

# Aboriginality Construction of the Magic Realism in Mo Yan's Novels

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**Abstract**—The similarity of cultural tradition and historical fate in various facades have provided Chinese authors with the opportunity and foundation of embracing Latin American's magic realism. Mo Yan was nurtured and influenced by "magic" at a very young age. He brings a mysterious flavor to his works, which has made them more enchanting. His later works incline to cultural criticism and reflection on human nature. They are more inclined to the narration of folklore and the return to traditions, where numerous characters and plots share their origin in Chinese traditional stories and folktales. Meanwhile, his writing style becomes more traditional. He waves magical dust over daily life. We can tell that his stories are not real, but imaginary and illusory, with romantic appeals attached to it, and are based on our national traditions and traditional culture. His literary works focus on the nationality of Chinese literature and display his reflection upon history and the present condition of our nation. At the same time, he presents the computation, contradiction, and conflicts between traditions and conventions and the increasingly modern outside world.

**Keywords**—*Mo Yan; novels; magic realism; aboriginality*

## I. INTRODUCTION

In his early years, Mo Yan was greatly influenced by Latin American magical realism. Some scholars, therefore, classified him as a magical realist writer, taking his literary creation merely as a copy of the magic realism literature in Latin America, and ignoring Mo's inclination for folk customs and traditions. As a response to this misunderstanding, Mo Yan says: "Some people take the illusory and whimsical fantasies as copies of Latin American magical realism, which is not true at all. In our life, there also exist unbelievable stories and terrifying experience. The theoretical implications of visual art's magic realism greatly influenced European and Latin American literature. Italian Massimo Bontempelli, for instance, claimed that literature could be a means to create a collective consciousness by "opening new mythical and magical perspectives on reality", and used his writings to inspire an Italian nation governed by Fascism. Magic realism has benefited me a lot in writing and other aspects, rather than in narrating stories of ghosts and monsters." Mo Yan's later works are more inclined to cultural criticism and reflection on human nature. They are deeply rooted in traditional culture and national heritage. In his acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize in literature, Mo talked about this change: "In my early works, I was hidden

behind the literary text as a modern storyteller. However, ever since 'Sandalwood Death', I finally started to jump from the back to the front stage. If my early works were soliloquies and were too proud to be readable, then from this book on, I began to feel like standing on a square, facing a large audience, and telling my stories vividly and heartedly. This is not only the tradition of world novels but also that of Chinese novels. I had tried to learn from western modernist novels. I had tried to play with various narrative patterns. In the end, I returned to tradition." The theme of loneliness runs through the works of Latin American magic realism. Under its influence, contemporary Chinese writers begin to ponder and create a theme of loneliness with characteristics of their own national culture and tradition. The smell of loneliness permeates numerous works of Mo, who, taking solitude and hunger as his muses, makes his works turn to focus on and explore "human" himself and displays the unique way for China to defeat loneliness: to deal with the relationship between modernization and the conservative, traditional morals and ethics properly and to reconcile their conflicts and contradictions.

## II. THE INHERITANCE OF MAGIC REALISM IN CHINA

In a sense, ancient China is mysterious to the world as well. In the process of China's modern history development, China, from being closed to open, experienced an arduous quest. People became aware of their original limited conciseness and began to know and understand the modern world again, searching a way for personal development diligently. In this process, agony and worry filled the heart of Chinese authors. At the same time, the advanced intellectuals of Latin America were positively absorbing the technology and cultural concepts of developed countries, striving for realizing the national cultural leap and development. Magic realism is a continued craft in the many countries that have contributed to it in its earliest stages, as Germany being first and Latin American countries being a close second. There are certainly differences in aesthetics between European and Hispanic magic realists, but they are both equally magic realists. For this reason, the Hispanic magic realists should really have proper designation as such but not the overarching umbrella of the broader term as this article suggests. They created literary works marked with national characteristics and eventually made remarkable achievements witnessed by the world. "Latin America writers are the leading force of the entire world." [1] Chinese

writers began to join in this tide actively by absorbing and drawing lessons from the foreign culture to make up the deficiency of their national culture.

The development of magic realism can be traced back to 1980s. From then on, it began to influence Chinese literature to a profound extent. Vital elements of magic realism began to appear in literary works, opening a door for contemporary Chinese authors and leading them to a mysterious world. Essentially, magic realism is a type of reflection on social reality, a novel form of expression. The glory Mo Yan received through the Nobel Prize has made magic realism reach a new climax. Mo Yan has become a widely acknowledged follower and successor of Gabriel García Márquez, or a pioneer of magic realism in China. However, most Chinese still know nothing about the real process of development of magic realism. When Márquez talked about magic realism, he said: "What seems to be unpredictable is actually a trait of Latin America...Magical things, for us, are the reality of everyday life." [2] Contemporary Chinese literature is profoundly influenced by Latin America magic realism. We can see the attempts of its application in numerous literary works of various authors. In the present-day society, the word "magic" is applied to multiple areas, even web novels and comics. Guangfu Chen stressed in his paper "Introduction to and Comments on Magic Realism" that: "Someone says that realism is a mirror and magic realism a distorting mirror of the society, which is a proper metaphor. Magic realism is indeed the authors' deliberate exaggeration and refraction of the reality. They cover it with an illusionary hue. However, it does not mean that the questions they proposed are not the main contradiction of society. Regarding most literary works, normally they all have positive contents about anti-hegemonism, anti-imperialism and anti-feudalism. They are popular among the vast majority of readers and have achieved considerable social influence because they can use the past experience for present and learn from foreign experience in the aspect of artistic technique. As a result, magic realism has become one of the main schools of contemporary world literature." [3] In China, the study of magic realism has experienced the process of first being frenzy and then cooling down. Though many writers no longer apply the writing techniques of magic realism nowadays, its influence on Chinese literary is still undeniable. In 2004, Deming Zhao looked back and concluded the profound influence of Latin America magic realism's fruitful results on China in the paper "Latin America Novels in the 20th Century". In 2007, Xing Zhao published "the Contemporary Attempt to Sinicise Magic Realism — on 'One Hundred Years of Solitude' and 'Lenin's Kisses'", where he made comparisons between specific writers' works to discuss the influence of magic realism on Lianke Yan. The study of magic realism develops from elementary analysis on literary works to the focus on their genesis, evolution and distinguishing features. "On Magic Realism Novels of Latin America" by Haoyi Yuan, "A Brief History of Latin American Literature" by De'en Li, "The Techniques and Characteristics of Magic Realism Novels" and so on, all present a comprehensive view on the genesis and development process of Latin American magic realism.

The reason why Magic realism can be accepted and developed in China lies in that there exist similarities between the myths and folktales in Chinese traditional culture and those in Latin America. After breaking through the retraining of traditional realism and that in ideology and politics, Chinese authors began making an effort to attempt new writing methods. They turned their eyes upon foreign literature, striving to study and absorb their nutrition. Massive foreign literature flooded in, leaving a profound imprint on the conventional concepts and mindsets in China. The aim of getting to know the essence of literature creation again is to better promote the development of the cause of literature in China and bring mental nutrition and intellectual support to our people.

### III. THE ILLUSIONARY REALISM OF MO YAN

The process of accepting Latin America's magic realism is not smooth for Chinese authors. Two inclination are presented, one being mere imitation, the other one being localisation. Its reason lies in Chinese authors' various levels of exposure to and acceptance of magic realism. Mo Yan once said, "I threw away the book after finishing reading the first chapter of 'One Hundred Years of Solitude'. I thought I could write in the same way as well! However, I soon realised that I would never be famous if I do write in the same way, though I am capable of it." [4] Magic realism has proved an ideal vision for Mo, who is deeply influenced by it consequently. Kjell Espmark, Chairman of the Nobel Prize committee for literature, commented that "Defining Mo's works as magic realism would easily make people think of García Márquez, the South American literary giant, and naturally assuming that Mo is imitating his works, which is, however, not true. Mo has his unique way of representing stories that took place in China. Regarding the combination of fantasy and reality, he even outdoes Márquez." [5] Mo Yan is one of the brave writers who dare to attempt and break the boundaries in this process. He is the milestone marking Chinese contemporary literature's entry to the stage of the world.

People connect Mo with "One Hundred Years of Solitude", the magic realism work by García Márquez, ever since he became the rising star of Nobel Prize in literature. There exist numerous astounding similarities between Mo's attitude towards Chinese rural areas and Márquez's view on Latin American villages. The application of magic realism in Chinese literature is not due to coincidence but a natural choice. The most important reason is that China and Latin America have a lot in common concerning cultural traditions. Having experienced cruel culture desolation, contemporary Chinese writers are doing everything possible to find new writing methods. At this time, the appearance of magic realism technique catered to their need, and they embraced it positively. It is also relevant to writers' attainments in the aspect of traditional culture. There have also been many stories and novels on gods, ghosts and spirits in China, such as "Search of Gods", "Journey to the West" and "Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio", which are deeply rooted in the national culture and traditions. Both Chinese and Latin American people have the concept of ghosts and gods and all

beings having souls. Thus, the similarity in cultural traditions is the main reason for magic realism's steady growth on this land.

In 2012, Mo Yan was awarded Nobel Prize in literature. According to the Swedish Academy, he received it because his work is "with hallucinatory realism merges folk tales, history and the contemporary". Mo Yan was nurtured and influenced by "magic" at a very young age. He has brought a mysterious flavour to his works, which has made them more enchanting. Mo Yan breaks the boundary between human and ghosts and picks up the "ghost culture" from Chinese tradition in his novel "Reunion of Comrades". At the same time, he learns from García Márquez the writing techniques and methods when constructing his own "Gao Mi Northeast Township". García Márquez's Macondo and Faulkner's Yoknapatawph aroused his interest in popular writing and his awareness of the concept of native soil. In 1981, Mo published his first novel "Spring Night Rain". In 1984, he was assigned as professor of literature department in PLA art academy, which enabled him of devoting more time to writing. During this period, he created "The Transparent Carrot" and earned his first fame. Afterwards, he gradually became world-famous starting from the film adapted from his novel, "Red Sorghum: A Novel of China". Apart from "The Transparent Carrot", Mo also wrote "Baby with Golden Hair" and "Ball Lightning" during the 1980s. He said, "I wrote five novellas and dozens of short stories in 1985. They were undoubtedly deeply influenced by foreign literature, especially 'One Hundred Years of Solitude' by García Márquez and 'Sound and Fury' by William Faulkner." [6]

Mo's unique capability of this kind has played a vital role in his cause of writing. He said: "Life is multi-colored, containing many illusionary and elusive things. No matter how hard life is, it is always filled with romantic sentiments. Life itself possesses beauty in its mystery, philosophy, and implicitness." [7] Mo's works never lack astounding scenes, among which many are established upon his home village that witnessed his growth and his experience of hunger. For instance, "The Garlic Ballads" focuses on the situation in rural China at the beginning of the economic reforms initiated by Xiaoping Deng in 1978. The novel sets its background in the "Paradise Town" among China's vast rural area, where local generations almost knew nothing about the social reform. However, the extreme suffering they underwent aroused strong desire for fighting back against old conventions. Here we excerpt a dreamy paragraph from "The Garlic Ballads": "At dawn, he seemed to have slept for a short while. When he woke up, he felt sore and pain over his entire body. Fire blow out of his nostrils and mouth. The fiery breath had decayed his lips and nose wings. He trembled tremendously and desperately. His trembles made the iron bed squeak. Why do people tremble? Aye, why do people tremble? Some little red girls ran and jumped and yelled and shouted on the ceiling. Their bodies were very thin. Their waists were twisted by the rolling wind again and again. One of the girls was naked to the waist. She held a bamboo pole in her hand and stood on one side alone."

#### IV. LONELINESS IN MO YAN'S MAGIC REALISM

China is a country with a deep history. It is deeply rooted in its traditional culture, where Taoism and Confucianism are both respected and promoted, which is worth praising and spreading on the one hand, and has made China complacent and conservative on the other. When stepping on the outside world that has conflicts and contradictions with our traditions and conventions, we would find us in a situation filled with loneliness. In this background, this kind of loneliness is often reflected as mental torments between tradition and modernity. The theme of loneliness haunts Latin American literary works of magic realism. García Márquez once gave an account of himself, saying "people often say that my 'A Hundred Years of Solitude' is about Macondo, but it is about loneliness." In our country, many literary works have traces of loneliness as well, such as those of Lu Xun, Xiao Hong, and Ailing Zhang. Chinese contemporary authors have started to reflect on and create a theme on loneliness that is equipped with features of national culture and traditions. Latin American magic realism is like a mirror, which has reflected the reality that Chinese culture is stepping out to the world. We need to combine culture and social reality to realize our faith and identity. Loneliness also runs through the entire history of Chinese literature as one of the sentiments human is born with. We can feel the intense loneliness not only in contemporary authors like Lu Xun, Xiao Hong, but also in Qu Yuan, Ji Kang, who lived their lives thousands of years ago. At the same time, China also has a group of "root-seeking literature" writers who are influenced by magical realism. Their literary expression can be considered as a reflection of China's social reality and psychology in the new era.

The root-seeking literature turns the vision of Chinese writers to Chinese traditional culture. It is the result of Chinese contemporary authors' effort of making breakthroughs. Root-seeking literature focuses more on the essence of the traditional culture. Root-seeking culture is also deeply rooted in tradition, which strives to discover its essence in order to create literature with imprints of Chinese culture itself. While paying attention to the modernization of contemporary literature, Chinese intellectuals tend to pay more attention to the national nature of Chinese literature. At that time, the fledging root-seeking literature was a process where Chinese writers relieved their anxiety of modernity and faced western modernism. [8] However, unlike magic realism writers, although their works are rooted in national culture, writers in new China tend to criticize the benighted and backward parts of the traditional culture when evaluating it. The loneliness in the literary works produced in the period of new China has embodied their reflections on national culture, history and the present situation of the country. Regarding contents, Chinese writers have mainly created two types of figures to present solitude, one aiming at criticizing national culture as well as weakness in human nature, and the other one stands the loneliness of the spirit. In the novel "Little Village of Baos", Anyi Wang created the character Lao Zha, who was kind, virtuous, righteous, and willing to sacrifice himself. The positive compositions of Chinese



traditional culture and national spirit are exhibited through this figure.

Among novels relevant to the family planning policy implemented in the 1960s, "Frog" by Mo Yan reveals one of the most substantial problems. There is no doubt that this policy has had a tremendous impact on thousands of families and even has determined the future and destiny of many people. It involves many aspects of society and has been criticised by westerners. It is not only a complicated political topic but also a problem seriously related to the present situation of the country. Mo thinks this topic "touches the most painful point of the soul" and the most conventional part of the Chinese cultural tradition. "Frog" is the last of Mo's novels evaluated by the Swedish academy before they decided to award him the Nobel Prize in literature. It is a novel written "for thousands of readers who were born in the era of family planning and had their own experiences of it". "Frog" directly confronts with the sensitive topic of China's family planning and one-child policy and depicts the painful, even bizarre, process of modernization which took place in Gaomi, Mo's hometown, during decades. The main character, Wan Xin, "my aunt", a modern country doctor who had delivered nearly ten thousand babies, was well-known as the "goddess of delivery" when she was young. However, at that time, the country made a difficult decision to promote family planning policy because of its mass population. "My aunt" was in charge of it, and had consequently become a "killing monster". The novel narrates three astonishing deaths caused by fleeing pregnant women. Compared with death, the croaking of the frogs that "my aunt" wanted to run away from was nothing. Later, "aunt" wanted to make up her mistakes by making clay figurines in her imagined figures of the babies she had drained and selling them to tourists who wanted to raise children. However, when she helped her nephew "tadpole" to have a son with his infertile wife through surrogacy, the boundary of morality blurred again. The novel shows the inner struggle and loneliness of the "aunt" as a rural female doctor. She did not know whether she should obey the national policy to maintain a low birth rate by aborting babies in the wombs of those women with a second child, or follow her heart to protect the unborn babies and find ways to prevent accidental pregnancy.

The sense of loneliness penetrates through most of Mo Yan's novels. He mentioned in his Nobel acceptance speech that, "Loneliness and hunger are my muses." Although extensive descriptions of love do exist, the transient romance would only leave behind profound solitude. In "The Garlic Ballads", Jin Ju and Gao Ma, a couple devoted to each other, had to face the obstacles set by Jin's father and brother. When they were going to get married, Jin's father died, hit by a car. Her mother and Gao Ma were both involved in the "garlic event", which led to the suicide of Jin in the end. Mo Yan adopts various ways to present love, but eventually, all love ends in tragedy and loneliness. This reflects Mo's childhood experience to some extent. The collective sense of loneliness expressed through different characters successfully reflects the solitude and suffering these characters bear as they struggle between tradition and modernization, as well as in the realm of morality, and

enables us to draw a sharp contrast between rural and urban areas.

## V. CONCLUSION

Chinese literati are trying to find new ways of literary creation, but this process is full of hardships and sufferings. Due to the conflict between two different cultures and the vicissitude of times, they are also faced with difficult choices in the process of modernization. Whether to stick to the principle of "literature reflecting real life" or to strive for breakthroughs remains a question. The compatibility of cultural tradition and historical destiny provides the opportunity and foundation for Chinese writers to accept Latin American magical realism. In magical realism literature, politics and society are usually the objects of criticism. Due to the unique circumstances of Latin America, their literature is always filled with scenes of war or plots of social turmoil. In contrast, the era of war and turbulence belongs to the history of China. Thus, Chinese literature focuses more on the conflict and contradiction between tradition and modernity as well as old thoughts and new thoughts. It also pays attention to China's rural issues. Such are the traits of the majority of Mo Yan's works. If the way to solve the problem of loneliness in Latin America is to build up the unity of the peoples in order to overthrow the dictatorship, to enter a new era, and to make the culture of Latin America known to the world, then, that for China is to handle the relationship between modernization and traditional ethics properly, and to reconcile the conflicts and contradictions. The development of Latin American magic realism literature in China has also experienced an arduous process. From imitation to the creation of literary works with national characteristics, Chinese writers have learned to focus on "human" and made in-depth exploration. They have liberated themselves from the restraints of western literature and have discovered a path of literary creation with Chinese national characteristics. They have become aware that, it is necessary to return to traditional culture and national spirits to achieve the leap in creation, and they have succeeded in this process by studying and absorbing Latin American magical realism.

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