



NEWMAN PRIZE FOR CHINESE LITERATURE

紐曼華語文學獎

**Mo Yan (1955- )**

*Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* (2006)

Nominated by Howard Goldblatt

No one reads a literary text more closely than a translator, who must deal with every single word and how that word relates to other words. I have translated novels and stories by dozens of writers from China and Taiwan, and while many of those writers would make fine Newman fellows, Mo Yan stands out as the most accomplished and creative novelist of his era. I venture to say that no literate urban Chinese and few foreigners who read about China will be unfamiliar with his name. They will likely have read his 1985 Hong gaoliang jiazou (Red Sorghum) or seen the movie. Widely referred to as post-Mao China's "breakthrough novel," it is often linked with Gabriel García Márquez' One Hundred Years of Solitude as creative milestones. Since then Mo Yan has published prolifically. But numbers tell only part of the story. The quality and diversity of his fictional output, by any literary and popular measure, is extraordinary.

In 1988 Mo Yan followed Red Sorghum with a passionate metafiction that exposed a heart of darkness represented by corrupt, venal local officials in Tiantang suantai zhi ge (The Garlic Ballads). It was removed from book shelves during the 1989 Tiananmen confrontation for fear that it might further incite the demonstrators. Then came the most uproarious and biting satire in the history of modern Chinese literature, Jiu guo (The Republic of Wine). In true Rabelaisian fashion, Mo Yan launched an attack against and parodied aspects of Chinese society (most notably, gourmandary, here including cannibalism, and an obsession with alcohol as a cultural commodity).

Among Mo Yan's more recent novels are Tanxiang xing (*Sandalwood Torture*), a love story amid savagery cruelty during the Boxer Rebellion, and Shisan bu (*Thirteen Paces*), his venture into high modernism. The author's success with satire in The Republic of Wine was followed by Sishiyi pao (Forty-one Bombs), a novel in which meat replaces liquor as the vehicle for an examination of contemporary society; it is filled with puns, allusions, and varying prose styles, common features of much of Mo Yan's fiction. These early novels differ in style, content, and effects from one another. But recently, Mo Yan has undertaken the ambitious project of chronicling 20<sup>th</sup>-century Chinese history in two blockbuster novels. Cited as "Mo Yan's grab for the brass ring, i.e., the Nobel Prize for Literature" (Washington Post), Fengru feitun (Big Breasts and Wide Hips) focuses on a family of women in a generally unflattering romp through the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and a bit beyond. His latest novel, Shengsi pilao (Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out), narrates the second half of the century, with all its tragic absurdities (and absurd tragedies). Characterized as "a wildly visionary and creative novel" (New York Times), it puts a human (and frequently bestial) face on the revolution, and is replete with the dark humor, metafictional insertions, and fantasies that Mo Yan's readers have come to expect and enjoy.



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Most good novelists have difficulty maintaining a consistently high standard in their writing, but not Mo Yan. Each of his novels has been universally praised, and each demonstrates the depth and breadth of his exceptional talent. He is a master of diverse styles and forms, from fable to magic realism, hard-core realism, (post)modernism, and more. His imagery is striking, his tales often bewitching, and his characters richly appealing. He is, quite simply, one of a kind.

“I venture to say,” Mo Yan has written, “immodest though it may seem, that my novels have created a unique style of writing in contemporary Chinese literature.” Indeed! His impact on readers and societies and his stature, domestic and international, have been affirmed by a host of prizes and awards. He will reach a significant new height later this year, when he delivers an invited keynote lecture at the annual convention of the Modern Language Association in San Francisco, the first Chinese author to be so honored.