploring the Cultural Memory of the Common People: Desire, Violence, and Divinity in Mo Yan's *Sandalwood Death***

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### **Abstract**

This article examines Mo Yan's *Sandalwood Death*, a novel on Sun Bing, troupe leader of Cat Tune and participant in the Boxer Rebellion. Identifying more with localized folk culture than with the modern culture represented by either the new Westernized elites or the revolutionary Communist political class, Mo Yan, in *Sandalwood Death*, created a novel whose settings are the three interrelated realms of the everyday, the historical, and the divine. The first, "everyday" section of the novel focuses on the ways in which human desire is fulfilled and contested in the mesh of power relationships. With the outbreak of the Boxer Rebellion, the attention of the narrator shifts to the historical realm, in which institutional violence is exercised and challenged. The realm of the divine comes as the negation of the bodily and the historical. In this divine space constructed by the carnivalesque performance of Cat Tune, the boundaries between performers and spectators, human song and animal screams, the worldly and otherworldly, and even life and death are blurred. A psychological construction that exists in people's memory, this divine space uses the Cat Tune as its herald. For Sun Bing and his peers, the meaning of life is not found in self-gratification, but in becoming part of the people's eternal memory, a memory that is substantially different from any of the institutional versions. Creating, disseminating and transmitting such a memory, these people are not insensitive onlookers to scenes of bloodshed, but passionate activists who speak and sing on their own behalf.

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## Towards a Common People's Version of History

A whole century after the Boxer Rebellion (1898-1900), Mo Yan published his controversial novel *Sandalwood Death* to commemorate the event.<sup>1</sup> “A love story amid savage cruelty during the Boxer Rebellion” (Goldblatt, “Mo Yan’s Novels” 29), the novel tells the story of Sun Bing, leader and performer of the local Cat Tune (*maoqiang*) troupe, who once lived a “decadent” yet peaceful life with his daughter Meiniang. Due to a conflict with Qian Ding, the county magistrate and Meiniang’s lover, Sun Bing is forced to abandon his performing career. He joins the Boxers after killing a German railroad engineer who harassed his wife, and the Germans massacre his fellow villagers as revenge. Under Sun Bing’s leadership, the Boxers manage to win several battles, but Sun Bing is eventually caught and executed by Zhao Jia, Meiniang’s father-in-law and a renowned former executioner from the Qing Court’s Ministry of Punishments. Zhao Jia decides to apply the sandalwood punishment (an exotic fictional punishment of legendary cruelty) on Sun Bing as part of the German railroad’s opening ceremony. The story ends with Sun Bing’s slow execution. His death is followed by the German troops’ massacre of the Cat Tune performers mourning the death of Sun Bing on the execution site, Meiniang’s killing of Zhao Jia, and Qian Ding’s quick killing of Sun Bing.

As “a masterpiece of violence” (Chan 117), *Sandalwood Death* did stir up controversy among its readers upon its publication. What is at stake are not only the dispute around the evaluation of the Boxer Rebellion, a historical event that has been debated for both its content and form, but also the ways in which a violent historical event can be “legitimately” represented. In Goldblatt’s words, the author “seems to write to make them [his readers] uncomfortable—in their lives, in their views of Chinese history, in their excesses, and in their prospects for the future” (Foreword, in Chan x). Mo Yan is accused of writing about graphic scenes of bodily pain solely for the pleasure of it, without serving any higher purpose. One critic argues that unlike Lu Xun and Zhou Zuoren, whose writings entail a “spiritual dimension” and inherently significant representations of violence, Mo Yan’s narration lacks restraint, retrenchment, and a sense of propriety, and unconsciously discloses an approving attitude in the exaggerated description of the psychology of torture and violent behaviors (Li Jianjun 459-60). Regarding the Boxer Rebellion as “an absurd scene in

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<sup>1</sup> The novel was first published by Zuojia chubanshe in 2001. Other editions include the ones published by Shanghai wenyi chubanshe (2008; 2012) and Changjiang wenyi chubanshe (2010). The English edition, translated by Howard Goldblatt, was published by the University of Oklahoma Press in 2012. The quotations in this essay are all from the English edition unless otherwise stated.

modern Chinese history,” one critic accuses Mo Yan of abusing history as an expression of his nationalistic ideology (Fu 538). Mo Yan himself was clearly aware of how he provoked some readers for writing about violence in such an extravagant way. However, he argues that a writer cannot be identified with the characters he creates: such graphic description of human suffering arises naturally in the course of a story’s development (Mo Yan and Chen 262-64), and only kind-hearted people with mild temperaments can write about violence, because they are too sensitive to overlook its severe consequences (“Mobilize All Senses” 351). To him, the exhibitionist representation of violence could come from the author’s perverse obsession with violence, but it could also constitute a brand of cultural criticism through uncovering the darkness of humanity that has existed in both history and reality (“Banquet” 468-69).<sup>2</sup>

To defend himself against the critics’ basically nationalistic interpretation of *Sandalwood Death*, Mo Yan states that everything he writes is an allegory of universal humanity, and the only problem is that his allegory is often misread as depiction of reality (“Natural Response” 280).<sup>3</sup> To avoid the nationalist trap, Mo Yan carries out his literary agenda, “writing as common people.” For him, this is to replace the more institutionalized slogans, such as “writing to enlighten the nationals,” or “writing on behalf of the people.” With this agenda, Mo Yan positions himself as an (imagined) equal member of the folk, instead of elevating himself so as to write condescendingly on behalf of them (“Writing as Common People” 61-69). He has been consciously staying away from the “big words” such as “national culture,” “national confidence,” or a correct “political orientation” (Mo Yan and Qi 272; “Natural Response” 281), and dedicates himself to the celebration of the irreducible individual experiences of the common people from the Township of Gaomi. Situated by Mo Yan in Shandong province, his imagined hometown serves as venue to observe universal humanity. Following his line of reasoning, we might have to agree that, as with the numerous wars represented in his other novels, the astounding cruelty of the sandalwood punishment is an imagined situation through which humanity is interrogated. Such interrogation offers a way of thinking beyond the confinement of ideological doctrines such as nationalism in modern China.

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<sup>2</sup> Of course, Mo Yan has also won wide praise for constructing a carnivalesque and polyphonic literary space in which “voices representing different ideologies and social classes formed relationships of mutual conflict, fusion, and disintegration” (A. Wang 362; also see Hong 287 and Zhang “The Limits of Narration” 390). Thematically, it is also regarded as “the first important novel in the twenty-first century for continuing the May Fourth enlightenment mission through criticism of the Chinese national character (Li Jingze 355).

<sup>3</sup> Also see Mo Yan, Pamuk, and Desai 387.

Identifying more with the folk culture (民間文化) than with the culture represented by the enlightenment-minded elites and the politically-oriented revolutionaries, Mo Yan strove to establish the discourse on the (marginalized and lower class) people as a site of negotiation against hegemonic positions. It is a site in which the irrational, the affective, the everyday, and the trivial play a decisive role in the historical process and in people's search for meaning in their lives. To be specific, Mo Yan constructed *Sandalwood Death* around the three interrelated realms of the everyday, the historical, and the divine. The everyday focuses on the ways in which human desire is fulfilled and contested in the mesh of power relationships. With the outbreak of the Boxer Rebellion, the attention of the narrator shifts to the historical realm, in which institutional violence is exercised and challenged. The realm of the divine comes as the negation of the bodily and the historical. His narrative thus configured, Mo Yan invites his readers into a discomfiting zone. Here they revisit the values of human affect, passion, and the power of faith and spirituality against the discourses of the May Fourth enlightenment and the Maoist revolution.

In constructing this three-layered literary space, Cat Tune, with its expressive, structural and performative power, plays a key role in defining the way of life for the marginalized, providing a forum for historical engagement, and catalyzing the transformation from the historical into the divine. Cat Tune provides not only the surface structure of narration in the novel, but also the "deep structure" of people's feeling and way of life: what matters are not the old stories performed, but the performance itself. Regarding the Cat Tune theme as the representative sound of his literary hometown ("Mobilize All Senses" 350), Mo Yan interrogates the subjective world of both its performers and audience, who are often criticized in the Chinese enlightenment historiography. Cat Tune, the passionate, irrational, unrefined, vulgar performance that integrates numerous "backward" traditional elements, becomes the voice of these marginalized people when they are facing hegemonic, institutional violence.

Mo Yan's version of "returning to people" thus manifests itself as way of writing history—not as teleological progress or Hegelian totality, but as a contingent, fragmented space, as what individual people might have experienced in their suffering of body and soul. Instead of regarding people as props of the great historical dramas directed by the mystic grand forces known as historical necessity, Mo Yan describes them as spontaneous actors who enjoy and suffer as a result of their everyday lives, and who engage with history, and pursue spiritual truth in a highly theatrical fashion. As Andrea Riemenschnitter points out, "Mo Yan's staging of a variety of local performances, such as Maoqiang [Cat Tune] opera, seasonal festivals,

military and religious parades, as well as of scenes of excessive violence in executions and battle scenes, appears to be a strategy in his pursuit of a cultural reclamation of local subjectivities” (592). As a form of cultural memory passed through generations, all the local performances, with Cat Tune as representative, thus symbolize the local common people’s way of life, their mode of action, and their means of salvation—all of which have been repressed in the modern discourses because of their association with irrational beliefs and frantic longing for eternity. Mo Yan’s acts of cultural reclamation make the following bold assertion: local subjectivities represented by the voice of Cat Tune cannot be silenced, surprised, or subsumed under the hegemonic discourses of the Western, the national, the modern, and the rational. Therefore, using Cat Tune as a central trope, the novel engages in a complex dialog with the official (revolutionary) and the elite (enlightenment) discourses.

### **The Significance of the Insignificant: Everyday Life as the Site of Meaning**

In *Sandalwood Death*, the everyday is a realm independent from the world of “significant” historical events. This reflects a fundamental tenet of Mo Yan’s literary beliefs: unlike history, literature seeks significance in the world of the seemingly insignificant. In answering Jim Leach’s question on whether his writings will become a principle resource for historians, Mo Yan says, “If people still read my books in a few hundred years, they could find out all about the everyday life of people. History books focus on events and the times, but literature focuses more on people’s lives and feelings” (“The Real Mo Yan” 12). Here literature is given a mission different to that of enlightenment and revolutionary literature: it is not a call to arms, but for documenting and imagining people’s lives. Therefore, counterbalancing a seemingly melodramatic history full of violence, the novel’s vivid description of people’s everyday life acquires a unique position. The everyday is not an ignorable side issue, or a “preparing” stage for the historic events, but itself the central stage for people to seek the meaning of life. The everyday world in *Sandalwood Death* focuses on the ways in which human desire and dignity are contested. At the center is Meiniang’s love story with the county magistrate Qian Ding. Some scholars regard Meiniang as the embodiment of the people’s untainted and unrestrained vitality (Zhang, “The Limits of Narration” 381-82). However, a close reading of the text shows that she does not live in a world devoid of cultural codes; neither does she pose a threat to institutional powers. Despite her beauty and charm, no single man with a decent

family background would consider marrying her, as her feet are unbound. Eventually she has to marry the dim-witted butcher Zhao Xiaojia. Possessed by surreal visions and hallucinations, he knows nothing but the senseless killing of animals. Her vitality is expressed as a soft resistance to the repressive conventions, a resistance achieved by living with such cultural codes as foot-binding: she has no choice but to seek love from other channels while maintaining an unhappy marriage—as long as her husband remains indifferent to her affairs.

Furthermore, even her choosing the object of desire is influenced by the cultural environment in which she lives. In René Girard's conceptualization, human desire is mimetic in nature, which means it always finds a model to follow (1-52). Meiniang's desire is kindled after a chance encounter with Qian Ding, the archetype of the scholar-official. Their relationship follows the model of scholar-beauty romance in popular culture, which often features the love story between a lady of well-established family and a poor, young scholar. In other words, Meiniang desires Qian Ding because a scholar-official like him has always been desired by all the "beauties" in the popular stories featured in *Cat Tune*. Unlike Yu Hua's deconstructionist, violent rewriting to this model (Jones 570-602), Mo Yan is basically loyal to the original model, making only some revisions: the scholar has realized his dream of becoming the scholar-official, but with an ugly woman from an influential family. Meanwhile, Meiniang, the beauty, comes from a lower-class family, whose theatrical vocation is regarded as no better than panhandling. To some extent, Qian Ding's male desire is only partially fulfilled in the conjugal relationship before meeting Meiniang: he marries his ugly wife and relies on her family background to get access to more political resources. Only after encountering the lower-class woman, Meiniang, is he fully able to satisfy both his political and carnal desires. Such a rewriting indicates Mo Yan's endeavor to create a romantic effect: the barrier between social classes so central to revolutionary literature disappears, and only emotion matters.

In developing their sexual relationship, Meiniang, the woman culturally marginalized for her class background and unbound feet, becomes the desiring subject instead of an object of desire with her resolute action. However, their affair cannot be realized without resorting to the traditional cultural model, here represented by *Cat Tune*. It is this local theater that inspires her to imagine an ideal husband and to pursue her dream. Their first encounter begins with her hitting Qian Ding's sedan. Afterward her fantasy grows stronger, eventually turning self-destructive. Going without food or sleep, she eloquently expresses her inner feelings. Her lengthy monologue reveals the imprint of theater performance (Mo Yan, *Sandalwood Death* 125). As a desiring subject, her only salvation is the fulfillment of her desire (137-38,



235-41). Such a mode of desiring rewrites the “villain plundering beauty” model that is popular in works of revolutionary literature (such as *The White-Haired Girl*), which highlight the antagonistic relationship between upper-class male and lower-class female.

Beneath its relatively peaceful surface, *Sandalwood Death* presents its readers with an everyday world that is full of inner tension between the powerful and the powerless. Parallel to Meiniang’s love story runs the antagonistic relationship between Sun Bing and Qian Ding. If Meiniang, as a sexual object, can still be assimilated by the ruling class, her father, as a subversive figure challenging the status quo, is destined to be excluded. As Zhang Qinghua summarizes, “His Cat Tune career mixes folk culture, peasant consciousness, traditional chivalry, quasi-religious mythology and a quasi-supernatural magic way of thinking” (“The Limits of Narration” 397). In the eyes of the elites, he is merely a clownish figure to whom nobody pays attention on or off stage. Working in a marginalized profession as an actor and troupe leader, Sun Bing is clearly aware that his social status is as low as that of the beggars (Mo Yan, *Sandalwood Death* 302, 338). In everyday life he enjoys the “decadent” pleasures of whoring and drinking. He is part of the social trash heap, the subaltern. However, he is empowered by performing at Cat Tune.

With its mixed features of complicity and subversion, Cat Tune provides Sun Bing with the chance to change his life. On the one hand, it is part of the cultural and political mechanism that sustains the existing social order, because it allows people to imagine alternatives to their lives and fulfil their repressed desires (as in the case of the women who swoon over Sun Bing) without threatening the status quo. On the other hand, Cat Tune poses a potential threat to that very same status quo, because it shows them a way to transcend the everydayness of the world. It provides not only moral values and role models for the participants to follow, but also a hope for the hopeless in a devastating situation. Discussing the peasants’ hardships on another occasion, Mo Yan says, “For survival, they invented humor, learned to enjoy life while suffering. They will resist when hardship goes to an extreme. The resistance is a denial of their destiny, and it does not have to be in the form of rebellion” (Mo Yan and Qi 270). When one adopts a perspective as pessimistic as that, Cat Tune stops being the symbol of the unrestrained, freewheeling vitality that some scholars have taken it for. Instead, it becomes an aid to forbearance and resistance (Han 61).

With the agency that Cat Tune grants him, Sun Bing confronts Qian Ding by contesting his masculinity. In the novel, the two are described as mirror images: both have attractive beards and moustaches that resemble Lord Guan’s (關公). At a banquet, when a clerk praises his boss Qian Ding for his manly moustache, the half-

drunk Sun Bing starts to deride Qian Ding: “the beard on his chin cannot compare with the hair around my prick!” (Mo Yan, *Sandalwood Death* 104). Such a challenge Qian Ding will not tolerate. Yet to show the public that he is fair-minded, he arranges a beard and moustache competition to convince the public that Sun Bing is merely an unsuccessful copycat of the county magistrate. To make it worse, Sun Bing’s beard is plucked off, which he believes to have been done with Qian Ding’s consent. It is, to him, a symbolic castration, after which he gives up his career in theater and returns to hometown to open a tea shop. Meiniang blames his humiliation and failure in life on his having chosen to become an actor. Opening a tea house marks his return to the “normal” social order (145). It is never clear whether Qian Ding gives the order that leads to his arrest, but it does not matter. As Sun Bing experiences it, it is the “everyday, institutionalized, routinized, taken-for-granted violence” (Scheper-Hughes 22) that is at work. Such violence has always already been built into the system and functions at a minute level to exclude and marginalize lower-class people. Most violent is the ultimate inequality between the ruling and the ruled in terms of political power, material resources, and cultural (or discursive) power (Imbusch 25). As such, forcing Sun Bing to give up his performing career constitutes an act of violence in the guise of benevolence.

Mo Yan’s emphasis of the everyday can be understood as a critique of the mainstream mode of literary writing. Since the May Fourth era, concern with everyday reality has been regarded by enlightenment thinkers as an effort to turn the literary gaze from aristocratic entertainment to more commonplace concerns. Originally published in 1919, Zhou Zuoren’s “A Literature of Commoners” (平民的文学) gives special emphasis to creating literature that addresses common people’s daily lives, thereby accessing their universal feelings of joy and sorrow (103). Zhou’s proposal aligns with the Society of Literary Study’s realist slogan “a literature for life.” Meanwhile, following their Russian forerunners, many intellectuals regarded “going to the people” as a conscious choice. However, as Marston Anderson points out, realist literature in China during the 1920s and 1930s is tasked with encouraging readers to “actively involve themselves in the important social and political issues confronting the nation” (25). Such an implicitly nationalist agenda became more evident in the revolutionary literature published after the late 1920s. Subsequently, the value of the everyday reality in literature fully depended on whether it could be interpreted in terms of the grand social and political struggles. To counter this trend, Zhou wrote numerous essays on the aesthetic dimension of everyday matters (趣味), thereby highlighting the significance of the apparently insignificant. Shen Congwen, by concentrating on common peoples’ emotions and daily conduct in the remote

Western Hunan area, created a literary world that resists direct political interpretation. However, 1950s war literature, being a politically charged propagandist genre, could barely have been salvaged were it not for the sporadic inclusion of love stories, at least according to Mo Yan. As he writes, “The novels of the seventeen years [1949-1966] always try to interpret the Leader’s thought. They turn to write about love relationships when they forget about this mission” (“Literature of the Seventeen Years” 37). Here, the everyday in literature assumed the status of an unconscious desire—one revealed only by accident and eventually overshadowed by the grand narratives of the Cultural Revolution.

The everyday world in *Sandalwood Death* is not a mere duplicate of Zhou Zuoren’s mundane and miracle-free world of aesthetic taste, or of Shen Congwen’s utopian escape from the violent political reality, but a continuation of the efforts to reconfigure the everyday as an independent, meaningful cultural space. Such an approach to the everyday is related to the “root-seeking” literature of the 1980s. It is also related to the rising importance of “*minjian*” (民間, literally “among people”) in the 1990s. *Minjian* is imagined by literary critics such as Chen Sihe, as a discursive space independent of the political institutions in literary creation in modern China (200-42). To Mo Yan, *minjian* is even hostile to the institutions, but it is a space to which intellectuals need to return. The hostility, however, does not mean violent rebellion or subversion of the state, but rather turning away from the hegemonic culture and affiliating oneself to the common people (Mo Yan and Yang 397). In this sense, *minjian* is a convergent space of the everyday both generally and in the case of marginalized, lower-class people. With its celebration of unrestrained, primitive vitality, *Red Sorghum* still bears traits of romanticism, as it imagines a Dionysian world untainted by modern civilization. But the everyday world in *Sandalwood Death* is more one of intense desire, passion, and suffering. Meanwhile, the everyday world of the people, exemplified by Meiniang and Qian Ding’s affair, does not necessarily form a dichotomy with the institutional realm. *Minjian*, therefore, is rather an imagined field for all people of all cultural backgrounds and political persuasions to negotiate.

### **Irrational Passions: Common People’s Theatrical Engagement in History**

In *Sandalwood Death*, history is represented as a violent, abrupt intrusion into the everyday. The difference between the two, in Yixu Lü’s words, is that between a “small world” of the everyday in which a happy ending is possible, and a

“dehumanized” “great world” that “destroys what peace and happiness the main characters have achieved, culminating in the bloody spectacle on the execution platform” (80). It is not, however, a linear progression that follows historical necessity, but rather a series of random experiences fraught with contingency and uncertainty.<sup>4</sup> Mo Yan “casts doubt, likewise, on the Maoist conception of a grand history that is driven by a pivotal force with a supreme figure at its center” (Chan 39). In David Wang’s terms, he creates a “historical space,” in which he “three-dimensionalize[s] a linear historical narrative and imagination,” and with “concrete people, events, and places” he creates “a flowing, kaleidoscopic historical coordinate.” Such a historical space “goes beyond an affirmation of the importance of life experience. By daring to utilize a durable linguistic symbolism to adorn the native soil of his creation, Mo Yan also provides a historical space with virtually unlimited possibilities for strange and fantastic narrative mutations.” It differs from revolutionary historical fiction by “carving out the difficult process of founding a republic with the magnanimity of epic narration” (D. Wang 488-90). Wang’s comments mainly address Mo Yan’s fiction about the Republic era, but they also shed light on the present discussion. However, in *Sandalwood Death*, Mo Yan demonstrates more complicated ambiguity and complexity than in his previous novels. In doing so, he reinvents popular discourse, producing a narrative that differs as much from that of the elite as that of revolutionary officialdom. By infiltrating and interacting with these official narratives, Mo Yan complicates their production, revealing how all three feed off each other.

In the historical space Mo Yan imagines, it becomes difficult to define the significance of the grand historical events. In the official narrative, Sun Bing and his followers might have joined the Boxer Rebellion out of a growing revolutionary consciousness, represented as a blossoming awareness of “historical necessity.” But such a determinist, one-dimensional interpretation collapses under the weight of history’s “complexity, nuance, and ambiguity” (Cohen 214). In this novel, Sun Bing’s decision to join the Boxer Rebellion is portrayed as a random “butterfly effect.” As Meiniang points out, all the trouble arises from an insignificant quarrel at the banquet about whose beard and moustache are more masculine. With Sun Bing’s imprisonment and release, Qian Ding’s wife takes preventive measures to secure her position in the family, driving Meiniang away from Qian Ding. She also sends her servants to pluck Sun Bing’s beard and moustache off, forcing him to return to his hometown and open his tea house. It is not until his wife is harassed by the German

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<sup>4</sup> These features have been identified as the traits of the new historicism in Mo Yan’s writings, see Zhang Qinghua, “Mo Yan and the Literary Trend of New Historicism.”

engineers that Sun Bing becomes involved in the Boxer Rebellion. To Sun Bing, this is unpredictable. Here history becomes more a battlefield of human agency than a site for the objective, rule-bound march of history. Therefore, although people's lives are trapped by colonial-authoritarian historical context, nothing is predetermined.

In this version of history, the “superstitious” discourse delegitimized by enlightenment and revolutionary discourses is also fairly represented. To some extent, the superstitious becomes a legitimate alternative to scientific, rational thought for the local people. A center for information exchange, Sun Bing's tea house constitutes a public space where customers from different walks of life circulate news and rumors, as well as express their concerns about the progress of the German-sponsored railway project. The project will destroy their farmland and ancestry cemetery. In arguing against it, they rely on popular beliefs about *feng shui* (風水) and the fear of having their souls hunted (Mo Yan, *Sandalwood Death* 145-50). These beliefs have often been ridiculed as backward by the enlightenment-minded social elites. Despite his modern scientific education, Mo Yan is able to temporarily suspend his own judgment, emancipating repressed voices from the domination of scientific and nationalist discourses. Evading the gaze of Westernized elitists and the Maoists, the Boxers in his novel become subjects who gaze at antagonists, oppressors and monsters. By framing a supposedly modern civilization as an alienating barbarian force that terrorizes the natives and turns them into outsiders, Mo Yan grants native beliefs a measure of legitimacy. Transposing this approach to modern-day China, one can see it as a latent criticism of market-driven neoliberal violence, wherein people's houses are demolished, their farmland is annexed, and their natural environment is destroyed. Summoning the repressed and marginalized discourses gives history a new look.

What makes the Rebellion unique and controversial is the role popular theater played in it: by reviving ostensibly “non-modern” beliefs, the medium played a central role engaging the Boxers. Earlier scholars, including Liang Qichao (1873-1929) and Chen Duxiu (1879-1942), commented with disapproval on the theatrical aspects of the Rebellion. Liang decries the negative influence of fiction and theater, because he believes that it fomented revolt by drawing on popular literature and lore. Chen adds Chinese opera to the list of scapegoats, alleging that Boxers modelled their posture, speech and acts on opera performances (Cohen 224-28). In his research on the uprising, Joseph Esherick also points to literature and theater, which he blames for teaching country-dwellers to worship new gods and follow new rituals. Theater, he asserts, functioned as “the center of attention” in popular religious practices of community life. He concludes by writing that “[i]n many ways, it was the social drama of the theatre which tied together the elements of popular culture most relevant

to the rise of the Boxers” (65). Sato Kimihiko argues that Boxers were born of the interaction between popular religions, martial arts, and art forms such as opera during the long development of the Ming-Qing period (33-34). In Paul Cohen’s words, the cultural language and cultural patterning of the Boxer Rebellion “showed the deep imprint of Chinese popular theatre” (106).

At a fundamental level, popular theater justifies their struggle and provides them with a mode of action. By calling upon deities and past heroes to possess them, the rebels—whose life is regarded as valueless by the government (Mo Yan, *Sandalwood Death* 233)—not only enhanced their fighting skills and strategies, but also gained power. Possession by gods blurs performance and reality, the worldly and the otherworldly, and is “immensely empowering psychologically” (Cohen 105). To them, deities and national heroes came to embody loyalty, justice, and courage, which the rebels emulated. They thus “acted out their battles for righteousness and honor just as surely as did the performers on the stage” (Esherick 65). Therefore, although their resistance begins with the aim of preserving the *feng shui* of their ancestors’ graveyard (Mo Yan, “Chinese Writers’ Social Status” 462), divine possession broadens it. Their lives start to gain significance through their association with China’s destiny. Sun Bing chooses to be possessed by Yue Fei (岳飛) (1103-42), the tragic hero who, by defending the Song Dynasty from the Jurchen invasion, came to symbolize loyalty and patriotism. Yue Fei was eventually killed by those who preferred to compromise with the Jurchen. Sun Bing’s fate is foreshadowed by Yue Fei’s tragic death. To some extent, the theatrical process of possession creates a second identity for the uneducated peasants, making them into larger-than-life heroes.

Nevertheless, *Sandalwood Death* does not simply repeat historians’ discoveries. Rather, it focuses on the ways in which the subjectivity and agency of the “actors” is constructed. Cat Tune provides a possible voice for Sun Bing and the peasants to oppose the official discourse, one which would not have otherwise existed. In this sense, having or lacking the ability to speak in the voice one chooses reveals itself to be a power relationship: speechlessness symbolizes the lack of subjectivity and agency. In modern Chinese literature, speechlessness, or “silence” almost became an unwritten rule in describing the oppressed, powerless peasants, and “telling about one’s bitterness” (訴苦) became the starting point for them to subvert the existing power relationship. This is especially true of literature on the Land Reform of the late 1940s. For instance, in Lu Xun’s “Hometown,” the protagonist’s childhood friend Runtu, once eloquent and animated, becomes shockingly reticent upon meeting him as an adult. The story lists several social causes for his change, but leaves one unmentioned: the difference between their social statuses (with the first-person

narrator representing the institutionalized Chinese cultural elite). It is this difference that silences the poor farmer. Sun Bing encounters a situation similar to the one that besets the narrator of “Hometown” when he kills the two German railway engineers. Since he kills them to protect his wife from their harassment, he believes that his involuntary homicide can be justified as self-defense. The rationale that sanctions his act of murder is deeply rooted in the moral values reflected in the popular theater.

However, for the German colonial power and the puppet state of the Qing, the verdict is sealed before these cases are even tried; what awaits Sun Bing is only death. His self-justification becomes what his daughter calls naive and nonsensical. His only option is to flee. Witnessing the German soldiers’ retaliatory massacre of his family and fellow villagers, Sun Bing’s mind is filled by the sounds of Cat Tune: “At that moment the sound of drums pounded against his eardrums, like the drumbeats preceding the first act of a Maoqiang opera, followed by the doleful sounds of a suona, a horn, and then finally the circular, repetitive performance of a cat zither” (Mo Yan, *Sandalwood Death* 159). Then he laments his traumatic experience, mourns his wife and children’s death, and expresses his resentment with hysterical operatic singing. The scene brings to mind the story of Lin Chong’s forced rebellion in the classical work *Water Margin* (水滸傳), which has been adapted into numerous local operas. Following Lin Chong’s example, Sun Bing decides to join the rebels. It is at this point that the power of speech is channeled into the desire for (violent) action.

The process of converting the villagers into Boxers not only helps them acquire a second identity, but also helps them transcend the mundanity of life. The novel describes the villagers’ acceptance of the Boxers with anthropological accuracy, showing how they combine the familiar (theater) and unfamiliar (magic power) to create an uncanny experience (136). When Sun Bing returns to his hometown to recruit followers, he meets resistance because people see him as an ordinary, clownish actor. Sun Bing sings in Cat Tune to attract the villagers, but the crowd despises him, seeing no difference between previous performances and the one he gives to galvanize them. In essence, they see no difference between him and themselves. To convince people, he and his colleague (who is possessed by Sun Wukong 孫悟空, an imagined figure with superhuman martial arts skills in *Journey to the West* 西遊記) have to exceed their normal martial arts abilities during the ritual of possession. Their magical performance elevates them above the villagers, making the actors kin to mystic forces. Gradually, the villagers are convinced, and they subsequently start joining the Boxers and invoking their own favorite deities. This is a turning point that transforms the villagers from audience members to performers (163-77). Here it is worth noting how the novel restrains its criticism of performative aspects that rational

observers might ridicule, describing the theatrical process of procession as a “truth-effect.” This is a revision of and a response to the typically hostile May Fourth attitude toward the Boxers and their theatrical trappings.<sup>5</sup> Dismissing the Boxer Rebellion as merely xenophobic, superstitious, and barbaric, many Western and Chinese enlightenment thinkers have seen these historical figures in stereotyped terms.<sup>6</sup> Their strong judgments have even been inherited by the communist revolutionaries.

### **In Search of Meaning beyond the Secular: Memory as Immortality**

What ultimately takes the novel beyond enlightenment and revolutionary discourses is the elevation of Sun Bing as a divine figure. The process of possession has already laid the ground for his deification. Through the ritual of possession, the villagers become wholly enchanted, since only those who believe in it sincerely receive its full benefit. Eventually, owing to their deep faith in a transcendental power, their engagement in history acquires an extra-historical dimension, and becomes a quest for the meaning of life. Establishing direct communication between individual life (from the bodily experience to spiritual pursuit) and transcendental existence (the eternal, the religious, and the divine), history becomes a stage for ascending to a higher state of being. As Inge acutely observes in discussing *Red Sorghum*, Mo Yan suggests, “that myth and belief are more important than history” (502). His comment can be justly applied to *Sandalwood Death*: “myth and belief” affectively counter the brutality of history. Highlighting the importance of belief in the transcendental, the novel questions the violent monopoly on interpretation that rationality has arrogated to itself. In so doing, it salvages the experience of marginalized people.

Before his death, Sun Bing becomes divine by enduring a level of pain that lesser men could not bear: the sandalwood punishment. This method uses a wooden log to skewer the victim’s body from anus to shoulders, making for a slow, agonizing death. It is a torture that matches those depicted in Buddhist lore about hell. Zhao Jia, the inventor and administrator of the punishment, regards it as far more refined than crucifixion: “I know you Europeans have used wooden stakes on people, but that is simply nailing someone to a crossbar and leaving him to die. I am going to let you

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<sup>5</sup> For example, both Lu Xun and Zhou Zuoren demonstrated some unfriendly attitude toward traditional theater (舊戲). To some extent, traditional theater has become the embodiment of the old culture, the direct target of the enlightenment. For details, see Zhang and Qi (144-50).

<sup>6</sup> The Boxers have been often represented as the barbaric, “incomprehensible Other,” or the “yellow devil” in Western literature and media. See Lü (81-84).



see what a real punishment is like, one that is so exquisite, so refined, that the name alone reveals its resounding elegance: sandal—wood—death, a term with a rough exterior but an aesthetic core, displaying the patina and aura of antiquity” (Mo Yan, *Sandalwood Death* 279). An overtly phallic symbol of state authority, the sandalwood log penetrates the individual’s body in a way too painful to be imagined. The punishment itself makes a martyr of him, ensuring that he will be remembered as a hero-deity. Like those of other cultures, the Chinese tradition holds that human beings can become gods if they behave with enough heroism, virtue or charisma. One famous example is Lord Guan, who became after his death the god of warriors for his loyalty, righteousness, and courage. The same can be said about Sun Bing: he evolves from a clownish figure to a hero, ultimately becoming a deity.

To some extent, the sacred space created in the novel is a denial as well as sublimation of the everyday (the bodily desire) and historical violence. The key issue here is the performative destruction of the human body. As Howard Yuen Fung Choy has observed, “It is the body that painfully feels the effects of history and on which history forcefully etches itself. Without the body, history is an intangible idea. Not only does history register itself through the life cycle of birth, age, illness and death, but it always also configures itself by disfiguring the human body” (Choy 185). Through disfiguring and dismembering the human body, history might be able to claim triumph over the individual victim, however, it cannot exhaust the meaning of such destruction. Rather, “as the path of saints and martyrs” (Scheper-Hughes 26), the destruction of the body often becomes the point of departure for constructing the meaning of a higher life beyond the everyday and political reality.

As can be seen from the above examples, the Boxers’ quasi-religious activity of possession by the deities does not, by itself, constitute the divine. Only through bodily torture, death and self-sacrifice can the divine figure be created. Torture is a test Sun Bing has to pass. As a master of Cat Tune and a hero resisting colonial invasion and government oppression, Sun Bing could have escaped and survived with the beggars’ assistance. However, in accepting the sandalwood punishment, he decides to sacrifice himself. In contrast, Xiao Shanzi, Sun Bing’s apprentice, fails a similar test. In agreeing to die for Sun Bing as a substitute, Xiao Shanzi demonstrates enough heroic spirit, at least at first. His desire for spiritual immortality helps him transcend the fear of pain. Deeply convinced that he will become immortal by entering the annals of Cat Tune history, he sees the punishment as the most sublime act possible and wants to perform well (Mo Yan, *Sandalwood Death* 307, 334). Nevertheless, he is eventually unable to match Sun Bing’s courage, collapsing on the spot. His failure of nerve reveals the singularity of Sun Bing’s sacrifice. Therefore, it

is not simply the fact of death, but the unprecedented manner of suffering, the willingness to accept it, and the capability to endure an “artistic” means of death that make a man into a god.

Deification takes the form of ritualistic/theatrical performance, which turns the process into a kind of public celebration. Cat Tune, according to Sun Bing at the last moments of his life, is not simply a form of entertainment, but a way to mourn and communicate with the dead (336). With its transformative potential, Cat Tune provides new sources of power, discourses and social patterns. The novel repeatedly invokes the belief that Cat Tune is a vehicle for transcendence. For Cat Tune’s actors and patrons, theater has replaced history as the venue to seek the meaning of life and whatever follows it. Their whole life becomes a stage on which outstanding performers can become immortal. Rather than theater imitating life, life imitates theater: heroic action is the price of eternal life. Yet only through fanatical performance and engagement is the desire for eternal life realized. This marks the difference between Qian Ding and Sun Bing. The former might be aware of the power of theater and accept its influence, but he is never more than a spectator. It is the latter who dares to choose total self-destruction as his dramatic finale.

In the process, the executioner’s scaffold transforms—first into a theatrical stage, then into a sacrificial altar. It is Sun Bing’s Calgary, or his Golgotha: the place where the everyday, the historical, and the divine collide. To Mircea Eliade, such ritualistic suffering is the occasion of hierophany. It is “the manifestation of something of a wholly different order, a reality that does not belong to our world, in objects that are an integral part of our natural ‘profane’ world” (11). Death is no longer the end of life, but a point of entry into eternity, which exists in collective memory by the grace of Cat Tune. The transforming power implied in the suffering and death of Sun Bing is so strong that it leads to the rational scholar-official Qian Ding’s acceptance of Sun Bing’s divinity.

As the practitioner of state violence, Qian Ding himself is marginalized by the system. He still has some faith in the rationalist Confucian social order and is often obliged to speak on behalf of his people as a model official would do (as when he performs rituals to encourage farming). Meanwhile, he is open to new ideas, as he demonstrates when he prohibits foot-binding. To please Meiniang, he even invents a celebration of swing playing. However, as he witnesses the gradual collapse of the dynasty and the intrusion of the colonial power, he feels desperate and powerless. Therefore, as Han Chen argues, he returns to the people to indulge his senses. Still, his desires are partly repressed, at least to the extent that they are bound by his Confucian ideals (64). Zhou Lei regards Qian Ding’s self-contradiction as a pretense

that he adopts out of anxiety and alienation from reality (42). He is not an active agent who makes his own choices, but someone forced to choose between the state and the people. Unlike his brother Qian Xiongfei, who chooses to oppose the state, he prefers to stay in the system, showing more sympathy for his suffering people. Functioning as the rationalist in the novel, Qian Ding reveals the weakness of the traditionally rational approach to the colonial world order.

After ridicule of Sun Bing and his followers for summoning gods during the Boxer Rebellion, a failed plea to spare the captured Boxers, and an experience of total powerlessness, he eventually aligns with Sun Bing. Within the heated atmosphere of Cat Tune performance on the execution site, he comes to accept the inhumane punishment as the path to divinity, and is convinced that Sun Bing has become a divine figure by going through an inhuman ordeal. When Sun Bing's (still-living) body starts to rot, it attracts numerous flies that cannot be shooed away, and he "descends into the hellish limbo between life and death" (Xiao, "The Theater of Cruelty" n. pag.). However, Qian Ding sees this phenomenon as evidence of a mythic guiding force, a realization that leads to his hierophany: "Sun Bing's suffering had already transformed him into a saint, and I could not defy the will of a saint [to help him]" (Mo Yan, *Sandalwood Death* 377). Here the theodic message once again reveals the poverty and insufficiency of modern rational thinking in facing unimaginable agony and endless bodily pain.

The theatricality of Sun Bing's ascension to godhood is made possible by the collaboration of all involved parties. Zhao Jia, the executioner who has carried out numerous executions on behalf of the state, the very embodiment of state violence, "promises" Meiniang that he will turn her father's death into a grand show (280). Sun Bing chooses to die with his eyes open, awakening the people by intentionally botching the rescue plan his daughter and the beggars' attempt (328-33). Here the novel might be drawing a parallel between his voluntary death and the death of Tan Sitong (譚嗣同) (1865-98), a driver of the historic One Hundred Day Reform (1898) who chose to shed his own blood to awaken his people. The cruelty of his punishment is beyond Sun Bing's powers of imagination. Seeing his body decaying from the inside out, he keeps his dignity to the last, using his singing voice to make a final, defiant assertion of his own existence. As Qian Ding witnesses, Sun Bing's last words are "the opera . . . has ended . . ." (402). In his mind, his death is a show for his audience. While the death of Tan Sitong and his peers provides nothing more than mindless public entertainment, Sun Bing's death is significant. It is not that he awakens his people with certain rationally conceived ideas (such as national salvation), but that he helps mobilize the audience and turns them into actors.

Instilling in them a fanatical faith that outstrips concern for their physical lives, state-perpetrated “terror as entertainment” becomes the people’s “terror as deification.”

With the passionate engagement of the spectators and performers, Sun Bing accomplishes his deification. On the day of the execution, Sun Bing’s troupe parades in colorful costumes to the execution site, singing the Cat Tune theme with the accompaniment of screaming mystic cats. “At the execution site, the ‘righteous cat’ led the troupe sing various folk operas to form a carnivalesque scene. This affects the seemingly grave, but still fragile process of execution” (A. Wang 362). The troupe’s performance endangers the actors’ life because the German troops regard it as a protest. Yet they still perform and invite more onlookers to join them. The onlookers then become agents of the performers’ influence, passing their sentiments along to a wider audience. By these means, a cultural memory is constructed to celebrate Sun Bing as a new divinity. The essential difference between the sandalwood punishment and previous, equally painful penalties derives not from the punishment itself, but from the active participation of the spectators/onlookers, without whom creation of the divine is impossible. Eventually, in the execution of Sun Bing, the tension between the sacrifice and the spectators disappears. Tensions of this sort have been previously highlighted by Lu Xun. For example, the Jesus that Lu Xun creates in his essays “Avenge” and “Avenge (2)” can be read as the metonym of the lonely quest for social reform during May Fourth, and the spectators to his crucifixion are no different from the crowds in some of his other works, such as *The True Story of Ah Q* and “Medicine.” Lu Xun’s enlightenment attitude is echoed in Mo Yan’s description of the six gentlemen-martyrs of the short-lived One Hundred Day Reform (Mo Yan, *Sandalwood Death* 197-209). As it is a top-down reform, the people are alienated from it. Mo Yan’s accomplishment in *Sandalwood Death*, as Shelley Chan puts it, is that he “subverts Lu Xun’s notion of the indifferent and submissive crowd represented, for example, by the famous slide-show incident in which strong but unfeeling Chinese men impassively watched their own compatriot being slaughtered by foreigners” (153).

In this divine space constructed by the carnivalesque performance, the boundaries between performers and spectators, human song and animal screams, the worldly and otherworldly, and even life and death are blurred. This divine space is, of course, a psychological one that exists in people’s memory, with the Cat Tune as its herald. For Sun Bing and his peers, the meaning of life is not found in self-gratification, but in becoming part of the people’s eternal memory. Creating, disseminating and transmitting such a memory, these people are not insensitive onlookers to scenes of bloodshed, but passionate activists who speak and sing on their

own behalf. As a cultural dimension, the divine has long been displaced by the “modern” and “scientific” discourses of May Fourth. The “old” beliefs in eternal life became the target of criticism in the various anti-superstition movements, which reached their apex in the Cultural Revolution. Under the hegemonic discourses of science, the consequence of such criticism is the total de-legitimation of people’s faith in the transcendental (along with its rituals and artefacts). In this respect, *Sandalwood Death* not only acknowledges the repressed spiritual dimension of people’s lives, but also celebrates its role in defining the meaning of life and the afterlife. Against the hegemonic attitude of modern atheism, the novel questions the whole practice of secular modernization in China, and reclaims the legitimacy of a long repressed desire for the transcendental among the people.

## Conclusion

My interpretation of *Sandalwood Death* is situated in the cultural and political discourses—such as the May Fourth enlightenment and the subsequent Maoist revolutions—that produced and consumed it. As Cohen delineates, from the time of Kang Youwei (康有為) (1858-1927) and Chen Duxiu (陳獨秀) (1879-1942) to that of the Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution, the Boxer Rebellion has been shaped either negatively—as a time of “turmoil,” “indiscriminate xenophobia,” barbarism and irrationality—or positively as an expression of patriotic anti-imperialism (Cohen 211-88). It is impossible not to refer to these discourses—and the socio-political-epistemological paradigm they constitute—while writing about the Boxer Rebellion. While inheriting the May Fourth mission of criticizing the Chinese national character epitomized in Lu Xun’s writings, Mo Yan reconsiders what have been viewed by the enlightenment writers as the people’s defects, such as their being “passive,” “irrational,” “xenophobic,” and “theatrical.” He discovers through these “negative” traits where the people’s political agency can be located, and regards the Boxers’ resistance to the government and the German colonizers as legitimate. In so doing he aligns himself with the Maoist discourses of revolution and anti-imperialism. Meanwhile, he endeavors to rescue the narratives on the Boxers’ resistance from the purely political and reductionist revolutionary formulas. In these discourses, the Boxers only acquired symbolic importance as part of the collective abstraction “the People.” Staying away from the political, he turns to the phenomenological experiences of the body and the irrational, instantaneous aspects of resistance.

Declaring himself a man of the people, Mo Yan has been trying to avoid the condescending attitude embedded in the enlightenment. He has even gone so far as to say that those thinkers who followed Lu Xun's approach "endeavored to criticize the backwardness, and the flaws in the Chinese national character" ("Write as Common People" 66). It was not just a matter of modernism attacking tradition; it also reflected an elitist antipathy toward the popular culture participated in by several hundred million ordinary Chinese (Cohen 234). Zhang Qinghua also makes a similar observation: "No one in Lu Xun's writing is redeemable. Writers after Lu Xun turned from writing for life to writing for the people, but demonstrated their condescending attitude and desire for power" ("The Limits of Narration" 379). Meanwhile, the novel continues to challenge "the official ideology as reflected in revolutionary literature" (Chan 6). This ideology features a teleological and lineal historical narrative, and revolution as the gradual awakening of the people's class consciousness. With its carnivalesque celebration of bodily desires, graphic scenes of torture, and fanatic passion, the novel also subverts the sublime and optimistic style of the revolutionary literature, and turns its realism—its ascetic, sanitized description of erotic desire and desensitized presentation of violence—into surrealism, or "carnavalesque magical realism" (Liu 30).

In general, *Sandalwood Death* belongs to the efforts of redefining history from a people's perspective, and of "demystifying revolution than its deification (as in Revolutionary History)" (Lin 19). Nevertheless, although Mo Yan is "often criticized for political caution" (Kinkley 199), he refuses to use his literary works to intervene directly in politics. He feels the pressure and the terror of the political (Mo Yan and Qi 325), yet he prefers to transform this pressure and terror into stories. Adhering to literary creation as his means of engagement, Mo Yan tells stories through which he reinterprets the whole twentieth-century Chinese history. As he presents them, the stories are neither a scientific object of analysis nor a commentary on the existing grand narratives, but subjective experiences of marginalized individuals. Through their fate, the meaning of human suffering is contested, and human desire and the pursuit for the transcendental are celebrated. In Sabina Knight's words, "the characters [in Mo Yan's novels] who might qualify as heroes evince an almost libertarian allegiance to personal freedom" (103). To him, the voices emancipated are first and foremost those of the repressed, silenced, and underrepresented. Focusing on marginalized common people's life experiences and repressed voices, *Sandalwood Death* is an act of emancipation *par excellence*.

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