



Yinde Zhang, *Mo Yan, le lieu de la fiction* (Mo Yan, the Place of Fiction),

Paris, Seuil, 2014, 319 pp.

Fanny Fontaine

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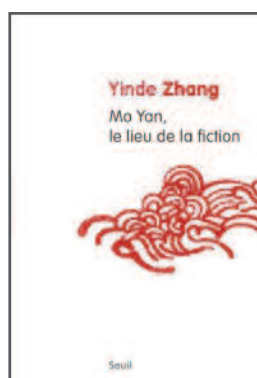
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the market, as the state remains at the centre of regulatory mechanisms. With this last explanation, Wu returns to the book's main thesis: contrary to Western neo-liberal vision, Chinese town planning is not an enemy of growth but its main tool.

This book will be welcomed by scholars and students interested in China and who wish to understand one of the key elements of China's transition. Scholars and students of urban planning may also find in it elements for reflection and comparison on changes in the styles of urban planning in its theoretical and practical dimensions so as to better understand the reality and process of urbanisation in China and elsewhere.

■ Translated by N. Jayaram.

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**Yinde Zhang,
Mo Yan, le lieu de la fiction
(Mo Yan, the Place of Fiction),**
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FANNY FONTAINE

After publishing many works on contemporary Chinese literature, such as *Le monde romanesque chinois au XX^e siècle: modernités et identités* (The World of Chinese Fiction in the Twentieth Century: Modernities and Identities), *Le Roman chinois moderne 1918-1949* (The Modern Chinese Novel, 1918-1949), and *Littérature comparée et perspectives chinoises* (Comparative Literature and Chinese Perspectives), Yinde Zhang, professor of Chinese Studies and director of research at the Centre d'études et de recherches comparatistes (Centre of comparative studies and research) at Sorbonne Nouvelle University-Paris 3, turns his focus here to a contemporary Chinese writer already known to the public: Mo Yan, winner of the 2012 Nobel Prize in Literature.

A former member of the People's Liberation Army and a native of Shandong, this writer, whose pen-name means "don't speak" (莫言 *mo yan*), has already been the focus of abundant critical works centring on various analyses that very often veer between two stumbling blocks: excessive particularisation or excessive generalisation. While some concentrate solely on his biography, others identify him with an exotic image of China, while still others paint him as the paragon of contemporary Chinese or world literature. Nevertheless, part of the academic critique has turned towards the study of certain thematic and formal elements of his work, for example its connection with history and memory, its social critique of contemporary China, and the formal procedures of writing.

In this context, Yinde Zhang, who has worked extensively on the notion of identity, adopts an original approach, offering us a monograph that views Mo Yan's work from a spatial perspective. The title of the book, "Mo Yan, le lieu de la fiction" (Mo Yan, the place of fiction), gives already an idea of the importance of territory in this study, as the focus is placed on one particular location, Gaomi, the writer's birthplace.

The appeal of this work lies in its positioning at the crossroads between the local and the universal, identity and otherness. Indeed, Yinde Zhang analyses Mo Yan's work "in its three-dimensional aspect encompassing memory, critique and the imaginary" (p. 18). In other words, he studies the latter's work as a place that represents a space of the body (bodily memory), a critical space, and a space for the imaginary. To study Mo Yan is to "explore his work with fresh eyes, at the point where history meets fiction, the real meets the imaginary, and the local meets the global" (p. 25). It means "stepping away from one's birthplace" – as the writer himself stated in 1992 – leaving one's place of origin, Gaomi, and studying all of its symbolic dimensions, by means of which Mo Yan has transformed a real place into a literary and imaginary non-place, free of any political or literary ideology: "Gaomi is a place of the word, as much as a place of fiction. It is a reinvented territory" (p. 12).

Therefore, in an approach that is both monographic and chronological, Yinde Zhang has studied Mo Yan's "place of fiction" at several levels: he first looks at the writer's creative space, examining the sensory, rational, and imaginary dimension of his work, before viewing each work as an independent territory within this space.

The first part, "L'œuvre en contexte" (The work in context) therefore sets out a symbolic process that can be read throughout the work. It starts with Mo Yan's biography, not from a biographical perspective, but to emphasise the extent to which the autobiographical place acts as a foundation from which a profusion of stories emerges, feeding on legends, imagination, and on an historical or indeed mythical time depth: that of China. Gaomi is the original place, a starting point for a fictionalisation of history. It is the place of expression of the body, of matter, of the earth, at the infinitely subtle level of individual sensitivity, or at the mythical level of outlandish family sagas. Yinde Zhang leads us ably through Mo Yan's "creative and sensory journey."

In a remarkably structured work, the author next turns to Gaomi as the place of a controversial statement that reveals Mo Yan's critical power, in terms of both the comical and the ironic. The literary place then becomes a theatre stage where the writer can use his detached voice to undermine any form of power. This subversive statement first manifests itself in the oral and vernacular dimension of the writing, which offers a return to a language that fluctuates between the spoken and written word, that expresses the rhythm of the earth and in which the subject enjoys freedom of speech. This gives the reader access to the language of the people, but reinvented.

Finally, Yinde Zhang dwells on an inescapable trait of the writer: the subversive use of irony that colours all established social discourse, from state ideology to the literary *doxa*: no matter how nationalist, in favour of an increased birth rate, or epic the language might be, all passes through Mo Yan's filter of exuberant and ferocious verve.

The second part, "Une topographie romanesque" (A novel-by-novel topography), studies Mo Yan's novels as independent islands linked symbolically into a network, shifting from the journey taken by the writer's creative identity to the journey of the works themselves, the frame of refer-

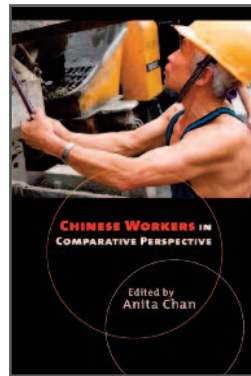
ence being biological. Indeed, Yinde Zhang has produced a detailed study of each work in its imaginary dimension, looking at the tension between the real and the supernatural, the rational and the fantastic. The aim of the critique is to show that, by depicting the violence of the body, Mo Yan questions the connection between the individual and history and attempts, perhaps, to restore a form of vital power or humanism to a fiction that speaks of the body and of life: a *biofiction*.

The study first looks at *The Republic of Wine: A Novel*, a virulent satire of an abject society. Indeed, this was the first of Mo Yan's novels to recount the violence of relations between the individual and the state, in the metaphorical form of cannibalism "to textualise the abjection, this rejection outside the body" (p. 118). The omnipresence of the lower functions of the body allows a primitive power to re-emerge, blowing away all notions of decorum. Yinde Zhang next considers *Big Breasts & Wide Hips*, which draws a paradoxical picture of the motherland, in which Jintong's mother symbolises China's sacrifices over the course of the series of destructive utopias it has experienced through history. Bodily violence is once more the theme in *Sandalwood Death*, which approaches the subject through a critique of a violated and colonised territory; finally, this biological dimension of the writing finds expression in *Frog*, the explicit theme of abortion, and the treating of the body as a commodity. In this case, the question of the body is once more linked to the earth, because the novel reveals the negligence of successive policies blighted by utilitarianism. Yinde Zhang shows that, from Mo Yan's point of view, from communism to liberalism, history is nothing more than a cycle that keeps repeating, an inevitable return of alienations of the body and mass executions.

After a brief conclusion that shifts the emphasis of the question of Mo Yan's controversial commitment towards a subversive writing policy, the end of the book offers an insight into the reception of the writer in France, both in the press and in the world of academic research, which makes it possible, in hindsight, to embrace the originality of Yinde Zhang's viewpoint. Instead of appraising Mo Yan's work through the prism of a culturalist or exotic vision, it considers it rather by studying how this "fictional world, with its autobiographical, memory, and mythical dimensions, breathes life into realistic and fabulous figures, while mixing in violence, cruelty, animality, the carnivalesque, the grotesque, irony, and humour. The variety of aspects in the work thus corresponds to its polymorphic and transgeneric nature: a web-like organisation is worked through the texts and genres, linking them thanks to a meaningful collection of repetitions and variations" (p. 58). Similarly, Yinde Zhang's book is organised around the motifs of the body and territory, thus sketching a literary map of Mo Yan's world.

■ Translated by Will Thornely.

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Anita Chan (ed.),
Chinese Workers in Comparative Perspective, Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 2015, 296 pp.

MING-SHO HO

China watchers generally agree that successful economic development through low-wage export has shown signs of exhaustion. Since the Labour Contract Law came into effect in 2008, labour costs have risen considerably, squeezing the profit margins of export-oriented manufacturers. Migrant workers' rights consciousness has surged, as witnessed by the Honda strike and the much publicised wave of suicides at Foxconn (a Taiwanese electronics maker) in 2010, and the strike at Yue Yuen (a Taiwanese footwear maker) in 2014, all taking place in Guangdong Province, nicknamed "China's California" for its economic significance. The visible slow-down in GDP growth has also cast doubt on the viability of the current strategy to maintain political acquiescence with improving living standards. *Chinese Workers in Comparative Perspective* is an edited volume that provides timely and comparative insight into how the working class has experienced the recent major transformation.

Anita Chan, the editor of this volume and an Australia-based veteran observer of China's workers, persuasively contends that it is time to move beyond "the fallacy of exceptionalism," since what is happening in contemporary China can also be found elsewhere. The methodological refusal to treat China's working class as a special case helps to demystify the official pretension to create "socialism with Chinese characteristics," since, as the introductory chapter eloquently argues, workers are exploited as much there as in other capitalistic countries, if not more. There is another unexplored implication. This contextualising research strategy is instrumental in debunking some naive but fashionable and influential expectations that China will evolve into a balanced and harmonious developmental pattern⁽¹⁾ or a unique path that combines political stability and economic growth.⁽²⁾ As in nineteenth-century Britain, the contemporary world factory of China is no less ruthless to the producers who supply the globe with what millions need, the irony being that it is ruled by a party that retains nominal allegiance to the historical mission of classical Marxism.

Originating from a 2011 conference, this volume offers a sufficiently updated diagnosis of China's working class. The foreign-funded factories in maritime provinces continue to rely on labour supply from the rural hinterland, and have recently begun to hire second-generation migrant workers. That the new generation is more city-bound and less likely to identify themselves as temporary sojourners has deeper implications for class politics in the years to come. Massive lay-offs in state-owned enterprises and

1. Giovanni Arrighi, *Adam Smith in Beijing: Lineages of the 21st Century*, London, Verso, 2009.
2. Jacques Martin, *When China Rules the World: The End of the Western World and the Birth of a New Global Order*, New York, Penguin, 2009.