The Reception of Mo Yan in the British and North American Literary Centers

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Master Thesis
Literature
Autumn 2014
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Abstract

This thesis investigates the two major conflicting modes of interpretation applied to Mo Yan’s literary texts diachronically and synchronically in order to reveal both the aesthetic imperative and the liberating force of the British and North American literary centers in receiving literature from the periphery. After an introduction to the centers’ disparate responses to the paradigmatic shift of the local Chinese literary trend in the 1980s, the thesis continues with a theoretical discussion on reader-response theory and the uneven power relations between the literary center and the periphery. Jauss’s concept of horizon of expectation and Fish’s interpretive community are adopted to stress openness in interpretation while Casanova’s conceptualization of the world republic of letters provides the framework to study the competition among interpretive communities for the legitimacy of their respective interpretation.

The study of the press reception of Mo Yan focuses on the ongoing shift of horizon of expectation from the dominating political and representational mode of interpretation to one that stresses the literary and fictional nature of literature. The study shows that the imperative in the reception of Mo Yan is the extension of the Western cultural hegemony sustained by an Orientalist dichotomy. The academic promotion in the public sphere, however, shows critics’ effort to subvert such domination by suggesting an alternative mode that brings the Chinese literary context to bear on the interpretation. In addition to this, Mo Yan’s strategic negotiation with the dominating mode of reception is analysed in my close reading of POW!. At the end of the thesis, I call for general readers to raise the awareness of the hegemonic tendency of any prevailing mode of interpretation. By asserting a certain distance, readers enable the openness in interpretation and hence possible communication among different communities.

Keywords: Mo Yan; reception; reader-response criticism; horizon of expectation; interpretive communities; Pascale Casanova; discourse; hegemony
In 2012, Mo Yan was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. The Nobel Committee describes him as a writer “who with hallucinatory realism merges folk tales, history and the contemporary” (Press Release). In China, Mo Yan is hailed as a national hero, who finally fulfills the Chinese’s longing for a Nobel Prize in literature. In major Western countries, however, the consecration has evoked heated debates concerning the writer’s political commitment. As far as the British and American newspapers examined in this thesis are concerned, commentators from the condemning voice criticize Mo Yan’s comment on the need for censorship as checks at airport security and accordingly label him as a state writer. They argue that Mo Yan’s adherence to the Communist party line undermines his integrity of being a writer and hence his literary achievement. On the contrary, those from the supporting voice insist that what defines Mo Yan as a writer (a novelist to be specific) is his works rather than his public conduct. Moreover, they argue that his works not only contain strong social criticism but also invaluable literary merits such as the experiment of diverse literary styles, and the universal exploration of the human nature. The debates even further extend to the reviews of the two novels published in English in early January 2013: *POW!* and *Sandalwood Death*. Yiyun Li, in her review of *POW!*, criticizes Mo Yan for failing to attack the Communist regime directly or present the dark side of Chinese society in a faithful documentary style. As Li condemns, “who needs these hackneyed hallucinatory scenes?” (Jan 19, 2013 *The Guardian*). On the other hand, Dwight Garner and Ian Buruma praise Mo Yan for his engagement of a distinctive social criticism that goes beyond the Capitalism/Communism dichotomy in the two texts. They also argue that social criticism should not be considered as the only merit of
modern Chinese literature. Instead, what they argue in terms of the two then newly published novels, according to Buruma, is that “the art of telling stories is actually the main theme of both novels” (Feb 3 2013 NYT).

The debates reflect two groups of commentators with contrasting interpretations and evaluations of Mo Yan and his works. Such disparity points to the problem posed by the many ways for general readers to approach a literary text, a problem which falls into the domain of reader-response criticism. Moreover, to consider that newspapers are one site of public sphere where different stances compete with each other in the attempt to influence and structure public opinion, the ensuing questions would be: Why do there appear these two distinct and at the same time opposing voices concerning Mo Yan’s consecration? What is the logic behind the phenomena? Where do the two voices originate? And what is the potential consequence in influencing public opinion, and more importantly, in literary interpretation? Bearing those questions in mind, I pinpoint the study of the two contending voices reflected in major British and American newspapers as the focus of this thesis.

The conflicts in interpretation can be traced both synchronically and diachronically. According to Stanley E. Fish, different interpretations are produced due to the adoption of different sets of interpretive strategies. The disparity in the reception of Mo Yan can be considered as two opposing interpretations produced by two distinct interpretive communities. Meanwhile, it also involves the transformation of the horizon of expectation, to use Jauss’s concept. The conflict then is not only between two interpretive communities, but also between the old and the new horizon of expectation. But before we look at the contending responses, it is necessary to give a brief overview of the transformation of the local Chinese literary context that took place in the 1980s and the definition of the British and North American literary centers used in this thesis.

The modern Chinese literary scene has undergone several drastic changes that ultimately have led it to evolve into the present day situation. The period that is most widely known to the West is Mao’s radical years with the Cultural Revolution (1966-76) as the culmination. But in fact, the guiding principle that “literature and art serve politics, serve the workers-peasants-soldiers, and so forth” had been imposed on
literary activities since 1942 (qtd. in Leung: xxxii). Socialist realism from the then Soviet Union was adopted and literature produced under this principle was categorized as revolutionary literature. As a result, literature in this period (1942-1976) was cut off from the Chinese literary tradition and utilized to construct a rosy picture of the revolutionary cause in opposition to the cruelty of its opponents.

Only in 1978 when the new leadership shifted its attention from political struggle to economic reform and encouraged cross-national interactions by launching the open door policy did the literary field start to flourish again. Writers began to examine their collective traumatized experience during the political turmoil and attempted to subvert the socialist realist discourse through a realistic (but not a socialist realist) representation of Chinese society in their works. But within a few years, this was replaced by diversified literary experimentation. Since 1986, due to the influence of the Western literature and theory through translation and the drastic social political changes in the Chinese society, writers have quickly expanded their thematic concerns and literary innovation. Two anthologies best capture the change, *Morning Sun: Interviews with Chinese Writers of the Lost Generation* (1994) by Laifong Leung and *Chairman Mao Would not Be Amused: Fiction from Today’s China* (1995) edited by Howard Goldblatt. Both Leung and Goldblatt highly value contemporary Chinese writers’ dismissal of political engagement as the primary responsibility and their pursuit of humanism and formal innovations. Goldblatt goes further to point out that some writers publish abroad to assert their artistic freedom from the political pressure that is still persistent within the country.

As for the definition of the British and American literary centers, I first draw on Casanova’s understanding of a center being one that “controls and attracts the literary productions dependent on it” in each linguistic territory (Casanova 116, 117). To her, London and New York are the two centers within the Anglophone area. The geographic specificity indicates the center as, to use Bourdieu’s term, a social space in which “the legitimacy of its centralized power of consecration is unchallenged; a world having its own pantheon and prizes . . . its own distinctive traditions and internal rivalries” (Casanova 117). In this sense, a center is a space in which different agents struggle for, exert, impose, and sustain power and authority in the

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1 The guiding principle is derived from Mao’s speech “Talks at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art,” which determines the function of literature and art to serve political purposes until Mao’s death.

2 Examples of the study on revolutionary literature, see Berninghausen and Huters 1976, Yang Xiaobin Ed. 2009 and King 2014.
corresponding region. Following this logic, the places of origin for the journals and newspapers that have been the major participants in the reception of Mo Yan will also be considered as part of the center. Therefore, the centers in this thesis are based in London and New York and extended to cover southern England and north-eastern USA respectively.

The responses of the British and American literary centers to the transformation of the Chinese literary scene have been inconsistent. Although the period of using realistic representation to subvert the Maoist discourse is widely known and recognized, the period that followed with more diversified themes and styles has, however, been observed divergently. On the one hand, the institutionalization of the study of modern Chinese literature as a university discipline has gradually fostered a new interpretive community. They welcome the new trend and seek to introduce it to the centers. This academic community stress the development in the literary and fictional aspects of modern Chinese literature. One of the most significant characteristics of their study is to adopt the Chinese literary context as the major reference in interpretation. The Chinese literary context here is understood as the Chinese literary repertoire, which includes Chinese literature, literary history and tradition.

On the other hand, the reception of a foreign work is inevitably involved with factors such as the transnational circulation of literature between the center and the periphery, the host country’s social cultural values and so on. Therefore, in contrast to the academic community’s eagerness to introduce the local new trend, modern Chinese literature suffers from aesthetic appropriation by the centers due to its peripheral position. There are three major theoretical stances that address the constraints of the center in the transnational reception of literature. Pascale Casanova points out two antagonistic forces that the center exerts over the periphery: the centripetal and centrifugal forces. While the periphery is synchronized by the center’s aesthetic standards, it is distanced, alienated, and even rejected by the same center that exerts attraction. But in general, Casanova stresses the aesthetic attraction and synchronization as a liberating force that helps to free literature in the periphery from national constraints. Stephen Owen, on the other hand, strongly criticizes the structural inequality of world literature in which Western literary values are imposed on the periphery. As he argues in the discussion of world poetry:
This “world poetry” turns out, unsurprisingly, to be a version of Anglo-American modernism or French modernism. . . . This situation is the quintessence of cultural hegemony, when an essentially local tradition (Anglo-European) is widely taken for granted as universal.

Following Owen’s contention, Andrew F. Jones also argues that the translation and reception of contemporary Chinese literature are shaped by the “discourse of world literature” that perpetuates the dominant Anglo-European literary models and values. Sara Brouillette approaches the study of the constraints of the center from another angle. She contends that the mode of production and consumption of postcolonial literature in the centers are motivated by the publishing industry to sustain the exotic imagination of a foreign country. Meanwhile, she also points out how postcolonial writers negotiate such a mode of consumption by deploying strategic exoticism in their texts.

Let us relate the context described above to the reception of Mo Yan: although the local literary context has completed one paradigmatic shift of the horizon of expectation, the conflicting responses to his Nobel consecration reveal to us that the horizon of perceiving modern Chinese literature in the centers is still in the process of transformation. Therefore, in this thesis I will trace the trajectory of Mo Yan’s reception in the press and in scholarly journals respectively to examine the formation of the different modes of interpretation and the nature of the competition within the British and American literary centers. I argue that these centers exert both constraining and liberating forces on the periphery. The study not only adds another evidence of the Western cultural hegemony over the periphery, but also reveals the academic interpretive community’s continual struggle to subvert such dominance. In addition to this, following Brouillette’s contention, I stress Mo Yan’s negotiation with the imperative in reception both through his works and by making use of his author identity.

The general structure of my thesis is as follows: the first section introduces the theoretical premises on which I build my study. Jauss’s horizon of expectation and Stanley Fish’s interpretive communities are the key concepts. Casanova’s conceptualization of the world republic of letters is, on a macro level, the major theoretical framework of the thesis, whereas Brouillette’s study on writers’ negotiation with the imperative in the reception of postcolonial literature provides a paradigm for me to examine how Mo Yan uses his agency as a writer to make the
similar attempt. In the second section, I will trace the reception of Mo Yan in the press diachronically to analyze the ways in which he has been read differently. Four newspapers are selected as the primary source materials for my investigation: The New York Times (NYT) and Washington Post (WP) from the USA, and The Guardian and The Times from the UK. Section Three focuses on the emergence and the dissemination of the academic discourse which forms a new mode of reading by bringing the Chinese literary context into interpretation. In the fourth section, I will do a close reading of *POW!* in an attempt to uncover how Mo Yan, like the postcolonial writers examined by Brouillette, adopts strategic exoticism to negotiate the imperatives in reception and as a result brings about contrasting responses in reviews.

In the concluding part, I appeal for hermeneutic openness. Drawing on Hans Georg Gadamer and other hermeneutic thinkers, Elizabeth Anne Kinsella generalizes five characteristics of a hermeneutic approach, two of which are stressed in this thesis as the major feature of and benefit from openness in interpretation: to seek understanding rather than explanation and to acknowledge the situated location of interpretation. As she argues, “the goal of a hermeneutic approach is to seek understanding, rather than to offer explanation or to provide an authoritative reading or conceptual analysis of a text” (Kinsella). The task of hermeneutics is to present an interpretation together with the conditions in which the interpretive practice takes place. By arguing for hermeneutic openness, I call for readers to raise the awareness of literary hegemony and keep a certain distance from the prevailing mode of interpretation in order to achieve an understanding among different interpretive communities.

It must be noted that I leave the problematic of translation outside the scope of my study, since the focus is mainly on the reviews of and the articles on the English translation circulated in the British and North American literary centers. Mo Yan’s texts under discussion are translated by Howard Goldblatt.

**Theoretical Concerns**

Hans Robert Jauss’s aesthetics of reception contends that literary history is not “a series of unchanging, ‘objective’ facts but a record of the ‘transsubjective’ experience of readers” (1549). Contrary to traditional models of literary history, which focus on
individual authors or genres, Jauss argues for the significance of the history of reception in literary interpretation and evaluation. In his essay “Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory,” Jauss adopts the phrase “the horizon of expectation” from hermeneutic philosophy to describe how the reader’s expectations produce interpretation and aesthetic judgments of a literary work. When a reader receives a literary work, it “is received and judged against the background of other works of art as well as against the background of the everyday experience of life” (1548). The horizon of expectation refers to the totality of such background. Philip Goldstein has made a good generalization: “the horizon of expectations’ stipulates that, to experience or interpret a text or a society in a meaningful way, readers must bring to bear the subjective models, paradigms, beliefs, and values of their background knowledge, what his colleague Wolfgang Iser calls a ‘repertoire’ of strategies” (Goldstein 5). In this sense, the meaning and evaluation of a literary work is determined by a set of horizon of expectations.

Following this contention, I emphasize three essential aspects of Jauss’s theoretical conceptualization. Firstly, the horizon of expectation is bound to change over time. Accordingly, the meaning and evaluation of a text will also change. But this does not mean that the different interpretations can cancel each other; rather, “the understanding of the first reader will be sustained and enriched in a chain of receptions from generation to generation” (1551, 1552). Secondly, considering the fact that the changing of the reader’s expectation leads to changes in interpretation, Jauss argues that a literary work is not a fixed timeless object “that stands by itself and that offers the same view to each reader in each period” (1552). Instead, it is an event, “much more like an orchestration that strikes ever new resonances among its readers and that frees the text from the material of the words and brings it to a contemporary existence” (1553). Thirdly, the set of expectations is constructed by “a consensus of actual historical readers” (qtd. in Introduction: 1549). The horizon of expectation, to Jauss, is a historical construct.

Since Jauss’s reception theory aims at bringing reception to the central position in constructing literary history, his focus lies on the diachronical examination of the historical construction and transformation of the horizon of expectation. In comparison, although Stanley E. Fish shares the view of expectations based on an
established consensus of readers, he examines the different expectations among "interpretive communities" synchronically. In his article "Interpreting the Variorum," Fish defines the notion of interpretive communities as "those who share interpretive strategies not for reading (in the conventional sense) but for writing texts, for constituting their properties and assigning their intentions" (2087). Fish contends that it is the interpretive strategies readers apply while reading that render meaning to a text rather than formalist criticism’s stance that meaning resides within the text, "interpretive strategies are not put into execution after reading . . . they are the shape of reading, and because they are the shape of reading, they give texts their shape, making them rather than, as it is usually assumed, arising from them" (2085). The difference in interpretation is generated among readers who adopt different set of interpretive strategies and therefore, cannot cancel one another.

There are both merits and limits to Fish’s contentions. Fish argues that "interpretive communities are no more stable than texts because interpretive strategies are not natural or universal, but learned" (2288). Two propositions must be noted here: one is that interpretive communities are not essential entities, and the other, that interpretive strategies can be acquired. Such a contention opens the possibility for communication among interpretive communities. However, Fish seems not to be optimistic in this respect. He regards the recognition of an interpretation only by people who happen to be in the same community, "communication is a much more chancy affair than we are accustomed to think of it” (2088). In a sense, he does not see the possibility of communication of any kind between interpretive communities. If the strategies can be acquired, then the question becomes why and how the conflicting communities, as is shown in the press debates, choose to take different strategies. To what extent can they oppose or understand each other? What is the nature of the opposition behind the conscious choice of strategies?

Another question, which is closely related to the reception of Mo Yan, is the perception of the authorial intention and the author figure. For Fish, interpretation is "a succession of decisions made by readers about an author’s intention . . .” (2080). Although he recognizes readers’ effort to discern an author’s intention, he does not consider it derived from the author. Rather he indicates it as a construct by the reader in the attempt of searching the intention of an author. This perception is similar to the concept of the implied author in narratology. In this view, the authorial intention can be proliferated when readers adopt different interpretive strategies. To complicate the
question, it is the same with the author figure. As William E. Cain comments, “If pressed, Fish would likely answer that while Milton, for example, is obviously an ‘author,’ our sense of him as an author . . . is an interpretation” (Cain 58). The author, in consequence, loses his/her control of determining the intention and even his or her own author figure, leaving readers to construct them by the way they choose.

From Jauss’s diachronical and Fish’s synchronical conceptualization of interpretation, one can see that they both argue for hermeneutic openness. However, neither of the two theorists has touched upon questions of power, authority, privilege and the ethics of reading etc. in interpretation. Jauss fails to account for the institutional authority in bringing up the transformation of horizon of expectation in history, whereas Fish does not give any explanation to why certain mode of interpretation is prioritized over the others in the actual practice. In this aspect, however, Casanova’s conceptualization of the world republic of letters sheds significant light on how the above factors influence the reception of a foreign work in the global scale of literary circulation.

In her book *The World Republic of Letters*, Pascale Casanova conceptualizes a literary world which functions of its own accord, with its own components, participants, mechanisms and economy. It emerged in Europe in the sixteenth century when literature was used as a marker of national distinction in the process of the construction of nation states. Therefore, this literary world began as an arena for the rivalries and struggles of literature in relation to national identity and nation building. But with the accumulation of literary capital, “the most endowed [national] literary spaces” slowly acquire independence from political and national domination and in consequence, “bring about the independence of literary space as a whole” (85).

When the world literary space obtains a position to assert and defend its autonomy, it has established its own regulating system. The driving force that structures the system is the competition among its participants for the symbolic literary capital. The more literary capital the participants accumulate through transaction, the more central position they occupy and accordingly, the more power and authority they assert over those with less literary capital. As a result, the world literary space is structured in a hierarchy of the center, subcenters, and the periphery according to “the uneven distribution of resources among national literary spaces” (86). Cities like Paris, London, New York, and Berlin, etc. occupy the positions of the
literary center and subcenters, but countries such as the third world countries in general are placed in the literary periphery.

According to Casanova, the center exerts both enabling and constraining effects on the periphery. She describes the two opposing forces as the centripetal and centrifugal forces:

The literary world needs to be seen, then, as the product of antagonistic forces rather than as the result of a linear and gradually increasing tendency to autonomy. Opposed to the centripetal forces that strengthen the autonomous and unifying pole of world literary space and provide both a common measure of literary value and a literarily absolute point of reference (the Greenwich meridian) are the centrifugal forces associated with the national poles of each national space—the inertial forces that work to divide and particularize by essentializing differences, reproducing outmoded models, and nationalizing and commercializing literary life. (109)

Both are generated from the literary center and together they sustain the tension between the literary center and the periphery. On the positive side, the center’s recognition frees writers in the periphery from national constraints, “[t]he functionalist and realist aesthetic is . . . one of the most telling measures of the political dependence of a literary space” (111). Writers who aspire to break the constraint and to seek more freedom in literary production have to turn to the literary center for their works’ recognition. Casanova draws on the denial of Benet’s literary innovation in Spain in contrast to his recognition by the literary center to show that recognition by the literary center empowers the writer to free himself from the dominant national literary aesthetics. In this sense, it is the world literary center that offers writers from the periphery the opportunity to assert their literary autonomy.

Another positive effect that Casanova points out is that the import of literature from the center to the periphery “[enriches] an underfunded literature” (134). It enables writers to “break with the norms of their native literary space” and “seek to introduce into their language the modernity of the center” (134). The Chinese literary scene in the May Fourth Movement and the 1980s are two examples to show how the influence of Western literature enriched and helped to transform the Chinese literary field which was once dominated by national political imperative. In a word, the center is enabling and empowering. It is not only the writers from the periphery but also the national literary contexts those writers represent that are enabled to be liberated at varying degrees from the constraints of national politics.
In regard to the negative aspect, Casanova argues that the center holds such a strong power and authority over the periphery that it exerts absolute dominance in selecting, translating and interpreting the texts. As Casanova suggests, “[t]he domination that they exert requires them . . . to ‘discover’ nonnative writers who suit their literary categories” (135). In other words, the selection reflects the center’s preference for literature representing cultural difference that is perceived to be essential. Only those who suit their categories will be selected. As a result, writers from the periphery have to learn the norms dictated by the center in order to gain recognition. She refers to the norms as ethnocentrism that writers “need to situate themselves at just the right distance from their judges . . . neither too near nor too far” (156). In order to gain recognition, writers from the periphery need to situate themselves strategically to play the game of the literary center.

Casanova’s conceptualization of the world of letters is a great contribution to the study of both the emancipation of literature from national imperatives and the inequality among national literary spaces in the present context of globalization. The literary world she maps is described at a macroscopic level with a special focus on the competitions among national literary spaces. Yet the framework has its limitations. In the first place, the conflict in interpretation is presented as one between opposing national discourses. For example, the reception of Ibsen is presented through a contrast between England and France. The perception from this angle risks presenting national discourses at all levels from the center to the periphery as monolithic whereas in fact, as Gramsci argues, the public sphere is a space where different discourses compete for legitimacy. If we zoom in to examine the center, as this thesis attempts to do, there are even more competing discourses in the center than in the periphery due to the greater freedom the former has won from political and national constraints. In this sense, I argue that the power exerted by the center is not absolute. Nor is Casanova’s suggestion of using one national discourse to play off another the only way to challenge literary hegemony. Instead, within the public sphere of each literary space, especially those situated in the center, there are marginalized discourses that keep challenging the hegemony of the dominant one. Cultural studies in the United States and Britain can be taken as a good example in this regard. The reception of Mo Yan, as is seen in the response to his Nobel consecration, also shows that within one national public sphere, there are conflicting discourses which respectively defend their own mode of literary interpretation.
In the second place, although Casanova points out that the centers’ ethnocentrism dictates the reception of peripheral literature, she seems to restrict the discussion only to the world literary space and avoids linking it to the American and British national discourses in a more explicit way. This might be due to her attempt to stress the relative autonomy that the literary world has obtained from national constraints. However, one cannot deny the inextricable connection between the national discourse and the literary space even in the substantially emancipated literary centers. Inspired by Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, I extend Casanova’s discussion of ethnocentrism within the literary field to that of the Western cultural hegemony in the national discourse that dictates the reception of peripheral literature. According to Said, the Orientalist discourse is constructed in the attempt to set a contrast between the West and its cultural Other. Drawing on Gramsci and Foucault, Said traces the trajectory of the construction, development, and sustenance of this discourse. As he suggests, “Orientalism is . . . a considerable dimension of modern political-intellectual culture, and as such has less to do with the Orient than it does with ‘our’ world” (Said 12). He indicates the ethnocentric nature of the discourse presenting the West as civilized, modern, and democratic in contrast to the barbaric, ignorant, and backward Oriental. The reception of Mo Yan reflects the overarching Western cultural hegemony over the periphery that reaches much beyond the ethnocentrism Casanova delimits to the literary sphere. Moreover, Mo Yan’s case also shows that the Western cultural hegemony, which falls into the domain of postcolonial criticism, has already extended its domination to a larger sphere. Ethnocentrism only explains the judgment of another culture from one’s own culture and values, but it is the hegemony that imposes the ethnocentric perspective of the West as the standard to structure the rest of the world.

In the third place, in terms of the peripheral writers’ agency, Casanova’s account of writers’ self-censorship in an attempt to conform to the norms of the center reveals their absolute passivity. In order to achieve recognition, they have to situate themselves at the distance that is allocated to them. The only agency they have in Casanova’s account is to turn to one powerful literary center to play off another. Although I agree with Casanova on the extreme power the center and subcenters have, there are, however, peripheral writers who actively seek ways to negotiate the imperatives in the interviews, comments, and in their works. Sarah Brouillette, for
example, examines how the postcolonial writers negotiate the imperative through a
conscious construction of the reception in their own texts.

In her book *Postcolonial Writers in the Global Literary Marketplace* (2007),
Brouillette points out that the publishing industry in the literary centers constructs an
exotic mode of consumption of the postcolonial literature. She follows Huggan’s
analysis of the “tourist gaze” and adopts MacCannell’s concept of “touristic
consciousness” to argue that between the site of representation (the locale) and the
locus of reception (London and New York), the publishing industry creates an illusion
that the reader can gain access to the authenticity of the local through consuming
postcolonial literature. The unspecified audience, labelled as a market reader, is
compared to a tourist, who claims the experience of the exotic to be true because it
meets the expectation. Brouillette argues that postcolonial writers such as Walcott use
strategic exoticism in their texts as a way to negotiate the imperative in expectation.
On the one hand, the exotic depiction meets the reader’s horizon and confirms their
expectation of the foreignness. On the other, the deconstruction of the exotic aims at
arousing the reader’s awareness of the constructedness of the local authenticity. By
constructing and deconstructing the exoticism at the same time, writers assert their
distance from the imperative of the center, while making readers question their own
expectation.

For Brouillette, cosmopolitan readers only see the illusion the industry
produces while experts can see the reality behind. As she suggests, “Huggan and his
cohort of critics apprehend and assess ‘the real differences,’ while the tourist sees
only their ‘disguise’ by the industry’s ‘imagining’” (17). Postcolonial writers and
thinkers are like travellers or anti-tourists, claiming to have access to the real
knowledge of the truth, the “back regions” that tourists can never penetrate. Although,
as I shall argue and prove in the thesis, my close reading of *POW!* corresponds to
Brouillette’s findings that the writer uses strategic exoticism in the text to negotiate
the imperative in reception and that the reading practice performed by the academic
community is more authentic because it is less commodified, it is not my aim to use
one interpretation to cancel the other. Instead, the aim of my examination is to see
how the writer and the academic community in their respective ways contribute to
challenge the Western cultural hegemony.

In conclusion, although Jauss and Fish indicate hermeneutic openness in the
theoretical sense, the actualization of such openness is shown to occur in reality
through constant struggles and competitions among different interpretive communities for legitimacy. The case of Mo Yan, as is shown in the next section, reflects how power and authority influence the competition in reception between the journalistic and the academic discourses in the literary centers.

Newspapers: A Battlefield between the Journalistic and the Academic discourses

The press reception of Mo Yan in the British and American literary centers spans from 1990s and reaches its peak in 2012 upon his Nobel consecration. During the two decades’ reception, the perception and evaluation has undergone drastic changes from extolling his courage in revealing the cruel reality of China to the other extreme of accusing him of being a state writer. The trajectory shows that the shift from one stage to another is due to the emergence and participation of the academic discourse in the journalistic public sphere. The study of Mo Yan’s reception in the press aims at revealing how the Western cultural hegemony permeates the journalistic public sphere, taking the position of the “norm” and at locating the factors that challenge such dominance.

The conflicting reception in the press presents a competition between the journalistic discourse and the academic one for the legitimacy of their respective mode of interpretation. Discourse, here, is understood in the Foucauldian way at two levels, discourse as a whole and discourses as groups of statements. While discourse as a whole refers to “the set of rules and procedures for the production of particular discourses,” discourses refer to “groups of statements themselves” (Mills 62). As Sara Mills quotes from Foucault to describe discourse as a whole, discourse is characterized by a “delimitation of a field of objects, the definition of a legitimate perspective for the agent of knowledge, and the fixing of norms for the elaboration of concepts or theories” (qtd. in Mills 51). In this sense, discourse as a whole forms a discursive framework in which authority and “truth” are established. In contrast, a discourse, as Mills generalizes, “is a set of sanctioned statements which have some institutionalised force, which means that they have a profound influence on the way that individuals act and think” (62). Therefore, the journalistic and academic discourses are two sets of statements competing for “truth.”
The hegemonic aspect of discourse is put forward earlier by Antonio Gramsci. According to Gramsci, civil society is ruled by consent rather than coercion. The way to win consent is to promote the discourse in the interest of the ruling class as the dominant one over the other discourses. Such domination is regarded as hegemony. In the case of Mo Yan, I argue that the journalistic discourse reflects Orientalism through which the literary centers exert their cultural hegemony. In order to construct and consolidate the Western Self mirrored by the cultural Other, the journalistic discourse promotes the political and representational (PR) approach to Mo Yan’s texts. “Political” here refers to the expectation that literary texts engage with political criticism with a special focus on ideological difference. “Representational”, on the other hand, seems to refer to the expectation of a realistic representation of the Chinese society, but is in fact used in a narrow sense to focus on representing the backward and the traditional aspects that can set a contrast to the civilized West.

To challenge the PR approach, the academic discourse constructs an alternative literary and fictional (LF) mode of interpretation. This mode stresses that a literary text is first and foremost a fictional construct. The thematic concerns such as social political criticism only belong to the unlimited themes that literature can possibly engage. Moreover, one of the major characteristics of the LF mode is to bring the Chinese literary context to bear on interpretation. Therefore, it is presented as a sharp contrast to the prevailing stereotypical perception of China, Chinese culture and literature in the PR mode. To take the journal Modern Chinese Literature and Culture as an example, on the homepage the aim is asserted as follows:

*Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* is a peer-reviewed, multi-disciplinary cultural studies journal. . . . We see it as a very important mission of the journal to communicate to those outside our field the globally-important issues involved in the culture of Taiwan, Hong Kong and the People's Republic of China. MCLC maintains a high scholarly standard in which cutting-edge views of modern Chinese culture, informed by critical theory, are articulated clearly and accessibly. With the growing importance of China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong in the world economy, the rise of Chinese nationalism and a Chinese military threat in East Asia, not to mention the emergence of a disturbing China-bashing in the West, this is a critical moment for China scholars to communicate their work to an expanded constituency, to challenge the way China is represented in the Western media, and to help a broad intellectual readership come to a deeper understanding of issues related to modernity and its cultural formations in China. (emphasis added)
The British academic circle does not generate the same amount of scholarship as its American counterpart, but the same discourse is emerging there. Suman Gupta, editor of *Wasafiri*, asserts the same stance in the 2008 issue entitled “Writing China”:

This issue was conceived to offer serious readers, curious about contemporary mainland Chinese literature and culture . . . a set of well-informed, thoughtful, accessible inroads into the field. . . . I wanted to bring together an issue that would not merely give a sense of contemporary mainland Chinese literature and culture which is both accessible and adequate in scholarly terms, but one that would actively work *against the kind of unthinking normative preconceptions that seem widely prevalent in Britain, the USA and elsewhere*. (emphasis added).

Both of the two agendas suggest their attempt to construct an academic discourse antagonistic to the dominant ethnocentric discourse of the Western cultural hegemony and to bring forth a shift in the horizon of expectation of modern Chinese literature.

Although the academic discourse, as will be elaborated in Section Three, originates from the institutionalization of the modern Chinese literature in American universities, one has to notice, however, that once a discourse is established, it is not restricted to the original community, but will pertain to every individual or institution that performs it. In this sense, those who or which promote the academic discourse from the LF perspective are referred to as the academic interpretive community in this thesis. This community includes scholars in the academic sphere, critics who are outside it but perform the same LF mode as mediators in engaging public opinion, and those who are academic scholars but also participate in the public sphere. It is the same with institutions in this regard. This academic interpretive community plays a significant role in promoting Mo Yan to be understood and appreciated in the LF mode.

This section attempts to examine diachronically how power and authority affect the competition between the two discourses. The four newspapers that I have chosen for this study are *NYT* and *WP* from the USA, and *The Guardian* and *The Times* from the UK. Their consistency (at varying degrees) in reviewing Mo Yan offers primary sources for me to study the trajectory of the reception and the shifts in it. Without the consideration of more newspapers, I might neglect other possible modes of interpretation or present the degree of the contrast between the two discourses with a certain element of inaccuracy. But since the investigation is centered on the leading newspapers, which, at the same time, must also be the major participants in Mo Yan’s reception, the delimitation will not affect, but on the
contrary, highlight the study of the rivalry for authority between the two discourses in
the centers. Moreover, the examination is hoped to be suggestive of a broader trend of
the conflicts in reception between interpretive communities situated at different
hierarchical positions.

The successful research cannot be achieved without the databases provided by
the Stockholm University Library. Thanks to the online academic research database of
LexisNexis Academic, all the four newspapers under investigation are available for
texts retrieving through a keyword search. For example, after having selected NYT in
“Sources by Category” in LexisNexis Academic, then by inserting the keyword “Mo
Yan” in the search box, one can retrieve all the texts in which the name Mo Yan is
mentioned in NYT in different columns and editions in a diachronical sequence. The
texts include not only reviews and comments, which are the major focus of the study,
but also excerpts from and brief introductions to his works under the titles such as
“The Editors’ Choice: Recent Books of Particular Interest,” “Introduction to China’s
Pop Fiction,” “New & Noteworthy Paperbacks” and so on. After all the texts have
been collected, my research reveals an important fact that the conflict between the PR
and LF aesthetics in the debates concerning the Nobel consecration has actually
structured the whole history of Mo Yan’s reception in the two centers. Moreover, by
way of tracing exactly the tension between the two modes of reading, the reception
history in the press can be divided in a rather clear three periods: the dominance of the
PR mode in the first period (1993-2008), the recognition of the LF mode in the short-
lived second period (2008-2012 before the Nobel Prize), and the competition for
legitimacy between the two in the third period (Oct 2012-April 2013). The discovery
makes the study of the conflict revealed in the newspapers even more significant in
terms of peripheral literature received in the centers.

The first period includes the reception of four novels: Red Sorghum, The
Garlic Ballads, The Republic of Wine and Big Breasts and Wide Hips. The reviews in
the four newspapers show that the PR mode is embraced by the press as the standard
of selection, interpretation, and evaluation. Mo Yan’s works which have major
descriptions of the Cultural Revolution, the repression of an authoritarian regime, and
the representation of a backward society are favored by the press, while those without
central themes as such tend to be neglected and devalued. Mimetic social realism and
a strong local color such as myths and folktales are favored, whereas texts with strong
modernist and postmodernist tendency are not. In addition, reviews performed in the
PR mode are promoted while those from the LF perspectives are neglected. The difference in preference in the press can be seen obviously from the fact that the former are almost always given extensive length to elaborate while the latter are, on the contrary, reduced to one-paragraph long reviews.

The press reception of Mo Yan in the literary centers begins with Red Sorghum. It was received in the film adaptation as a social realist fable in the film review in NYT in 1988. Five years later in 1993, NYT published the first book review of the English translation. The reviewer Wilborn Hampton highly praises the novel for “introducing Western readers to the unfamiliar culture of provincial China” (NYT 1993). The merits of the novel lie in the representation of “a society living on the precipice of anarchy” (NYT 1993). One year later in 1994, The Guardian published a one-paragraph long review, introducing the novel as a fictional account of a family saga in order to explore the Chinese national character in the theme of “species’ regression” (Baker 1994). The novel’s fictional structure with the grandson telling the life stories of his grandparents as a witness has attracted many scholars’ attention for the unique literary technique and “species’ regression” has been later recognized as the central theme of Mo Yan’s literary project in the academic circle. Yet in the journalistic public sphere, this perspective has only appeared as a one-paragraph review. The contrast reveals the preference of the press for interpretation performed in the PR mode.

The following reception of The Garlic Ballads and The Republic of Wine is presented as a typical contrast of such preference. When The Garlic Ballads was published in 1995, it caught the attention of the four newspapers unanimously. In fact, it is the only book that is reviewed by all the four newspapers and all reviewers praise Mo Yan’s achievement in the text from the PR perspective. The critique of the oppressive regime is generally recognized as the major merit of the text. Richard Bernstein comments, “The unifying theme of Mr. Mo’s new book is the small person’s battle against capricious authority, both of the corrupt state and of the family tradition” (NYT 1995). Margot Norman, in The Times, also acknowledges that the book touches the sore of the repressive regime. In addition, both reviewers stress the novel being banned in China upon its first publication in 1988 to indicate the writer’s integrity against political pressure. Tobin Harshaw, however, feels unsatisfied with the degree of the writer’s criticism, “The psychological grip of Communist indoctrination is a theme the author fails to take very far” (NYT 1995). In terms of the
realistic representation of the Chinese society, Richard Lourie suggests that the novel fulfils the expectation. The novel reveals a reality “where no tourist would go,” “a view that history and journalism inevitably take” (*WP* 1995). He recommends the book to readers for the very reason of its realistic representation, “if good writing about real China is your cup of tea” (*WP* 1995).

In terms of the literary value, the reviewers read the text with reference to the Western literary context. Richard Lourie considers the modernist non-linear narrative in the novel as outmoded, “Mo’s intercutting of three stories will seem less fresh than to an audience starved for modernism—an audience who, crudely put, can be said to have missed the 20th century” (*WP* 1995). Margot Norman, however, identifies Mo Yan with writers recognized by the literary centers, “He has properly been compared to Garcia Marquez and, for the symbolic intensity of his writing about the natural world, to D. H. Lawrence. But there is another, bawdier dimension too: in content, tone and angle of view, some of his scenes seem to come straight from Chaucer” (*Times* 1995).

While *The Garlic Ballads* receives all positive reviews from the PR mode of aesthetics, *The Republic of Wine* receives two in contrast to each other: a lengthy review with strong criticism by Carolyn See from the PR perspective in *WP* and a one-paragraph comment in the LF mode by Philip Gambone in *NYT*. In the former, See expresses her frustration with the complexity of the narrative in the novel. She identifies Mo Yan’s social critique through “[t]he controlling image of a nation devouring itself” with that of Jonathan Swift through depicting the gustatory practice of eating Irish babies (*WP* 2000). But criticism as such does not fulfill See’s expectation for a direct political engagement. Even for the most direct social critique in the novel revealed in the correspondences between the fictional Mo Yan and the young literary wannabe, See considers it inadequate, it is “about ordinary literary finagling, not a frighteningly oppressive political regime. Again, what’s more important?” (*WP* 2000). For See, only a direct attack against the regime is expected as the most important task of the text.

As for the complexity of the narrative, See spends great effort to identify Mo Yan’s style with familiar Western writers:

One way would be that “The Republic of Wine” is a vast repository of scholarship both ancient and modern, a combination of James Joyce’s “Ulysses” and Laurence Sterne’s “Tristram Shandy” and Chinese proverbs both bogus and authentic, as well as a sly sendup of
American noir literature, Germanic fairy tale, the 18th-century English epistolary novel and so on. (WP 2000)

One can see that the common practice of reception in the centers is to consider the established Western writers as a point of reference. Chakrabarty calls the preference of Western history and tradition over non-Western, third-world histories as the “inequality of ignorance” when “Europe works as a silent referent in historical knowledge” (Chakrabarty 2).4 The inequality not only shows the latter in the position of subalternity, but more importantly, presents the former as the origin of “the modern,” which is understood, in Chakrabarty’s quote of Meaghan Morris, “as a known history, something which has already happened elsewhere, and which is to be reproduced, mechanically or otherwise, with a local content” (qtd. in Chakrabarty 17, emphasis in the orig.). See’s practice shows her attempt to bring Mo Yan into the history of “the modern” West regardless of the local Chinese literary history. Apparently the result is not satisfactory to her. Mo Yan’s literary innovation is not appreciated, but considered as confusing. In the end, See reaches a negative conclusion: “He’s given us an indigestible, over-the-top literary banquet with way too many courses” (WP 2000).

Contrary to See’s criticism, in the one-paragraph review in NYT, Philip Gambone highly praises the novel’s literary innovation. The novel is considered to be “a fantastical postmodernist hodgepodge that borrows elements from kung fu novels, detective thrillers, traditional Chinese tales of the supernatural, American westerns and magic realist fiction” (NYT 2000). Moreover, he sees the complexity of the narrative as designed by Mo Yan to realize his social critique through satire, “in his juxtapositions of the horrific and the comic, the lyric and the scatological, Mo is poking fun at China’s post-Mao reformist era . . .” (NYT 2000).

Gambone’s comment corresponds to the reception in the academic circle upon the publication of the English translation in the same year. The Republic of Wine is considered as the second peak of Mo Yan’s literary career after Red Sorghum. Mo Yan himself also comments that the novel represents the peak of his literary career. As he suggests in a talk “My American Books” given at the Tattered Cover bookstore in Denver, Colorado, on 20 March 2000:

There are still many improvements that could be made on both Red Sorghum and The Garlic Ballads, and if I were to rewrite them, I

4 Although Chakrabarty focuses on the discussion of history in this article, he also recognizes the same problem in literary studies.
believe they’d be better. But with *The Republic of Wine*, I couldn’t improve it, no matter what I did. I can boast that while many contemporary Chinese writers can produce good books of their own, no one but me could write a novel like *The Republic of Wine*. (*WLT* 476)

The talk together with the other scholarly articles published in *WLT* in 2000 reflects the academic circle’s recognition of Mo Yan’s literary achievements in the novel. In comparison, See’s lengthy criticism and Gambone’s one-paragraph praise in the press show again that interpretation outside the PR mode tends to be marginalized. The reviews of *The Republic of Wine* repeat the same reception pattern of *Red Sorghum*.

*Big Breasts and Wide Hips* (2004) is the last novel received in the first period. While there finally appears a positive review in the LF mode in *WP*, the novel is totally ignored by the other three newspapers. Jonathan Yardley expresses his appreciation of the novel for the writer’s disengagement from the political concerns right from the first paragraph:

> [Mo Yan] is properly regarded as representing his country’s hopes for unconstrained literary and artistic expressions. The Swedish Academy, which leaps at any chance to mix literature with politics, might well find in Mo Yan just the right writer through whom to send a message to the Chinese Communist leadership. (*WP* 2004)

This is the first press review in which the literary value of Mo Yan’s works is prioritized above the social political concerns. Yardley highly praises Mo Yan’s literary innovation by comparing it with Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* and Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. However, although Yardley as an influential book critic in *NYT* contributes such a positive review of the novel, his assessment does not noticeably affect the other three newspapers.

The reception pattern of the four novels in the press reveals two important things. On the one hand, the reception shows the coexistence of the two modes of interpretation to approach Mo Yan’s texts, the PR mode and the LF one. It in a sense proves the openness of interpretation since the beginning of the reception. On the other, it is the PR mode that dominates and regulates the selection and interpretation of Mo Yan’s texts in the journalistic public sphere. The contrast in length and the identification with Western writers and styles regardless of the Chinese context reflects the discursive hegemony that regulates the press reception of Mo Yan in the centers. While reviews from the PR mode are provided ample space to elaborate, the LF perspective is either given a little space to voice or simply ignored. Situated in the central position with literary authority, the centers restrain the reception of Mo Yan
within the larger horizon of perceiving modern Chinese literature in its political and representational function.

The second period centers on the reception of *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out (L&D)* in the four newspapers. It is also the last novel reviewed before Mo Yan won the Nobel Prize. This period marks the emergence and participation of the academic discourse in the press. As mentioned previously, the most distinctive feature of the academic discourse is to bring the Chinese literary context as the basis to construct a new horizon of expectation. The academic discourse has emerged in both centers, but as far as the reception of Mo Yan is concerned, they appear in different forms. In the USA, it is mainly promoted by academic scholars on China and Chinese literature. As for the UK, however, there is no review of this novel published in the press. Instead, there has emerged a similar academic discourse, which, through recourse to the local literary context of the periphery, seeks to subvert the stereotypes in the reception of peripheral literature by the centers. Mo Yan is often taken as one example among the other modern Chinese writers who challenge the imperative in the reception of the centers.

The academic discourse appears in the US as a strong force, since the press has started to invite scholars who are considered as experts on China and Chinese literature instead of general reviewers. The press also provides an introduction to the reviewer to stress his/her authority. Jonathan Spence, the reviewer for *NYT* is fashioned as “a leading Western authority on China,” and Steven Moore, for *WP*, is introduced to engage “writing a history of the novel” (2008). The gesture indicates that the academic discourse starts to gain recognition and authority in the public sphere. Although political concerns are still an essential factor in evaluation and interpretation, their reviews highlight the novel’s relation to the local trend in the Chinese literary context, which has been neglected in the previous period.

Both critics abandon the perception that Mo Yan’s works only function as a realistic representation of the Chinese society. Although they recognize the representational elements in the novel, they stress Mo Yan’s literary innovation as a successful achievement in relation to the Chinese literary context. For Spence,

Yet although one can say that the political dramas narrated by Mo Yan are historically faithful to the currently known record, *L&D* remains a wildly visionary and creative novel, constantly mocking and rearranging itself and jolting the reader with its own internal commentary. (*NYT* 2008)
This is similar to Moore, who states that “Mo Yan has been writing brutally vibrant stories about rural life in China that flout official Party ideology. . . . He also flouts literary conformity, spiking his earthy realism with fantasy, hallucination and metafiction” (WP 2008). Their comments not only stress the literary and fictional aspects of the novel, but also recognize Mo Yan’s literary achievements as a means to break away from national constraints.

As for the political engagement, the two critics hold different stances. Mo Yan’s political critique does not fulfill Spence’s expectation: “[L&D] is not unremittingly hostile to the Communist system” (NYT 2008). Moore, on the contrary, praises Mo Yan’s social critique beyond the ideological dichotomy: “Mo Yan offers insights into communist ideology and predatory capitalism that we ignore at our peril” (WP 2008). The difference in their responses show that while the writer’s political stance with a special focus on the ideological preference is still crucial to Spence’s standard of evaluation, it is not seen as an essential element for Moore to evaluate Mo Yan’s achievement. Seen in this light, one has to realize that the PR and LF modes of interpretation do not essentially oppose to each other. Nor are they two fixed modes. Spence’s review is an evidence of the evaluation performed from both perspectives. It proves Fish’s contention that interpretation is based on the choice of interpretive strategies.

In terms of literary evaluation by identifying with other major writers, the two reviewers abandon the conventional practice of associating Mo Yan with major Western writers but instead to situate him back to the Chinese literary context. L&D is associated with Jiang Rong’s Wolf Totem (2004) in their similarity to use animal allegories to perform social critique. The novel is also compared with Yan Lianke’s Serve the People! (2008) in their “antipolitical passion” through satire with perverted sex in their literary works (NYT 2008). Mo Yan represents a larger group of writers who engage in shifting the Chinese literary scene into a new horizon. In general, the two reviewers celebrate Mo Yan’s literary innovation in relation to the local Chinese literary context. Western readers are encouraged to appreciate the novel in its original context when the literary trend in China has tremendously diversified.

On the part of the UK, the same effort to bring the local literary context to reshape the horizon of expectation has appeared in the press. Drawing on the local literary context, scholars attempt to reveal and deconstruct the power that the centers exert in interpreting literature from the periphery (Mishra 2008, 2009; Hilton 2012).
The most active critic in this aspect is Pankaj Mishra. In his two articles published in this period, Mishra criticizes the English centers’ practice in sustaining the dichotomy between the center as a liberal ideal and the periphery as its cultural Other. In the 2008 essay, Mishra criticizes that the promotion of writers who oppose their communist regimes in the Soviet Union and eastern Europe in the 1970s and 80s has been extended to the present day China, “The cold war may have ended, but its cultural reflexes still flourish, particularly as new antagonists - China, Islamofascism - loom on the horizon” (Guardian 2008). On the one hand, he points out that such promotion of the ideological dichotomy prevents readers from seeing China as a society “that is increasingly more consumerist than communist” (Guardian 2008). On the other, the distinction insisted by the centers between dissident writers and non-dissidents glorifies the former but denies the social and political engagement of the latter:

Such stereotyping would be harmless if it didn’t cause the neglect of other kinds of writing and writers: for instance, the many interesting Chinese novelists - Mo Yan, Zhu Wen, Han Shaogon - who have foresworn the drama of exile . . . in order to observe the drama of a society undergoing the biggest and swiftest change in modern history. (Guardian 2008).

In his second essay published in 2009, Mishra goes further to criticize literary constraints at both national and international levels. At the national level, Mishra is in line with Casanova in arguing that peripheral writers adopt literary aesthetics of the center in order to achieve literary freedom from national constraints. He takes the literary innovation of major Chinese writers as an example, “the formative moment . . . was their break with socialist realism, often through avant-garde experimentation” (Guardian 2009). At the international level, however, Mishra stresses the power of international publishers in sustaining the stereotypes of national literature in the global circulation. He mentions two writers’ similar experience of being demanded to cater to the metropolitan West’s expectations from non-Western fiction. An Egyptian writer is informed that “international publishers were mostly interested in books that dealt with the treatment of women in Islam” (Guardian 2009). Another writer Mishra met in Havana is also devalued by a publisher by saying “his work was not Cuban enough. . . . [I]t didn’t have enough steamy sex or salsa” (Guardian 2009). The phenomena Mishra points out correspond to Brouillette’s examination of how postcolonial literature is constructed and consumed by the centers. Through the selection, promotion and interpretation in the light of intertextuality of literary texts in
the periphery, a touristic horizon of expectation is sustained and consolidated as the standard of interpretation and evaluation.

However, although the centers exert overwhelming power in structuring the peripheral literature to terms of otherness, Brouillette points out how postcolonial writers use strategic exoticism to negotiate such imperatives in reception. Similarly, Mishra in his article also points out the refusal of some peripheral writers to cater for the centers’ horizon of expectation. The Cuban novelist Leonardo Padura and the Chinese writer Su Tong are taken as examples of resisting “the aesthetic and ideological prejudices of a globalized audience” (Guardian 2009). Mishra’s article indicates that the cultural dichotomy sustained by constructing a touristic horizon is not limited to postcolonial literature. Instead, it is revealed to be a rather common practice in literary transactions between the center and the periphery.

The second period of press reception shows the introduction of the Chinese literary context and the critique of the centers’ imperative from the academic discourse. It fosters, in the centers, an interpretive community which bases interpretation on the local Chinese literary context. In so doing, it helps to deconstruct the dominant horizon of expectation that sustain the cultural and political dichotomies in the literary centers. The appearance of the academic discourse in the newspapers also proves the gradual recognition and authority they gain in the public sphere.

In the third period, I will examine the debates in response to Mo Yan’s Nobel consecration in the press. The debates are revealed to be the outcome of a competition between the journalistic discourse and the academic one for the legitimacy of their respective mode of interpretation, that is, the PR mode in contrast to the LF mode. On the one hand, the journalistic discourse attempts to assert its domination through defending the PR mode as the standard of interpretation and evaluation. On the other, the academic discourse challenges such domination by suggesting the LF mode as an alternative. The debates center on three aspects: the author figure of Mo Yan, the legitimate mode of interpretation in evaluating the novel *POW!*, and larger questions such as the image of China and writers’ artistic freedom. *NYT* and *The Guardian* are the major public arenas for the debates.

One has to notice that it is the recognition from the Nobel committee that enables such debates in the journalistic public sphere. Mo Yan winning the Nobel Prize not only indicates the recognition of the LF aesthetics as a legitimate approach to modern Chinese literature, but also the acknowledgement of Mo Yan’s literary
achievement in this regard. The Nobel consecration renders more opportunity for the academic discourse to promote the LF aesthetics widely on an international scale. It reflects the emancipation brought up by consecration in the literary center that Casanova suggests. Without Nobel consecration, it would be hard for the academic discourse to draw so much attention to the debates on Mo Yan.

The debates begin with the discussion of the writer’s political commitment. Upon the announcement of the Nobel Prize to Mo Yan on 12th Oct 2012, the journalistic discourse questions the legitimacy of the consecration by labeling Mo Yan as a state writer. A few “facts” are listed as evidence. Firstly, Mo Yan is the vice chairman of the state-run Chinese Writers’ association. Secondly, at the Frankfurt Book Fair in 2009, he was a member of the Chinese delegation that boycotted dissident writers. Thirdly, the consecration of Mo Yan is celebrated by the official Chinese media whereas the previous two Nobel laureates of Chinese origin, the 2000 literature laureate Gao Xingjian and the 2010 peace laureate Liu Xiaobo are denied. These facts are regarded as evidence of Mo Yan pursuing the party line with the sacrifice of his integrity as a writer.

Moreover, these reporters launch their accusations by citing criticism from former laureates, dissident or anti-communist writers and artists, especially those of the Chinese origin. In _NYT_, Tatlow draws on Gao Xingjian’s comment that “writers living under conditions of censorship were inevitably cramped by it,” and ends her article by questioning the legitimacy of the Nobel Prize: “Can great, lasting literature come from there? The Nobel committee thinks so. Do you?” (_NYT_ Oct 12, 2012). Larry Siems and Jeffrey Yang consider Mo Yan’s indirect political engagement as fear of persecution, “where there is silence, there is fear: fear of trespassing official boundaries, on one hand; fear of being called to account for one’s reticence on the other” (_NYT_ Oct 18, 2012). To justify the claim, Liu Xiaobo’s detention is highlighted as an example of the consequence of a brave direct challenge. Although both Mo Yan and Liu Xiaobo win the Nobel Prize, the problematic of the parallel between one as a literature laureate and the other as a peace laureate seems to escape the authors and editors’ attention. In addition to the above examples, the 2009 Nobel literature laureate Herta Müller, a dissident poet Liao Yiwu, and an anti-communist Chinese

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artist, Ai Weiwei are also cited as sources of criticism. By resorting to the “facts” and the comments from dissident and anti-communist writers and artists, the journalistic discourse fixes Mo Yan’s identity as a pro-Communist, a state “villain” in contrast to the brave dissident heroes. The distinction reveals the centers’ imperative to underscore an ideological binary opposition in evaluating Mo Yan. As long as he does not fulfill the standard of being a dissident writer, he is put into the opposite position of the dichotomy, labeled as a state writer.

To challenge this imperative, the academic discourse insists on evaluating Mo Yan based on his literary works. On the same day of the announcement, Andrew Jacobs and Sarah Lyall defend Mo Yan by arguing that a writer’s works are what defines him, “Mr. Mo, 57, is hardly a tool of the Communist Party; much of his work is laced with social criticism” (NYT Oct 12, 2012). They take The Garlic Ballads and L&D as examples of how both Mo Yan’s social criticism and literary innovation are considered as “a departure point in old Chinese literature and in oral tradition” (NYT Oct 12, 2012). They also cite Michel Hockx, a professor of Chinese at the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London to stress Mo Yan’s socio-political engagement: “[Mo Yan] began looking at Chinese society, particularly in the countryside through new eyes outside the party line” (NYT Oct 12, 2012). In addition to this, Mo Yan’s speech at the Frankfurt Book Fair is cited as a response to the criticism of his failure to take a political stand:

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… Some may want to shout on the street, but we should tolerate those who hide in their rooms and use literature to voice their opinions. (NYT Oct 12, 2012)

By quoting the speech, Jacobs and Lyall show Mo Yan’s refusal to be placed on either extreme of the ideological dichotomy.

Pankaj Mishra also questions the political imperative. In response to Salman Rushdie’s critique on Mo Yan being a “patsy” for the Chinese government, Pankaj Mishra criticizes the political demand that is particularly intended for non-Western writers and literature:

His writing, however, has hardly been mentioned, let alone assessed, by his most severe western critics; it is his political choices for which

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6 See Sciolino (NYT Apr 10, 2013), Branigan (Guardian Oct 12, 2012), and Jaggi (Guardian Dec 1, 2012).
he stands condemned. They are indeed deplorable, but do we expose
the political preferences of Mo Yan’s counterparts in the west to such
harsh scrutiny?

In fact, we almost never judge British and American writers on
their politics alone. (Guardian Dec 15, 2012)

The second focus of the debate is the reception of POW!, of which the
English translation was published in January 2013. In her review of POW! in The
Guardian, Yiyun Li strongly criticizes the book for failing to be able to challenge the
repressive regime, or to reflect the cruel reality of Chinese society: “rather than
exploring the darker undercurrents of society or the depths of the characters, [Mo Yan]
sounds to make it his goal to stay on the surface” (Guardian 2013). What she expects
from the novel is “a more solid and representative tragedy of contemporary China”
(Guardian 2013). Without fulfilling the PR horizon of expectation, the novel to Li is
not only of no value, but even seems vulgar, “[POW!] reads like public masturbation;
at times laughable, in the end it reminds readers that such an act should be done in
private rather than in print” (Guardian 2013). Li also questions the hallucinatory
realism, which the Swedish Academy regards as one of Mo Yan’s central literary
merits. To Li, literary innovations outside the PR mode do not contain any literary
value, “but to what end? Who needs these hackneyed hallucinations?” (Guardian
2013).

In contrast to Li’s criticism, Dwight Garner and Ian Buruma defend Mo Yan’s
achievement from the LF perspective. Garner emphasizes the span of the novel from
1990 to 2000 when market economy was introduced into the country. Such an
arrangement aims at criticizing how the shift of economic trends influences people’s
social behavior and psychology. Buruma, however, stresses the main theme of the art
of telling stories. They both point out the novel’s debt to Günter Grass’s The Tin
Drum, as Mo Yan explains in the afterword. This emphasis brings to light the
influence of world literature on Mo Yan’s literary production. Besides, they both feel
obliged to introduce to readers the multiple meanings of the title pow: it refers to the
bang of old Japanese mortar shells which the protagonist Luo Xiaotong uses in his
imagination to revenge the corrupted adult world; it also means to boast beyond the
truth. Buruma even suggests the meaning of having sex in Beijing slang.

At the end of both reviews, they turn to take part in the discussion of Mo
Yan’s political stance. Garner praises Mo Yan’s social criticism beyond the political
dichotomy, “It’s a multi-angled book, one in which no character or political system
emerges unscathed” (NYT Jan 2, 2013). In comparison, although Buruma wishes Mo Yan to be “more courageous,” he criticizes the imposition of the political imperative on the writer, “To demand that Mo Yan also be a political dissident is not only what the Dutch describe as ‘trying to pluck feathers from a frog.’ It’s also unfair. A novelist should be judged on literary merit, not on his or her politics . . .” (NYT Feb 3, 2013).

In addition to the defense of Mo Yan against the PR imperative in the centers, the academic discourse extends the discussion to the image of China and the artistic freedom of Chinese writers. Didi Kirsten Tatlow in NYT has published two articles that argue for an open attitude towards China on national and international levels. On the one hand in “In 3 Awards, 3 Ways of Seeing China,” she argues that three major prizes that have been awarded Chinese writers—Mo Yan’s Nobel Prize for Literature, Liao Yiwu’s Peace Prize of the German Book Trade, and Yang Mu’s Newman Prize for Chinese Literature—reflect many facets of China through the concerns of each individual writer. On the other hand, inside China, upon the death of a Hong Kong poet Leung Ping-kwan, Tatlow expresses the poet’s desire to subvert the national imperative of homogenization: “Hong Kong and other places that represent diverse Chinese voices should be allowed their place in the sun . . .” (NYT Oct 18, 2012).

The above analysis indicates some strong but also partially contradictory tendencies in the reception of Mo Yan. In the first place, the study reflects the Western cultural hegemony that dominates the press reception. The first period shows that the reviews performed in the PR mode are encouraged, whereas those in the LF are neglected. Although the second period shows the emergence of the academic discourse that stresses the LF mode, it does not issue a direct challenge to the PR mode. One reason is that there are contrasting expectations on the writer’s political commitment within the academic discourse itself. Another reason may be that the academic discourse does not acquire a status as authoritative as the journalistic one. The third period, however, shows the power of consecration. Having been recognized by one of the most authoritative institution of the Nobel committee, the academic discourse has substantially been invested with literary capital and authority, and as a result, is elevated to the same high level to compete with the PR mode for legitimacy. The journalistic discourse, on the other hand, cannot simply neglect the LF mode, as it did in the past, but has to denounce its legitimacy in order to sustain the cultural dichotomy. The press reception of Mo Yan shows that power and authority play an extremely significant role in deconstructing the PR dominance.
Academic Discourse: Emergence and Dissemination

In this section, I will examine the promotion of Mo Yan by the academic interpretive community in the literary centers. The reception here mainly refers to the scholarship produced in the American institutions, for there are very few scholarly essays on Mo Yan published in the British academy. Instead of going directly to the analysis, I feel that it is necessary to provide a brief introduction to the institutionalization of the study of modern Chinese literature as a university discipline in America. As is mentioned in the introduction, the LF mode stresses the literary and fictional nature of a literary text with attention being paid to the local Chinese literary context. The institutionalization symbolizes the construction of a new interpretive community in the literary centers that seeks to replace the PR mode with the LF one as a legitimate approach to modern Chinese literature.

The shift in the paradigm began with the publication of *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction* by C.T. Hsia in 1961.8 In his article “Ideology and Theory in the Study of Modern Chinese Literature: an Introduction,” Perry Link points out that the study of modern Chinese literature until the 1960s is dominated by the interdisciplinary “area studies” approach. Under the Cold War context, scholarship aimed at “know[ing] thine enemy” (Link 4). Literary texts received by this approach are generally considered as historical materials for the study of Chinese society. Having been educated in English literature at Yale University, Hsia argues for a break from this mode of interpretation. As is stated in the preface to the 1961 edition:

The present work is not . . . designed as an adjunct to political, sociological, or economic studies. The literary historian’s first task is always the discovery and appraisal of excellence: he would be forfeiting his usefulness . . . if he used the literary material merely as a mirror to reflect the politics and culture of an age. (qtd. in Hsia: x)

The preface functions as a manifesto of Hsia’s literary paradigm that evaluates modern Chinese literature from the LF mode. He strongly criticizes the tendency to consider the representation of a society in a specific historical context as the major function of literature. Hsia also criticizes the Chinese writers’ indulgence with national concerns, which he terms as the “obsession with China.” This obsession

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8 David Der-wei Wang in the introduction of the book states that the book “established modern Chinese literature as a Western academic discipline” (Hsia vii).
shows the strong demand that intellectuals engage with politics and national building in their texts. Instead, as is suggested by David D. W. Wang in the introduction to the third edition, Hsia embraces the critical thoughts of F.R. Leavis and Matthew Arnold that literature should reflect human experience and constitute “an embrace of lived human experience in its immediacy and fullness” (Wang xiii). The merits of literature lie in the enlightening function beyond the specific social historical dilemma. In this sense, contemporary Chinese literature should provide insights through the examination of ‘the state of man in the modern world’” (Wang xvii). In general, Hsia argues for literature to reveal the general humanity under different social historical moments rather than being confined to nationalism. It is the exploration of human experience and insights to universal humanity that should be valued.

Following Hsia’s contention, Perry Link traces the process in the decades that followed and marks the paradigmatic shift: “beginning in the 1970s, and accelerating in the 1980s, the inadequacy of viewing literary texts only as historical source materials became ever more widely recognized” (Link 4). One reason behind such a shift is that Chinese writers, through their own literary production, expressed their dissatisfaction at “being viewed as mere social reporters rather than artists” (Link 5). Due to the Chinese writers’ active campaign, Link recognizes the literary value of modern Chinese literature:

Although it remains true, especially among PRC writers, that worry over China’s historical crisis strongly conditions literary expression, the ways in which these worries are expressed are varied, sometimes sophisticated, and clearly appropriate for literary analysis. (Link 5 emphasis added)

The LF mode is therefore, gradually established as a new standard to approach modern Chinese literature in the centers. Mo Yan entered into the English literary scene in the late 1980s and early 1990s when the LF mode had established its position as the central interpretive strategy in the American academic circle. Therefore, the study of Mo Yan in this section reveals the scholarship produced in this direction. Moreover, as has been discussed in the previous section, the academic discourse is performed not only by academic scholars, but also by critics and institutions that are outside the academic circle. Together they form an academic interpretive community. Therefore, this section will also show how this interpretive community seeks ways to promote the LF aesthetics to general readers.
This section is structured in three parts. I will first trace the trajectory of the reception of \textit{RS} in the academic circle to show how the meaning of the novel has been enriched through the years when hermeneutic openness is embraced in literary interpretation. Then I will examine the promotion of Mo Yan by \textit{World Literature Today (WLT)} in 2000 and 2009 respectively to locate Mo Yan’s major literary characteristics recognized by the magazine. In the third part, I will examine the book-length study on Mo Yan by Shelley W. Chan to show the writer’s other literary characteristics identified in her research such as the indulgence of violence with postmodern playfulness. The three parts are roughly arranged in a diachronical way in the hope that the parallel in time period with the press reception can shed some light on the contrast between the academic and the journalistic discourses.

Since its publication, \textit{Red Sorghum} has received the most critical attention from the English academic circle compared with Mo Yan’s other works. The study of the novel ranges from the examination of thematic concerns such as History, “regression of the species,” memory, and sexuality to the study of literary techniques such as narration, fictionality, allegory, metafiction and so on. The critical reception of \textit{Red Sorghum} began in 1989, when an article entitled “Romance of the Red Sorghum Family” was published by Ying-hsiung Chou on \textit{Modern Chinese Literature}. The article functions as an introduction of the novel to the English academic circle more than discussion, for the English translation of the novel was not published until five years later. In this article, Chou introduces how Mo Yan examines the Chinese national character through his literary innovations of the historical novels. Two aspects of Chou’s examination are worth mentioning as a performance of the LF mode of interpretation.

In the first place, Chou examines the narrative to identify the central theme of the novel as the “regression of the species.”\textsuperscript{9} Through a contrast between the weak, submissive narrator and the legends of his brave, heroic grandparents, Mo Yan laments the degradation of the Chinese national character. As Chou observes, “Compared with his ancestors, who are men and women of action, the speaker finds himself belonging to a different generation characterized by weakness, timidity and hypocrisy” (34). Chou contends that Mo Yan’s search for a root of the national character disregards any ideological preference. This can be seen from the period in

\textsuperscript{9} The phrase comes from the novel and is used by critics as a term to define Mo Yan’s examination of the Chinese national character.
which it is set, stretching from 1923 to 1976, when the conflicts between the central government and the warlords, the Nationalists and the Communists, and the Chinese and the Japanese are intertwined. To Chou, the setting shows the novel to be “a study of the national character as it finds itself caught at a critical juncture in time” (34).

As is shown in the treatment of the relation between history and self-expression in the novel, Chou argues that Mo Yan locates the root of the Chinese national character in individuality. The fact that the story of the grandparents is told by the grandson, who functions as an omniscient narrator, blurs the boundary between fact and fiction in the construction of history. The writer’s recognition of making history by individual subjectivity and imagination subverts the conventional conception that history must be factual and objective. As Chou suggests, “History is in fact often seen as secondary in importance when compared with individual expression. Individuals create history and shape history with their discursive activities” (38). Therefore, the novel is more about the role of self-expression in making history.

In the second place, Chou draws on the local literary context as the central aesthetic standard to locate Mo Yan’s literary achievement in this novel. Although Chou notices the Western influence on Mo Yan—he invokes Georg Lukács’s conception of using minor characters to bring social problems to the surface as a Western tradition—he finds that Mo Yan’s achievement mainly lies in his innovative reworking of the Chinese genre of historical novels. Chinese historical novels conventionally depict characters “larger than life” in a positive way in order to disclose a moral message (40). As for Red Sorghum, however, Chou argues that the novel is “a variable of the traditional historical novel in China” because the characters are depicted as larger than life in a negative sense (40). As a result, there is no moral message to be drawn out from the novel. Chou suggests that Mo Yan’s ambivalent moral stance reveals the author’s “outlook on life: individuality, however unrespectable, is preferable to submissiveness and blind conformity” (38). In short, Mo Yan refuses to offer a moral message of any kind. Quite the opposite, what Mo Yan shows is that the roots of the Chinese national character lie in its nonconformity.

Chou’s interpretation of the novel is mainly based on the local literary trend. As he points out at both the beginning and the end of the article, Mo Yan is one of the Chinese writers who “search for roots in the second half of 1980’s” (41). He indicates that Mo Yan’s achievement in this novel is evaluated in relation to the other root-searching writers in the trend of 1980s in the Chinese literary context. By adopting the
LF mode, Chou brings the local literary trend into the international horizon of expectation to assist interpretation.

Since Chou’s article, the themes and literary techniques of the novel have continued to be explored by critics through the years (Chan 2000, 2011; Wang 2002; Stuckey 2006). Due to the open attitude towards interpretation, scholarship on the novel becomes very productive. Differently from Chou, Shelley W. Chan argues that the retelling of history through later generations is a way of challenging the Maoist discourse of conformity. In contrast to both Chou and Chan, G. Andrew Stuckey offers a third perspective. He disregards the novel as being “an alternate historical form that may be deployed to resist communist or Maoist histories . . .” (Stuckey 132). Instead, he considers it to be a political allegory and metafiction. In addition to the aspects pointed out by Chou, there have also appeared articles focusing on other aspects that Chou has not touched upon, such as the construction of gender in the novel and the identification with the style of William Faulkner. In comparison with the preference of the journalistic discourse for PR elements in the novel, the academic discourse disregards this mode of reading right from the beginning. Instead, the LF mode based on the local Chinese literary trend and tradition is favored by this community.

Let us now move on to look at the two waves of enthusiastic promotion of Mo Yan in \textit{WLT} in 2000 and 2009 respectively. \textit{WLT} is a well-known magazine, which has been recognized by the Nobel committee as one of the “best edited and most informative literary publications” in the world. On its homepage, the mission of the magazine is claimed “to serve the international, state, and university communities by achieving excellence as a literary publication, a sponsor of literary prizes, and a cultural center for students.” Being an authoritative literary publication as such, \textit{WLT} has introduced Mo Yan extensively in two issues. The 2000 summer issue even featured Mo Yan on the cover. The promotion represents \textit{WLT}’s recognition of Mo Yan as a major representative of contemporary Chinese writers. Meanwhile, the interpretation and evaluation of Mo Yan’s literary texts in the two waves are performed in the LF mode, focusing on the literary forms, styles, and themes on the

one hand, and based on the Chinese literary context, modern and traditional, on the other. In this way, WLT functions as a mediator to disseminate the LF aesthetics to general readers.

The first wave offers a good contrast between the academic and journalistic reception of *The Republic of Wine*, since both are the responses to the publication of the English translation in 2000. Considering the fact that academic articles do not necessarily coincide with the time of publication as newspaper reviews do, the timing of WLT’s promotion presents a clear contrast in the different interpretive strategies adopted by the two discourses. Moreover, considering another fact that Gao Xingjian, a French citizen of Chinese origin, won the Nobel Prize in December 2000, while Mo Yan was promoted by *WLT* in the summer issue of the same year, one cannot fail to notice that the promotion of Mo Yan by *WLT* would appear to be fed by an assumption that he would receive the Nobel Prize. Moreover, the circularity of *WLT*’s promotion and the Nobel committee’s endorsement of *WLT* presents a rather clear example of how the literary center enjoys power, privilege, and authority over the periphery. The shift in mode of interpretation in the case of Mo Yan is proved to be initiated by powerful institutions in the center.

The 2000 summer issue of *WLT* includes four articles devoted to Mo Yan and an English translation of a talk given by the writer at the Tattered Cover bookstore in Denver, Colorado. Although the articles and the talk in general regards *The Republic of Wine* as the best of Mo Yan’s works since *RS*, they should be considered as promotion rather than common critical articles. The reason lies in the fact that none of the four articles focus on a specific work. Instead, they all attempt to encompass Mo Yan’s literary project as a whole. David Der-Wei Wang, in his article “The Literary World of Mo Yan,” introduces five of Mo Yan’s novels, *Red Sorghum, The Garlic Ballads, The Republic of Wine, Thirteen Steps* (1988), and *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, a series of short stories included in *Shenliao* (1993), and several novellas in *Hongerdou* (1998). M. Thomas Inge, in “Mo Yan: Through Western Eyes,” covers the first three novels. In the third article “From Fatherland to Motherland: On Mo Yan’s *Red Sorghum* and *Big Breasts and Full Hips*,” Shelley W. Chan discusses the gender shift in the image of Mo Yan’s fictional world, Northeast Gaomi Township and in the fourth one, “Forbidden Food: ‘the Saturnicon’ of Mo Yan,” Howard Goldblatt examines Mo Yan’s indebtedness to and revolt against the Chinese literary tradition of employing cannibalism. In this section, I will restrict my examination to the critical
response to *The Garlic Ballads* and *The Republic of Wine* to see how the academic discourse stresses the LF perspective to interpret the two texts.

The two articles by Wang and Inge present a totally different evaluation of *The Garlic Ballads* and *The Republic of Wine* from that of the press. In terms of the reception of *The Garlic Ballads*, on the one hand, critics only regard *The Garlic Ballads* as one early style of Mo Yan’s literary project, which is not as rich in literary merits as *Red Sorghum* or *The Republic of Wine*. On the other, even though they acknowledge that *The Garlic Ballads* marks a return to traditional realism, a tendency in interpretation suggests that it is not a simple adoption of social realism or naturalism characterized by faithful representation; rather, it is an innovation of satire and hybrid narration blended in realistic representation. As Wang comments:

> Without glossing over even the most trifling detail, reality/realism strives to capture and re-create the stitches between social space, form, and consciousness. Mo Yan’s narrative exposes the muddleheaded ‘self-restriction’ of official narrative as he presents a biting imitation of the novelist’s nonstop attempts to overstep literary boundaries. (489)

Upon the examination of the ideological message, Inge agrees with Michael Duke’s reading of *The Garlic Ballads* being “overtly ideological” (503). But even so, he refuses to consider Mo Yan’s criticism as solely ideologically oriented. As he suggests:

> [While] it deals more directly with political matters than any of the rest of Mo Yan’s fiction, one doubts that the author’s intentions can ever be reduced to a single purpose. He seems not to be one who believes that a work of fiction can bring about either public or personal improvement, although he does seem to believe in the humanistic power of art. (503)

Mo Yan’s talk published in the same issue supports the above interpretation. He acknowledges that the inspiration of *The Garlic Ballads* comes from a real event in a Shandong county in 1987, but he refuses to put any ideological label either on the officials or on himself. As he comments, “this is a book about hunger, and it is a book about rage” (“My American Books” 476). Seen in this light, it is revealed that although both the academic critics and the writer acknowledge the strong PR elements in the novel, they encourage interpretation from the LF perspective. The academic interpretive community again shows how they embrace hermeneutic openness. While acknowledging the PR elements, the novel can still be interpreted from the LF mode. The two modes do not essentially oppose each other; rather they are two perspectives to approach the text.
In terms of the reception of *The Republic of Wine*, the academic interpretive community also presents a contrast to that of the journalistic discourse. Critics praise *The Republic of Wine* as the second creative climax of Mo Yan’s writing career. Most important, the appreciation of his achievement in this novel is due to his distinction from the Chinese literary context. The novel is examined in relation to two important periods in modern Chinese literary history, the May Fourth Movement (1915-1921) and the Maoist discourse (1942-1976).11

The examination of the Chinese national character was initiated in the first two decades of the Twentieth Century, when China was invaded and exploited by the colonial powers. Confronting the country’s backwardness, intellectuals in the May Fourth Movement strived to search a way to save the country. Lu Xun is one of the representatives of the movement. In his masterpiece “Diary of a Madman” (1918), Lu Xun uses cannibalism as a metaphor to describe the country’s self-destructive tendency. At the end of the story, Lu Xun makes a plea to “save the children” from the demerits of the national character for the hope of the country relies on the younger generation. Mo Yan’s *The Republic of Wine*, however, reverses Lu Xun’s plea to “save the children” to a parable of raising “meat boys” for consumption. Critics highly value Mo Yan’s continued examination of the Chinese national character by parodying Lu Xun’s allegory of a cannibalistic society (Wang, Inge and Goldblatt). The novel pushes the theme of “regression of the species” in *RS* further to a land of self-destruction without any redemption. As Goldblatt remarks, “in a pervasive atmosphere of human degradation, eating is better than being eaten. Rather than shoot the cannibals, he joins them. As Mo Yan seems to suggest, might we all” (“Forbidden Food” 484).

As for the attempt to subvert the Maoist discourse, critics praise Mo Yan’s treatment of history reconstructed through individual subjectivity as a way of questioning the historical truth. Wang argues that one aim of Mo Yan’s literary project is to develop a critical voice against Maoist discourse, which had dominated the Chinese literary field for more than thirty years. History represented in Chinese socialist realist literature is designated as true in disregard of reality. Wang adopts Bakhtin’s contention that “the meeting point of space and time in a novel is always at

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11 The Maoist discourse here is understood as the enforcement of the guiding principle on the Chinese literary production from “Talks at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Arts” in 1942 until his death in 1976.
the site of the origin of narrative impetus” to argue that *The Republic of Wine* fulfills dialectical historicism: the portrayal of history in the novel is constantly rewritten by individual subjectivity, thus undermining the “truth-value” of history while celebrating subjectivity in dialogue with history (Wang 488). In general, the first wave shows *WLT*'s promotion of Mo Yan from the LF perspective. His literary achievement lies in the innovation of the Chinese literary tradition. 

The second wave begins when Mo Yan is awarded the Newman Prize for Chinese Literature organized by the University of Oklahoma in Norman. Mo Yan received the first Newman Prize in 2009 for his novel *L&D*. As a gesture to further promote the LF mode to interpret Mo Yan’s texts, Haiyan Lee states in the introduction of the prize that “This time, we highlight his accomplishment as an ingenious storyteller,” thus stressing the literary and fictional aspects over the political and representational ones (Lee 28). There are eight texts devoted to Mo Yan in this issue. While the first three discuss the importance of literary forms, the two scholarly articles continue to identify Mo Yan’s indebtedness to the Chinese literary tradition, and the three vignettes are shown to be examples of such identification.

The distinct narrative of *L&D* is emphasized as the essence of the novel in both the award statement and Mo Yan’s acceptance speech. As is described in the award statement, “The novel is written in a quasi-traditional narrative style and uses the Buddhist trope of transmigration to weave a dense web of human and animal lives convulsed by China’s five decades of revolutionary transformations” (Lee 28). Mo Yan relates that the form is crucial to a literary text. He gets the inspiration from his childhood memory that a peasant refused to join the commune in his village when China adopted people’s commune system. He has kept the story to himself until he finds the right narrative form. Howard Goldblatt in the nominating statement also focuses on Mo Yan’s literary techniques. To him, “[Mo Yan] is a master of diverse styles and forms, from fable to magic realism, hard-core realism, (post)modernism, and more” (29). Besides, he especially points out the shift of motif from liquor in *The Republic of Wine* to meat in *POW!* “as the vehicle for an examination of contemporary society” (29).

One aspect that needs to be noticed is that there is no discussion on the motif of color used in *L&D*. During Mao’s radical years including the people’s commune

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12 Goldblatt uses “Forty-One Bombs” to refer to the novel in the statement, but I adopt the 2013 English translation as *POW!*.
system, the color red is considered as positive, revolutionary, and morally good. It is heavily featured in political propaganda. Having set the novel in such a context when the whole country is drawn into another red swirl of revolution, Mo Yan creates a protagonist with a blue birthmark on the left side of his face to form a strong contrast between the individual and the commune. As an orphan, the protagonist gets his name Lan Lian, literally “blue face” as his name. Since the central plot is how he refuses to conform to the commune system and pursues individuality, the color motif plays such a significant role in sustaining the tension that it can hardly escape critics’ attention. Yet, even though the novel has won the Newman Prize, it has not been mentioned at all. Such avoidance can be considered as WLT’s gesture of restricting the literary discussion from any distraction of social political concerns. In a sense, it shows the academic discourse’s radical disregard of the PR elements in the novel.

The two scholarly essays and the three vignettes are attempted to show Mo Yan’s connection to the Chinese literary tradition. Liu Hongtao, suggests that the nativist literary tradition in China has two grounds, one is the Enlightenment model of literature represented by Lu Xun (1881-1936), and the other is the cultural conservatism of Shen Congwen (1902-88). Liu argues that although critics generally recognize Mo Yan’s inheritance of Lu Xun’s spirit, they neglect Shen Congwen’s influence on Mo Yan. By examining the primitive vitality in the form of uncivilized behavior, the grotesque, and the reinvention of the national imaginary in Mo Yan’s novels, Liu contends that Mo Yan carries on the tradition from both sides. In the second essay, Alexander C.Y. Huang and Howard Goldblatt examine the comic spirit that pervades in Red Sorghum, The Republic of Wine and L&D. They contend that “[Mo Yan’s] works have reinvigorated the neglected tradition of literary humor,” and by blending “the bawdy and humorous modes,” Mo Yan “construct[s] counternarratives to the grand narrative of the nation-state” (32). As for the three vignettes, Haiyan Lee in the award statement explains that the purpose of including them in this issue is to “announce and showcase his ties to the traditional Chinese art of storytelling exemplified by the Qing author Pu Songling (1640-1715)” (Lee 25). In short, the five texts present to readers Mo Yan’s inheritance and innovation of the Chinese literary tradition.

In the third part of this section, I will examine the only book-length study of Mo Yan by Shelley W. Chan in the academic circle in the British and American
In her book *A Subversive Voice in China* (2011), Chan examines four major themes in Mo Yan’s works: the representation of history, the paradoxical nostalgia, Mo Yan’s fancy for writing about violence, and his employment of satire. I will focus on two thematic aspects to show how Chan, by embracing the openness in interpretation of the LF mode, continues to map out the characteristics of Mo Yan’s works. These characteristics consist in, on the one hand, social criticism expressed in relation to the writer’s personal experience, and, on the other, the gradual disengagement from it to pursue writing about violence for pure enjoyment.

Chan examines Mo Yan’s literary project in relation to his personal life as a peasant, a laborer, a PLA officer, and a full-time writer. His social criticism is considered to originate largely from his earlier life experience. Chan argues that Mo Yan’s political identity as a middle peasant in his early life is the basis of his subversive voice. As Chan suggests, from the revolutionary period until Mao’s death in the late 1970s, the division of class status was the essential indicator to distinguish political enemies. Peasants were subcategorized into landlords, rich peasants, middle peasants, lower-middle peasants and poor peasants. While the former two subcategories were labeled as class enemies, the latter two were regarded as the revolutionary masses with a superior moral value due to their sufferings. Mo Yan’s family was classed as middle peasants, who were marginalized and prone to political discrimination. He was forced to drop out of school for taking part in editing a newspaper that flouted the school authority. As a result, he labored as a peasant from the age of 12. The hunger and hard labor afflicted him to such a great extent that the pursuit of a writer’s career was to him only seen as a way out of the predicament. But it was not easy. The entry into colleges at that time needed recommendations by lower and poor peasants. Mo Yan, as a middle peasant, stood no chance. As a result, to join the PLA became the only choice available for him.

Having grown up with a political identity between the binary opposition, Mo Yan’s social criticism contains more “disapproval with respect to recent and current political circumstances in China” (6). The exploration of Chinese national character is through the conceptualization of history in the literary texts. By invoking Hayden White’s idea that “history is no less a form of fiction than the novel is a form of

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13 In fact, there are quite a few book-length studies on Mo Yan, mostly PhD dissertations in Canada, Australia and Hong Kong. But since my study is the reception in the British and North American literary centers, Chan’s is the only book-length study of Mo Yan.
historical representation,” Chan discerns three stages of Mo Yan’s conception of history in Red Sorghum, Big Breasts and Wide Hips and L&D (24). In Red Sorghum, the writer considers the national character to be regressive and degenerative. He expresses the longing for a nostalgic, masculinized ancestor and a return to the glory of the “traditionally androcentric social structures” (44). In Big Breasts and Wide Hips, however, the focus is changed from the longing for a return to the sustaining tension between heterogeneous constructions of history, as Chan argues, to “defend the sanctity of history” (59). Until in L&D, the perception of history shifts again: by parodying Buddhism’s six realms of reincarnation, the writer mocks “the absurdity and ridiculousness of history” (60). Chan notices that “Mo Yan’s writings have become more and more playful, funny and dark at the same time” (62). The changes in the conception of history reflect the writer’s gradual disengagement with social criticism, which is once supposed to be intellectuals’ moral obligation in the Chinese national culture.

In addition to this, Chan argues that Mo Yan’s later works show more signs of the tendency to move away from social criticism to writing for enjoyment. It is generally recognized among critics that Mo Yan inherits the May Fourth spirit, but Chan is the first to defend explicitly Mo Yan’s overstepping of the imperative of social criticism. As she observes:

Mo Yan distinguishes himself from the May Fourth intellectuals as well as from his own contemporaries by his wild imagination, unique employment of language, and an increasingly noticeable playfulness in his later works. These qualities prevent his works from becoming mere exposé; they display the pure pleasure of writing. In other words, for Mo Yan, sometimes writing is just for the sake of writing. (19)

The graphical depiction of violence with Sandalwood Death is shown as a typical example to reflect the writer’s “delight in writing about violence as well as in the imagination of violence” (147). Chan even suggests that Mo Yan “seems to unconsciously present himself as a case study demonstrating the human tendency toward bloodthirstiness” (21).

Published in 2011, Chan’s book is the latest study of Mo Yan in the academic circle. By comparison, the criticism from the journalistic discourse after the Nobel consecration and until the publication of POW! in January 2013 can be considered as the latest reception of Mo Yan in the public sphere of the English centers. While the journalistic discourse criticizes Mo Yan’s deviation from political engagement, through Chan’s analysis, one can see that the academic community support and
celebrate such deviation. Writing for enjoyment is almost a luxury for writers in the periphery where literature is demanded to conform to the nationalist discourse. Chan’s study shows the writer’s pursuit for literary freedom and it is the academic discourse in literary centers that brings this perspective to visibility.

In conclusion, the study in this section shows the academic interpretive community’s effort to bring about a shift in the international horizon of expectation in relation to Mo Yan’s texts. The effort produces two important results. On the one hand, the academic circle has performed a sophisticated LF mode of interpretation on Mo Yan’s texts. The textual meaning has been considerably enriched when the text is examined from different angles. It also shows that the academic circle promotes an open attitude towards interpretation, continuing to map out new perspectives discovered through reading. On the other, the promotion of WLT greatly elevates the status and recognition of the LF mode to approach Mo Yan’s texts. By drawing on the local Chinese literary context, it helps to deconstruct the dominant PR mode sustained by the Orientalist cultural dichotomy in the centers. The promotion and practice of the LF mode with reference to the Chinese literary context function as a counteractive force to challenge the hegemony in the reception of modern Chinese literature by the literary centers.

Structuring Reception: The Writer’s Agency in *POW!*

The Chinese edition of *POW!* was published in 2003 and its English translation came out in early 2013 after Mo Yan won the Nobel Prize. The reason to choose this novel as my close reading text is due to the sharply contending responses upon the publication of the English translation in the press. The reviewers further extend the debate on Mo Yan’s social political commitment as a writer into the reviews of *POW!*. While Yiyun Li severely accuses the writer of being a fabulist to avoid political engagement in the novel, two other reviewers, Dwight Garner and Steven Moore defend him. They value not only the writer’s critique of the social evils prevailing in the contemporary Chinese society but also the writer’s imagination and the Chinese mythology revealed in the text. The two sides hold opposing expectations and as a result, their aesthetic evaluation of the text diverges. However, my examination of the text will show that it is not just the different interpretive strategies they adopt that
produce contrasting interpretations. Drawing on Brouillette’s study, I argue that the difference is also the result of the writer’s strategic negotiation with the imperative in reception. Therefore, my reading in this section attempts to examine the agency of Mo Yan as a writer, to see how the arrangement of the structure of the text, the use of the afterword as a paratext, and the adoption of strategic exoticism together create the general bifurcation in the reception.

In terms of methodology, I will examine the text with reference to the social historical context and the writer’s biography. Philip Goldstein, in his book *Communities of Cultural Value: Reception Study, Political Differences, and Literary History* (2001), defines this mode of reading as “the objective authorial approach, which seeks a unifying intention derived from the text and from the author’s life and sociohistorical context. . .” (15). The reason to choose this mode of reading is due to two concerns. One is that both the general and specialist reviewers read the text with reference to the author’s personal life and the corresponding social historical context. The other is that both draw on textual elements as evidence to argue for their respective interpretations. This is also the usual practice in the study of Mo Yan in general. I try to encompass the two aspects so that I can put my reading on the same plane as theirs. In addition, I must emphasize textual reading: the meaning of a literary text cannot be separated from its formal components. Without a careful examination of the formal aspects, partial selection of textual elements can be misleading. Armed with the combined mode of reading, I argue that Mo Yan, in *POW!*, explores nostalgia at two levels: the nostalgia for childhood pointing to a bitter-sweet past at the individual level and the nostalgia for the Chinese national character, which continues Mo Yan’s central theme of “the regression of the species.” I also argue that under the overarching theme of nostalgia, Mo Yan adopts strategic exoticism especially in the second plot in order to negotiate the PR mode of reception in the center. By providing the “mirage” expected by the metropolitan readers who are used to the PR mode to define Chinese literature, and by subordinating it under the overarching theme of nostalgia through individual narration, Mo Yan offers and suspends social criticism at the same time. In this way, he refuses to privilege social criticism as the most important function of his literary works.

The novel is about the protagonist and narrator, Luo Xiaotong, who experiences the corruption of the adult world in his adolescence, traumatized and as a result, stops growing mentally. The narrative is structured with two parallel plots. The
first plot focuses on the present time when Luo Xiaotong tells his story to Wise Monk Lan in the Wutong Temple in order to be accepted as his disciple. While telling his story, Luo Xiaotong observes the unworldly spirits and people in and out of the temple, and the celebration of the Carnivore Festival in the vicinity. What he sees is a reality blended with his imagination and hallucination. In this reality, he witnesses how the Lan clan (one of whom, the village head Lao Lan, destroys his family) lead an extravagant life and finally receive the punishment for their evils deeds.

The second plot chronicles Luo Xiaotong’s past ten years’ experience. The narration begins with the thrifty and hard-working life of Luo Xiaotong and his mother after the father elopes with his lover Aunty Wild Mule. The mother attempts to build a big house to save her dignity from being abandoned. But Luo Xiaotong suffers a lot from being deprived of eating meat. They keep living such a thrifty and hard-working life until the father comes back with a five-year-old daughter after his lover dies. The lesson of the abject eloping life teaches the father to reverse his living philosophy of integrity over cheating for self-interest. The whole family then work for village head Lao Lan in the United Meatpacking Plant and get involved in injecting water into living animals to increase weight and injecting formaldehyde to keep the meat fresh. The father is tortured by his conscience and with the rumor of the mother having an affair with Lao Lan as a trigger, he kills her with a hatchet. The narration ends with Luo Xiaotong imagining launching forty-one bombs to kill Lao Lan in order to take revenge for the loss of his family.

My reading of POW! from the perspective of nostalgia mainly draws on Linda Hutcheon’s understanding of the nostalgic account of the past as a psychological remedy. In her article “Irony, Nostalgia, and the Postmodern,” Linda Hutcheon examines the psychological implications of nostalgia based on Immanuel Kant’s emphasis of the desire to return to the time of youth rather than to a place. To Hutcheon, the nostalgic account of the past is not the actually lived experience; rather, “it is the past as imagined, as idealized through memory and desire” (Hutcheon). Invoking Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of “historical inversion” that “the ideal that is not being lived now is projected into the past,” she defines nostalgia as “the invocation of a partial, idealized history merges with a dissatisfaction with the present” (Hutcheon). Adam Muller is in line with Hutcheon to argue that “Nostalgics desire the return of a lost perfection: sometimes a kind of certainty; other times a psychological unity; at still other times a perfect moral virtuousness” (Muller 753). In the article “Nostalgia:
Content, Triggers, Functions,” Tim Wildschutt, Constantine Sedikides, Jamie Arndt, and Clay Routledge distinguish three categories of affect related to nostalgia. The first category is called the positive affect that derives from a nostalgic feeling of a utopian past. The second is the negative affect that derives from “the wounding realization that some desirable aspect of one’s past is irredeemably lost” (Wildschutt et al. 977). The third is called the bittersweet nature of nostalgia, which is a mixture of the previous two affects. A quote from D.S. Werman is used to explain the affect as “wistful pleasure, a joy tinged with sadness” (qtd. in “Nostalgia”: 977). Hutcheon and Muller’s conceptualization of nostalgia falls into this category. Mo Yan’s writing politics show that nostalgia expressed in POW! also belongs to the third category.

In order to direct readers to ponder on nostalgia and to resist the imperative of PR mode, Mo Yan makes use of his author identity to encourage reading in the LF mode. In both the epigraph and the afterword of the novel, Mo Yan suggests that the central theme of POW! is the performance of narration itself. The epigraph is a saying from Luo Xiaotong, “Wise Monk, where I come from people call children who boast and lie a lot ‘Powboys,’ but every word in what I’m telling you is the unvarnished truth.” The saying presents a contradiction in the truth-value of Luo Xiaotong’s narration. While what he tells seems to be a mixture of truth and lies to the reader, in his own eyes, it is considered to be all true. Through Luo Xiaotong’s mouth, Mo Yan invites the reader to suspend the normal perception of truth-value with reference to the real world, but to enter into the boy’s subjective world. This is further confirmed by the afterword:

Making use of the protagonist’s mouth to recreate the days of my youth and to contend with the blandness of life, to counter the futile struggle and the passage of time may well be the sole source of pride for me as a writer. Narration can bring satisfaction to all the unsatisfying aspects of real life, and that fact has provided me with considerable solace. Relying upon the splendor and fullness of a narrative to enrich one’s bland life and overcome character flaws is a time-honoured tradition among writers. (386)

Narration, in this sense, has more functions than being a social document. It is an attempt to seek psychological balance and redemption through nostalgic accounts of the past. Narration creates a new reality, a new version of truth, and the narrator is consoled, entertained, or sees justice meted out through narration when it fails in the real world. Narration is equal to re-creation.
In addition to Mo Yan’s writing politics, the formal aspects of the text also show more precisely how the nostalgia invoked in Mo Yan’s afterword is constructed on a narrative level. As is mentioned above, the narrative is composed of two parallel plots, one focusing on the time of narration, and the other on Luo Xiaotong’s past ten years’ experience. If the second plot is structured as Luo Xiaotong’s narration to the Wise Monk, the first one is his narration to the reader. As Mo Yan points out, “During the course of writing this novel, Luo Xiaotong was me” (386). In this sense, the whole novel can be considered as Mo Yan’s incarnation, Luo Xiaotong’s nostalgic narration at two levels in order to search for a psychological remedy for the troubled mind.

In the first plot, Mo Yan presents Luo Xiaotong’s awareness of the tension between the unsatisfied life of the present and the desire to return to a simple, innocent life of the past. While Luo Xiaotong witnesses the ongoing Carnivore Festival outside the temple, what occupies his mind is his own desire for women and visions of the promiscuous sexual life of the Lan clan. Luo Xiaotong’s sexual desire is expressed in his fancy of the unworldly female spirits. The novel spans from 1990 when Luo Xiaotong is ten years old to the year 2000 when he becomes twenty. The past ten years’ bitter experience deprives him of having any intimate relations with women. His fancies reveal his desire both for sex as an adult and for breast-feeding as a child. He imagines the male descendants of the Lan clan enjoying having sex with numbers of women, but when the female spirit who looks like the father’s lover, Aunty Wild Mule comes to him, what he sees is himself being breast-fed by her. Struggling between the sexual desire and the desire for motherly care, Luo Xiaotong is more reluctant to become an adult, “I want to be a man but am far more willing to become a child, to be that five or six-year-old little boy again (52). Luo Xiaotong’s psychological dilemma reflects what the writer in the afterword suggests as “[t]he desire to stop growing . . . rooted in a fear of the adult world” (385).

In addition to this, Luo Xiaotong’s visions of the figures in the Lan clan are also crucial to present how justice is meted out through a nostalgic imaginative account. The death of Lan Laoda’s son and the castration of Lan Daguan at the end of the Carnivore Festival become a symbolic, and to a great extent, prophetic punishment on the Lan clan for the evils they have done. This also reflects one of Mo Yan’s central themes of “the regression of the species.” Right from the beginning of the second plot, Lao Lan laments, “Each generation is worse than the one before!” (2). He recalls how his rich grandfather respects Luo Tong’s grandfather, albeit a beggar,
for his courage and integrity. Moreover, the rich grandfather asks his descendants to keep respecting such virtues, “The man out there shouting insults at us has balls! You can offend other people but not him. If you meet up with him, bow your heads and bend low” (81). But when it comes to the generation of Lao Lan and Luo Tong, all the virtues and respect for virtues are abandoned for materialism. While Lao Lan attempts to restore the glory of the clan through cheating and the manipulation of social connections, Luo Tong sacrifices his integrity for economic profit and later pays his price for it.

To put further emphasis on the regression of the species, the first plot reveals to readers what happens to the doomed next generation of Luo Xiaotong and the descendants of the Lan clan. The younger Luo Xiaotong in the second plot is eager to enter the adult world. He learns to seek power and manipulate people. But after corruption and manipulation destroy his family, he loses his agency to interact with the outside world, only seeking to save himself through narration. Besides, his visions of the death of Lan Laoda’s son and the castration of Lan Daguan fulfill his desire that the Lan clan receives their punishment. The nostalgic account Mo Yan presents corresponds to what Hutcheon describes as “the past as imagined, as idealized through memory and desire” (Hutcheon). It enables him to eradicate the social evils through his narration. As Luo Xiaotong says, “If I keep it inside… and don’t let it out, it will become an open sore, a toxic boil” (76). The narration becomes a therapeutic process to sustain the psychological unity of the individual.

While the first plot functions to unify the whole novel under Luo Xiaotong’s narration, the second plot, which mainly chronicles his past ten years, is devoted to exoticism that Mo Yan uses strategically to negotiate with the hegemonic PR mode of reception in the center. In general, there are three kinds of social evils revealed in the second plot: cheating in meat process, corruption and power abuse in the officialdom, and the preying on the weak and innocent. The three aspects again point to the central theme, i.e. the decadence of the Chinese national character. Cheating in meat process becomes tacit in the village. Lao Lan invents the method to inject water into meat to increase the weight. After he becomes village head, he teaches the method to the villagers. In fact, water-injection is not the only way of cheating. Lao Lan also uses formaldehyde and sulphur so that the meat “[looks] fresher,” “[smells] sweeter,” and “wouldn’t spoil” (17). The whole village becomes complicit in cheating for profit ever since. As Mo Yan puts it in a satirical way, “the butchers in our village, thanks to
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the prestige and organizational skills of Lao Lan, were united in friendship” . . . “bound together by their windfall profits and their illegal activity” (35). After Lao Lan founds the United Meatpacking Plant and hires the local villagers to work, the whole village together keeps alert against the news reporters who come to investigate. In the age of craze for profit, no one is left innocent.

The process of cheating for profit uncovers the corruption and power abuse in the officialdom. Although Lao Lan, as village head, only occupies a minor position in the local bureaucratic system, the villagers witness his power manipulation. Rumors that he and the municipal officials are sworn brothers imply that the connections with officials help Lao Lan to protect his privilege and interest. Although the details are left unsaid in the novel, one can see the same logic through the privilege the Luo family receives from Lao Lan’s protection. Before the Luo family builds a connection with Lao Lan, Shen Gang refuses to return the money he borrows. But afterwards, he voluntarily returns the money together with interest. In addition, the Peng brothers come to install electricity in the house of the Luo family. Being asked why, they reply that, “We’re just following orders” (169). Bribery also prevails. When Mother goes to her cousin to borrow a table in order to invite Lao Lan to dinner, the cousin suggests that “If you want to get on his good side, take him a red envelope filled with money” (134). Station Chief Han is assigned by the municipal government to be in charge of the meat-inspection. During the dinner with Lao Lan and Luo Xiaotong’s parents, he indicates both the influence of his power and the possibility of accepting bribery. After dinner, Lao Lan lets him win nine thousand by playing mah-jongg. Mo Yan depicts vividly the interaction in the whole process of bribery.

In comparison with criticism of cheating and corruption, the preying on the weak and the innocent is more complicated. Both the press and the academic circle focus their attention to the powerful preying on the weak. However, Mo Yan explores this theme in more depth and subtlety. One aspect neglected by critics is how ordinary people are complicit in preying on the potential victims. Two living philosophies become the guiding principles in social interaction. One is complicity for self-protection. As is expressed in the novel, “Who doesn’t have to lower their head when they’re beneath an eave?” (135). The other is the unpredictability inherent in complicity. Luo Xiaotong is constantly reminded by his parents that, “‘No one stays an enemy for ever, and no friendships are eternal.’ That’s to say, an enemy today could become a friend tomorrow, and today’s friend could turn into tomorrow’s
enemy” (168). The two utilitarian living philosophies together with cheating and corruption form an inescapable social web in which everyone is afraid of the powerful on the one hand, and on the other preys on those who are weaker than them. One typical example to show this is that the victims of Lao Lan do not seek revenge from him but on people who are weaker than them instead.

Su Zhou is Lao Lan’s brother-in-law. Sticking to the Buddhist thought that “There are consequences to everything, good and evil” (83), Su Zhou refuses to become a butcher and appears to steer clear of the complicity with Lao Lan to keep his moral integrity. But in fact he cannot. When his sister, Lao Lan’s wife dies, he suspects that his sister is poisoned to death, so he goes to the funeral and demands to examine the corpse. Although he states that it is Lao Lan who kills his sister, he does not dare to encounter Lao Lan. Instead, he launches his attack against Luo Xiaotong’s parents, accusing them of shamelessly collaborating with Lao Lan. He also humiliates Luo Xiaotong’s father with the rumor of the mother having an affair with Lao Lan. His attack, albeit with no evidence to prove it, becomes the last straw that crushes the father. In the end, the father becomes Su Zhou’s prey.

The father then turns to prey on the mother. In the novel, the father is the only person that holds moral integrity. As a villager comments in a joke, “if all Chinese were like you, Communism would have been realized decades ago” (36). But the hard eloping life causes him to question the value of integrity. Seeing that working for Lao Lan can bring an affluent and secure life for the family, he decides to sacrifice his integrity and work as the manager of the plant. But his conscience afflicts him. Meanwhile, the complicity with Lao Lan makes Father feel vulnerable. When Su Zhou attacks Father by implying that Mother and Lao Lan have an affair, “They made you factory manager and your son a director so she could sleep with your boss. . . . If I were you, I’d have hanged myself long ago,” Father cannot stand the shame (344). Yet he, too, does not seek his revenge from Lao Lan, who is the origin of all evils and tragedies. He turns to his wife, who is standing beside Lao Lan, and uses a hatchet to split open her head. As a victim, the father turns to prey on the mother who is weaker than him.

Critics acknowledge that Mo Yan inherits the May Fourth tradition to examine the Chinese national character (Goldblatt 2000; Inge 2000; Chan 2011). Yet, differently from the pioneers who attempt to seek the virtues from the national character to save the nation in the process of modernity, Mo Yan uses his cold eyes to
reveal to the reader how the macro social historical context engulfs individuals and in the process, how individuals, while being victims, help consolidate the trend. In the fast development of the Chinese economy, cheating, corruption and the loss of morality become the major social maladies. Mo Yan brings them to the surface but refuses to provide any heroic figure or redemption. In this aspect, the novel contains strong social criticism of contemporary Chinese society.

Mo Yan in the afterword states that, “I’ve always taken pride in my lack of ideology, especially when I’m writing” (386). In fact, he criticizes official ideology and politics of any kind. One of his major writing characteristics is to place the setting of his works in social transitional periods to express his general critique. This is the same with *POW!*. As Dwight Garner comments in his review, “It’s a multi-angled book, one in which no character or political system emerges unscathed” (*NYT* Jan 2, 2013).

The contradiction in living philosophies between the mother and the father brings out the first social transition of the land reform period. The mother is from a middle peasant family, “brought up to be a hard-working, frugal housewife, to never live beyond her means and to use her money to build a house and own land” (7). In comparison, the father is from a “lumpen proletariat family,” and his philosophy is to “eat well today and don’t worry about tomorrow” (7, 8). The father has confidence in his belief because during the land reform era all the possessions one owns has been taken away and redistributed. But after he comes back from eloping and sees how villagers become rich during the economic reform era, the father realizes that he is wrong. The new trend that encourages materialism totally reverses the social values constructed in the previous land reform era. To give another example, when Lao Lan becomes village head and teaches the village the water-injection method, there are protests against him: “Some villagers spoke out angrily and some others put up posters accusing him of being a member of the retaliatory landlord class intent on overthrowing the village dictatorship of the proletariat. But talk like that was out of fashion” (17). Mo Yan, by announcing the political discourse of the land reform era as out of fashion, mocks the absurdities of politics and political change.

Mo Yan also attacks the economic reform era when capitalist economic elements and materialism are introduced into China. As Luo Xiaotong comments on the new social trend:
In today’s society, Wise Monk, the best that labouring people can hope for is to make enough to live a decent life. Most never even manage that. . . . Only the bold, the heartless and the shameless find ways to strike it rich. . . . What does that say about social equality? (137)

By setting the story in a period of social transformation and with the ordinary people suffer in either way, Mo Yan refuses to promote any official ideology or political stance in his works. What Mo Yan presents is how common people sacrifice their morality, integrity and honesty to pursue money and power. As Per Wästberg says in the Nobel award ceremony speech, “[i]deologies and reform movements may come and go but human egoism and greed remain. So Mo Yan defends small individuals against all injustices—from Japanese occupation to Maoist terror and today’s production frenzy.”

In conclusion, the contending reviews in the press are not just derived from the different interpretive strategies that the two discourses adopt, but are also a result of the writer’s active negotiation with the imperative in reception through his literary texts. On the one hand, the debates in reviews show the persistent dominance of the PR mode in reception. The two sides focus on the legitimacy of Mo Yan’s social criticism in the second plot, whereas they both neglect the importance of the first plot in constructing the theme of nostalgia in the novel. Despite the fact that Mo Yan in the afterword suggests the theme of psychological compensation through narration, critics neglect this part of discussion. As a result, the first plot seems to become irrelevant to the meaning of the text, serving only as a thread to introduce the second plot. Moreover, Yiyun Li, expecting the novel to be “a more solid and representative tragedy of contemporary China,” feels frustrated with the erotic scenes and the unworldly spirits in Luo Xiaotong’s hallucinations (Guardian Jan 19, 2013). But it is the very act of disrupting the textual form for the sake of achieving a unified interpretation from the PR perspective that makes the erotic scenes and spirits appear vulgar, meritless, intruding and beside the point.

My examination of POW!, on the other hand, shows that it is Mo Yan’s negotiation through his literary texts that produces the two contending interpretations. The theme of nostalgia is as important as social criticism in the text, if not more. Mo Yan examines the function of nostalgic narration in producing another version of reality, a reality that reveals a utopian past to the narrator. Through narration, the individual narrator attempts to achieve a sense of psychological well-being. Meanwhile, the decadence of the Chinese national character is also revealed in his
criticism. But the placing of social criticism within the framework of fictional narration prevents it from being taken as the primary function of his literary works. It becomes the way in which Mo Yan seeks to negotiate the imperative of the PR aesthetics. Social criticism is one of his foci, but not the only one. The debates in reviews reflect the writer’s burden of social political commitments demanded by the literary centers. But they are also the result that Mo Yan achieves in the attempt to negotiate the constraints of the PR mode of reading and to explore instead other literary and universal values, as proposed by C.T. Hsia.

Conclusion

The study traces the trajectory of Mo Yan’s reception in the literary centers to examine the shifts of and the competitions between the PR and LF modes of reception in Mo Yan’s case. The examination reveals the interpretation of his works to be heterogeneous in nature, as is shown in both the press and the academic receptions. The press reception has undergone three stages, from recognizing Mo Yan’s political and representational achievement in the first period, his literary innovations and social criticism in the second, to the unresolved debates between the two discourses in the third period. In all the three periods, the PR and LF modes of reading coexist, with one being prioritized over the other. In the first period, the PR mode is favored while the LF perspective is neglected. In the second, although the LF mode is favored, the PR perspective is still considered to be important. The third period, however, shows the competition for legitimacy between the two. The reception in the academic circle has produced various interpretations due to the embracement of openness in interpretation. The scholarship on RS shows an enriched textual meaning derived from different theoretical perspectives and cultural contexts, even some of which contradict to each other. The promotion of WLT has also produced many interpretations with a special focus on the reference to the local Chinese literary context. The study of Chan continues to extend the LF mode of reading by drawing on the writer’s biography as well as new perspectives derived from textual reading.

Although the study shows the coexistence of the two major modes of interpretation, it is revealed that the ones regarded as legitimate come from reading communities that have established authority. In this sense, power is a factor that plays a significant role and competition for recognition is the only way for the communities
to achieve their interpretive legitimacy. The reception of Mo Yan shows a transition from the PR to the LF mode of interpretation to approach modern Chinese literature. The old horizon of expectation in favor of the PR aesthetics dominates literary interpretation until it meets the strong challenge from the academic discourse. The dominance, as has been argued in Section 2, is derived from the Orientalist dichotomy that structures the Western Self in opposition to its cultural Other. The serious debates upon and after Mo Yan’s Nobel consecration are typical examples of the Western cultural hegemony exerted in interpreting peripheral literature.

On the other hand, the academic discourse, by promoting the LF mode of interpretation, challenges the hegemony of the PR aesthetics and seeks to deconstruct the Orientalist discourse. The trajectory of the academic reception is revealed to be a continual expansion of the LF horizon of expectation in both the diversity of interpretation and the scale of its influence. The two waves of promotion by WLT reflect the academic circle’s effort to introduce Mo Yan to the world. The most significant contribution of the academic circle is to bring the local Chinese literary context to bear on interpretation: Mo Yan’s indebtedness to Pu Songling in Qing Dynasty, to Lu Xun and Shen Congwen in the May Fourth Movement, his challenge to the revolutionary literature (1942-1976) and his distinction from his generation of writers in the contemporary period, whether they be labeled as root-seeking or avant-gardists. The visibility of Mo Yan in the world cannot be separated from the effort of the academic interpretive community, which steadily gains authority and recognition especially through WLT and the Nobel consecration. The debates in which the journalistic and the academic discourses compete for legitimacy are the result of the recognition of the LF mode by the Nobel committee. Without it, the reviews of POW! would repeat the same reception pattern as those in the first stage in the press with the hegemonic PR perspective elaborated while the LF one reduced to a negligible length. Therefore, the academic critics’ effort, the promotion of WLT together with the recognition by the Nobel committee contribute to promoting the LF mode of reading and subverting the hegemony of the PR imperative.

Moreover, as is also discussed in Section 2, the journalistic and academic discourses are two sets of statements competing for “truth.” Behind the conflicting statements are the two discourses as a whole in competition at the structural level. The conflict must be understood at this deeper level since discourse as whole is the origin of the endless statements. The competition, then, is between Orientalism and what
Said proposes as humanism, which buttresses hermeneutic openness. My study shows the academic circle’s liberating force in the attempt to deconstruct the discursive formation of Orientalism.

In addition to the competition between the two discourses, the study confirms Casanova’s contention that the hegemonic tendency and liberating potential are both inherent in the world republic of letters. On the examination of Mo Yan’s case, as is generalized above, the academic circle helps to challenge the PR mode by suggesting an alternative mode of interpretation. The scholarship opens interpretation and reveals the writer’s major literary characteristics that are outside the PR framework: the central theme of the degradation of the Chinese national character, history created as a mixture of fact and fiction, social criticism targeted on the evil human nature brought up by different social historical contexts, literary styles marked with both Western influence and the Chinese literary tradition and so on. However, the study of the academic reception also shows the hegemonic tendency of the mode of interpretation promoted by WLT, that is interpretation based on the local Chinese literary context. The reception shows a more diversified interpretation in the beginning but a more restricted one within the identification of Mo Yan’s indebtedness to the Chinese literary tradition. Chan, greatly influenced by WLT’s promotion, exhibits a similar tendency. Her study draws more biographical, social historical background to assist interpretation, but similarly as the strategy of WLT, she reduces the attention paid to the Western influence on Mo Yan. Therefore, future study can be focused on two aspects, one is the distinction or the interaction between the social political and the academic aspects of the literary centers and the other, the perspectives that have been overshadowed by the LF mode with reference to the local Chinese literary context.

In the end, this study still argues for openness in interpretation. Even though there exists the hegemonic tendency due to the uneven power relations between the center and the periphery, between different discourses and communities, the open attitude of the academic circle should be encouraged in order to bring in new perspectives and to counteract the hegemonic tendency of any single mode of interpretation. Gu Mingdong, who has published two books to introduce the Chinese fiction theory, presents a good example of how to sustain the openness of interpretation.14 As he suggests, to introduce the Chinese fiction theory is not aimed at

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interpreting exclusively Chinese literature. Rather the introduction aims at introducing another perspective to approach literary texts in general. The active participation of the academic critics as such contributes to bringing in interpretations from different perspectives.

Moreover, the writer’s active negotiation with the imperative in reception must also be recognized. My close reading of *POW!* aims at revealing how Mo Yan, by using strategic exoticism, performs social criticism of the Chinese society while refusing to place it as the primary function of his literary texts. There is no denying the fact that the PR aesthetics held by the center carries authority. But the study shows the writer’s active negotiation in order to achieve literary freedom. The academic critics recognize the subverting elements in Mo Yan’s texts and help to foster a new horizon to replace the old PR dominance. Therefore, my analysis shows both the author and the academic interpretive community’s effort to promote the LF horizon to approach modern Chinese literature in the British and American literary centers.

At the end of my thesis, I call for general readers to raise the awareness of the dominating tendency of any mode of interpretation and to assert a certain distance from the prevailing popular mode of reading in order to achieve a deeper and wider understanding among interpretive communities. On the one hand, the study shows that interpretation is essentially open. On the other, interpretations cannot simply cancel one another because they are derived from different interpretive strategies. To allow for the existence of different interpretations is to allow for the difference from one’s own perspective and to show the will to understand, which is the basis for communication. But due to the uneven power relations that structure the republic of letters, the openness in interpretation is achieved through the competition for legitimacy among communities. Since a certain mode of reading tends to dominate interpretation at a specific historical period, it becomes extremely essential for general readers to assert a distance.

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