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Man and Animal in the Work of Mo Yan

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Mo Yan’s extremely diverse and original oeuvre over the last three decades has given rise to a number of major critical works. The fictional universe of this author is generally perceived to be illuminated by a broad thematic spectrum, ranging from childhood memory through to the power of violence and the explosion of sensual experience in such works as Honggaozleng jiazu (The Red Sorghum Clan), Tanxiang xing (Sandalwood Torture), and Fengru leitun (Big Breasts and Wide Hips), to mention the most famous examples. Some critics focus on cannibalism, which is a particularly striking phenomenon in Jiuguo (Wineland, or Liquorland) owing to its ingenious narrative presentation. Others opt for studies of the whole opus supported by monographs or comparative investigations. However, his work calls for fresh reflection taking into account its evolution and its scarcely explored intentionality. This author’s literary world cannot be reduced to the myth of Gaomi, his reinvented birthplace, or to culture-based interpretations. Within it there is to be found a universal vision and a way of writing that confronts the major issues facing mankind today. In this respect his urgent concern with man’s animal nature is expressed through obsessively recurrent motifs which, while being rooted within a specific history and geographical location, are nonetheless among the fundamental questions troubling the world as it enters the twenty-first century.

The universe of Mo Yan’s imagination is based on a new kind of humanism and a representation of society in which mankind is closely linked to the animal world, and this proximity is even what makes it human. Whether in a critical or in a celebratory vein, his work expresses an animal ethics that blurs the boundaries between our human selves and the otherness of animals, pointing towards a sense of community shared by all beings. This fiction of living beings, which owes less to metaphysics than to phenomenology, places the emphasis on sensual experience co-ordinated with an imaginative reinvention of biopolitics. The three recent novels, Sishi ya pao (Forty-one Cannon Shots), Shengsi pilao (Life and Death are Wearing Me Out), and Wa (Frogs), broaden the animal motifs to be found throughout his previous publications, and provoke reflections on the possibilities

1. This article is based on a paper given at the international conference on “The Asian novel and its translations” organised by Noël Dutrait at the University of Providence, 15-16 October 2009. I would like to express my thanks to him and to the two anonymous reviewers for China Perspectives.
2. See Yang Yang (ed.), Mo Yan yanju ziliao (Studies on the work of Mo Yan), Tianjin renmin chubanshe, 2005. This work is a collection of the most noteworthy critical articles, in addition to providing a bibliography, pp. 581-608. See also World Literature Today, 74, 3, Summer 2000, which is a special edition on the work of Mo Yan.
7. There is little doubt that both the importance of the imagination and the aspiration to universality are what the author means by his stated intention to “get beyond one’s native place.” See Mo Yan, “Chanyue guxiang” (Getting beyond one’s native place), in Xiaoshuo de qiw ei 360-378.
8. “We began by cutting man off from nature and setting him up as a sovereign ruler; we believed that this would efface all the unchallengable characteristic, namely that he is first and foremost a living being. And, by remaining blind to this shared quality, we have given free rein to every abuse … by seizing the exclusive right to radically separate man from animals, and granting to the former everything that was taken from the latter, we [Western man] entered into an accursed cycle, and as this separating boundary was constantly pushed back, it served to separate some men from other men, laying the basis for a claim, in favour of ever more restrictive minorities, to the exclusive privileges of a humanism which was corrupted at its birth for having borrowed its very principle and notion from self regard,” Claude Lévi-Strauss, “Jean-Jacques Rousseau, fondateur des sciences de l’homme,” in Anthropologie structurale II, Plon, 1973, p. 53.
9. Shengsi pilao was published in English as Life and Death are Wearing Me Out, trans. H. Goldblatt, New York, Arcade, 2008. Two of these works are also available in French: Mo Yan, Guanante et un coup de canon, translated by Noël and Liliane Dutrait, Editions du Seuil, 2008; La Dure loi du karma, translated by Chantal Chen-Andro, Éditions du Seuil, 2009.
of “living together” in a world that presupposes shared participation without human domination and discrimination between the species. The denunciation of human cruelty towards animals, the compassionate reciprocity favoured by metempsychosis, and the concretisation of anthropo-zoomorphism through images: such are some of the ways in which a biocentric pattern is given novelistic shape and sharply distinguished from anthropocentrism. (10)

The denunciation of cruelty

Mo Yan’s work confronts us again with the question of man’s absolute right over animals and the gratuitous nature of cruelty. The writer attributes this to our dogmatic adherence to modernisation, which exalts productivity and fetishises prosperity. The slaughterhouse in Sishiyi pao is a condensation of the perverted versions of modernity that provide naked violence with a patina of legitimacy. In effect every horror has its source in this meat-processing factory, which glorifies the modernising projects of the local authorities and, more broadly, of the nation as a whole. The creation of such an enterprise in a rural area enables an increase of productivity, in comparison with the artisan butchery that used to be the village’s principal but scarcely viable activity. The industrialisation that drags the countryside out of poverty proves capable of satisfying the authorities. Moreover, the food industry that replaces family butchery seems to eliminate cruelty, if cruelty means an intentional act carried out by the one who inflicts it in direct contact with the one who undergoes it. (11) But Mo Yan takes a stand against the impersonal automatism of machinery, in order to unmask the massive cruelty concealed by the de-individualising nature of serial production.

As we have come to expect, the author proceeds through irony to lay bare the alliance between financial interest and the official ideology that compounds its atrocities with fraudulent practice of selling meat pumped full of water. In -

10. Mo Yan’s project effectively goes beyond traditional humanism, as he declares in an interview: “It seems to me that contemporary fictions dealing with animals tend to be stereotypical by projecting pseudo-humanist ideas onto them. It all seems rather hypocritical.” “Mo Yan tæn dongwu” (Mo Yan, discussions on animals), in Mo Yan duihua xinxu (New collection of interviews with Mo Yan), Beijing, Wenhua yishu chubanshe, 2010, p. 369.


12. The link between cruelty to animals and the fraudulence involved in meat production inevitably recalls the Chicago stockyards of the early twentieth century described by Upton Sinclair in The Jungle. This novel was translated into Chinese as “The Slaughterhouse” (Tuchang) and had a direct influence on Xiao Hong. Included in The Hands, it is echoed more significantly in Sheng si chang (Field of life and death) in the scene describing the slaughter of an old horse, and in more general terms this cruelty to animals functions as a metaphor for the dehumanising process undertaken in the northern territories under Japanese occupation in the early 1930s. See Xiao Hong, “Shou” (Hands), http://www.eywedu.com/Xiaohong/dpxsh/001.htm, and “Sheng si chang” (The field of life and death), http://www.eywedu.com/Xiaohong/shsch/004.htm (10 March 2010). Upton Sinclair’s novel was first translated by Yi Kannen (Guo Moruo) as Tuchang, Shanghai, Nanqiang shuju, 1929.

the Festival of Meat. In the first case, the company reaches its peak of production thanks to the competition, in which its productivity is measured by the stomach capacity of its leaders. The chief of the rinsing works would have been unable to take full advantage of this marketing stunt if he had not put on an unbeatable performance, which makes him a champion worthy of the title Meat Child. The quantity of meat devoured on this occasion, like the gastronomic sophistication displayed elsewhere, only avoids being equated with sheer greed because the villagers’ voraciousness is dissolved into this highly suspect playfulness. By imagining such a game, the author is able to emphasise the ravages inflicted on the human spirit by a system whose only value is the display of power, in terms of both production and consumption, based on the consumption of animals.

The shared ideal of power, even of megalomania, is at the basis of the Festival of Meat, which is itself a perverted version of the old rituals of orgiastic sacrifice. The flags and the multicoloured chariots set up violent confrontations that evoke the world of baroque romance, while every variety of roasting meat emits its own aroma. Meanwhile, above the crowd abandoned to gluttony and drunkenness, fireworks trace out a gigantic character for the word “meat.” This celebration of abundance turns to debauchery amidst total indifference to the scapegoats sacrificed on the altars of this triumphant materialism. As the cult of enrichment becomes the new creed and the cement of national cohesion, this dictatorship of consumerism exercises its power through a ritualised joy without sacred meaning. The perversion of the sacred can be read through a whole network of transgressive signs. The sacristy conceals less in the rejection of the Buddhist principle forbidding all animal sacrifice than in man’s assumption of divine powers, as he imposes himself as master of the world and of all the creatures in it. The Feast takes place within a ceremony dedicated to the foundation of the Temple of the Meat God. This previously unknown divinity ensconced in Mo Yan’s pantheon is born out of the deification of the Meat God. This previously unknown divinity is represented in some legendary tales in the shape of a child who habitually finds pleasure with monks. The kinship between these two divinities becomes clear when the cannon-child assumes his role as narrator, throwing light on the links between the unrestrained consumption of meat, the ravages of lustful consumption, and the fetishism of prosperity. But the multiple identities of the child, who has degenerated into the flesh child, head of the rinsing works, god of meat, are then made to give way to the textual rupture introduced by the cannon-child’s role as narrator. The latter opens up a rift amidst the general impurity. In fact, this novel is made up of the 41 stories told by the cannon-child to a monk, who is immersed in an impassive silence in contrast with the narrator’s unstoppable torrent of words. But the child’s act of narration is in reality an expiation. The unending flow of the monologue is in every respect comparable to a confession. Mo Yan does not appear to question meat-eating per se, understanding fully its immeasurable complexity, even if elsewhere he praises the clan of the grass-eaters. But he gives prominence to the need to face up to reality by giving these clans his blessing, as Elisabeth de Fontenay puts it, especially as the reality in question takes on monstrous proportions. The narrator protagonisfinishes his tale by literally firing 41 cannon shots to pulverise Lao Lan and his factory, as if the destruction of the scene of the crime would allow the criminal madness to be expiated. But if there is an act of destruction, it is undertaken in order to remember better, and the cannon-child achieves such commemoration through the narration that completes his conversion. Although the other characters do not achieve this final break, they nonetheless live, like the
narrator, under the burden of casuistry. In their view, the domestic animals that have given their energy to humanity deserve a better fate than the slaughterhouse. If they cannot have a proper tombstone, they must at least have a burial place. For example, Huang Biao refuses to sell his plough ox, which is treated as though it were the reincarnation of his mother. On the initiative of the child’s mother, Chen Yuzhen, a 10-metre high platform is raised so as to liberate the souls of these dead victims of injustice. This structure proves to be dedicated as much to the victimisers as to the victims, since it is the child’s father, Luo Tong, who spends seven days there in obstinate solitary meditation. The irremediable occurs when, during his descent from it, he splits his wife in two in the same way that he used to finish off his animals. It is difficult to decide whether this fatal gesture is intended to punish her adultery or the criminal enterprise set up through the complicity between the legitimate and the illegitimate couples. Whatever the case may be, the deaths of Chen Yuzhen and Lao Lan, the imprisonment of Luo Tong, and Luo Xiaotong’s renunciation lead to this dramatic outcome, while also expressing the overriding need for reparation.

Compassionate awareness

The demonstration of cruelty and sadism is accompanied by a sense of compassion. The accusations on the charge sheet are therefore counterbalanced by a more positive mode, based on pity towards all living beings, without any distinction between man and beast. The author invokes a Buddhist view of things to imagine a universe in which human and non-human animals would cohabit, communicate, and permutate among themselves. More than his other works, Life and Death are Wearing Me Out expresses this empathy between and across the species, mediated by a story of transmigration that is meaningful as well as being a fantasy.

With the coming of the People’s Republic, Ximen Nao, a former landowner executed during the agricultural reforms, undergoes successive reincarnations as a donkey, an ox, a pig, a dog, and a monkey. Thus he becomes both witness and participant in half a century of the country’s history. His metamorphoses into several domestic animals keep him in contact with his family and his village, without any event escaping his notice. The animal within his lower body lives a social life rich in passing events, just like the human beings around him. His interactions with the latter enable the author to expound a bio-centred ethics, both from within the character’s viewpoint and from outside.

This ethics is made manifest in the first instance by pity for the community of suffering beings. In most instances, the feeling of the unbearable arises out of face-to-face situations. For example, the injured donkey causes his master Lao Lan to sob as he struggles to free his trapped hoof. Moreover, the care and affection shown by the master have dissuaded the donkey from his suicidal intention, according to the rescued creature himself. Or again, Huang Huzhu, who is in love with Ximen Jinlong, casts aside all propriety at the sight of her beloved covered in blood, and hurls herself upon him “like a tigress protecting her cub.” The sight of the unbearable arouses an immediate and disinterested reaction that transports the onlooker towards the other by creating an immediate identification. The impossibility of indifference has its roots in Buddhist compassion, but it also recalls the...
cult of sensibility initiated by Rousseau (22) and the daily experience of piety in the work of Schopenhauer. (23) This capacity to feel the suffering of others also refers to the anecdote of the ox reported by Mencius: A king who was unable to bear the sight of an ox being dragged off to sacrifice ordered that it should be replaced by a sheep. (24) This was not a matter of substituting a smaller item for a bigger one but the experience of a face-to-face meeting that, according to F. Jullien, is sufficient to set up a sense of fellowship with another existence, human or animal, because “it is existence itself that, through me, rises up in favour of another.” It is a movement quite separate from any egotistical aim, (25) and this primal emotion, arising from this shared existence, expresses no other link save that with life itself. Such a shared participation in life is naturally complemented by the rejection of indifference to death. Although burial for animals is only the object of a hollow promise in Sishiyi pao (Forty-one Cannons), it becomes a tangible reality in Shengsi pilao (Life and Death are Wearing Me Out), since the many mortal remains within which the reincarnated protagonist completes his life have actually been buried. The dignity of animals finds its supreme expression in this eternal rest, because mourning for these animals prevents them from dying alone; their life is recognised, just like a human life, which means they deserve the same funeral lament. (26)

Yet the compassion conveyed in Mo Yan’s work is not really reducible to the one-sided attribution of feelings to “humanity.” This would risk becoming a repetition of the species-centred fable, which assigns to man alone the power to experience pity for the fate of the threatened, violated, and massacred animals. Accordingly, Mo Yan is not content to just express a sensitivity or emotional immediacy, which is sometimes merely impotent and is incapable of arriving at a rational basis for rights. Life and Death are Wearing Me Out leads to a more reflective compassion in the sense that it is more contextualised and more functional. This novel valorises certain kinds of potentiality or functional aptitudes (27) that show individuals in their real capabilities tested in specific contexts. Such capabilities are shown to exist among human and non-human animals alike, and this opens the way to recognising their rights. In this way, the novel expounds a more political compassion that, being supported by a justified use of emotion, operates rather through a sense of solidarity and reciprocity between men and animals.

This reciprocal compassion is to be seen above all in the common participation in suffering and pleasure, transcending the boundaries of anthropocentrism. Thus, throughout these chapters it is not uncommon for animals to weep or smile on behalf of the human beings around them. The dog enters the tomb prepared for him by his master, only after accompanying the latter to his own grave. For his part, the ox sticks by his master, Lao Lan, when he refuses to join the People’s Commune: he abandons the collectivised land in order to return to his master’s independent pasture, braving the deadly blows rained down on him. (23) By means of this osmosis between two suffering creatures, the “tears of blood” mingle with the stifled cry rising up against injustice and against a totalitarian regime incapable of tolerating the existence of this “only independent peasant in the whole of China.”

Although compassionate awareness grows stronger in a relationship of interdependence between humans and animals, sensitivity alone is not enough to define behaviour. The faculties of perception, imagination, and even reason, allow the animals to build a world in which they acquire the legitimate right to forge relations with the human species, in the same way that some humans are able to care for animals. On their own initiative the animals seek to develop a relationship of co-operation and mutual aid with mankind, by conducting organised struggles against every form of injustice and seizing opportunities for expansion. Thus the canine protagonist challenges the status of servant companion assigned to him, because in his eyes his master, who is so dependent on him, is equally deserving of that title. The dog’s self-promotion to equal subject is also confirmed by his involvement in the sentimental entanglements of his close human kin, thanks to his

23. Moreover Schopenhauer refers to the Chinese — based on a translation of Mencius (Mengzi) by Stanislas Julien — and to the Hindus when he asserts: “Lacking the philosophy of the Schoolmen, whose authority I can invoke here, I would add the following: that the Chinese proclaim five cardinal virtues (Tschang), among which they give pride of place to pity (Sin). The four others are Justice, Courtesy, Wisdom, and Sincerity. Similarly, among the Hindus, on the memorial tablets raised to remember the dead, the virtues for which they are praised include, in the first line, pity towards men and animals,” quoted from the French translation: Le Fondement de la morale, trans. by A. Burdeau, Librairie Germer Baillière et Cie, 1879, p. 164.


26. At least, this is the same interpretation that Karl Weil makes in the case of J. M. Coetzee’s novel Disgrace. See Karl Weiss, “Liberité éhontée,” Critique, August-September 2009, p. 677. He identifies a “shameful empathy” in Professor Lunei’s response to the euthanasia of a lame dog, since he sees the kinship between himself and his dog as one based in humiliation and shame, over growing old and approaching death. It is not a matter of maintaining the ideal of “moral uprightness” in the words of Francione, who believes in ending the lives of domestic animals in order to preserve our good conscience sullied by the master-slave relationship. The essential point is that animals should not die alone, that they should be able to die surrounded by love because, as the end of Coetzee’s novel shows, the protagonist does not desire the dog’s disappearance but wishes to mourn their shared shame.


highly developed sense of smell, which makes him an incomparable detective. The pig, who has “clear ideas” in his natural state, but whose brain “gets fuddled” as a human being, attacks Hong Taiyue because the animal cannot put up with the sadism inflicted by the hardened old Communist on Lady Bai, a former landowner and his own principal wife in a previous life. (29) In addition, the pig who shows himself able to act out of noble feelings perishes in his attempt to save some children who are drowned in freezing water. (30)

The dog’s cunning manoeuvres, the pig’s act of bravery, and the sadism inflicted by the hardened old Communist on ashes obtained from his grandmother’s abundant newly-grown hair, has more or less the characteristics of a reconstituted human being. This resurrection coincides with the advent of the new millennium, and announces the emergence of an anthrozoomorphism, which in reality arises from the shared roots in life. This “humanimal” future has in fact its own historical trajectory. Ximen Nao’s metempsychosis recalls not only the descent into hell, but even more clearly the ancestral relations between the human and animal realms. His repeated reincarnation makes him the generating patriarch of a prolific kinship open to polymorphous animal connections. The spreading family descent, whose multiple origins, moreover, are traceable back to polygamy, adultery, and adoption, exists within a micro-society rooted in an anthropo-zoomorphic archetype. The baby of the century turns out “despite everything” to be the inheritor of the patronymic “Lan,” i.e. “Blue,” out of respect for his ancestors whose faces bore this bestial, or demonic, stigma. This cross-breed pedigree is authenticated by the fact that he was born from an animal-loving mother, as the outcome of transgression and incestuous love. Here the break from the norms of the kinship structure refers to the myth of Fu Xi and Niüwa, a couple who were brother and sister with human heads and intertwining snakes’ tails. The return to the origin (or plural origins) forcefully championed by the author receives its confirmation in this final chapter, which allows the emergence of primordial desire.

The “humanimal” body

The theme of animality lends itself to both teleological and mythical treatment. The sequential introduction of the different animals, far from being haphazard, embraces the development of Chinese society, with the donkey and the ox as beasts of burden immersed in the scene of collectivisation, the pig as the sign that announces and then confirms abundance, and the dog as the domestic companion in China as dance, and the dog as the domestic companion in China as.

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Mo Yan, Shengsi pilao, op. cit. p. 349.
Mo Yan, Shengsi pilao, op. cit. p. 366-367.
Mo Yan, Shengsi pilao, op. cit. p. 540.
the boy calls out “Ma” in a disquieting confusion of the words for “Mother” and “Mare.” (32) This topos ends up affecting the novel’s whole universe, shaping the text itself as a hybrid entity. In effect, Mo Yan’s work becomes an immense body, built through a process of hybridisation that acts upon the characters, the rhetoric, and the textual structures.

In all of Mo Yan’s novels one finds the cohabitation of men and animals, and even communication between them. This co-presence in the world is given clear form in the characters who have been metamorphosed or hybridised. The reincarnation of Ximen Nao, quite unlike the irreversible process of degradation, gives him the dual faculties of man and animal. Metempsychosis is presented less as a case of metempsychosis (the incarnation of a human soul in an animal body), than as proof of the impossibility of a split between body and mind. This is attested by the different chapter headings: “the donkey’s torments,” “the ox has recourse to obstinacy,” “the pig gives himself up to joy,” “the dog’s temperament,” without mentioning the sub-headings that summarise the behaviour and effects of the animals. The animal body here is no longer the object of behaviourist observation of its mechanical gestures, nor is it just a vehicle for human feelings. It is a metaphor for the living body of any kind, giving an expressive function to natural elements, men and animals actually interacting in a more systematic way. There are numerous character portrayals and descriptions of gestures or postures in which playful comparisons blur the boundaries between man and animal, as can be seen in the following two examples from Sishiyi pao: “He [the monk] was perfectly calm, like a dozing horse”; (39) “If they [the animals] had not uttered groans like old women with toothache, you would hardly have thought that they were alive.” (40) The first example establishes a parallel between the meditating monk and a sleepy horse, the two species being semantically...
linked by their shared serenity. The second describes a dog market in which the dogs’ suffering in their motionless bodies would have been unnoticeable if they had not uttered their human, or more precisely their elderly people’s groans; this analogy draws its power from evoking the suffering common to both sets of defenceless creatures. The proliferation of such comparisons actually goes beyond their shared suffering to refer to that of the world itself, since neither man nor animal is restricted to one side or the other in the comparison. On the contrary, through their perception and their feelings of interchangeability, they compare, contemplate, and exchange their positions. Comparison involves metonymic devices – the horse is close to humans, and the statue of the centaur in the temple is even closer – and this points to an environment shared by men and animals that, far from existing in an asocial world, actively participates in society.

The “humanimal” entanglement evoked in the language games reaches its climactic expression in Mo Yan’s latest novel *Frogs*, as is shown by the homophonic links set up by the sound of the character for “frog” (wa 1) in the title, which then refers to the character for “baby” (wa 2), and finally settles on wa (wa 3), which comprises one side of Nüwa, the goddess and creator of human beings. These homonymic associations operate as links in the diegesis, associating the issue of the murderous birth control policy with the denunciation of the organised trafficking in surrogate motherhood under the cover of a commercialised trade in bullfrogs. But they also have a symbolic range beyond these rhetorical effects. The disquieting imaginary world, in which the midwife charged with a holy mission doubles as an aborting one, is shared with animals that, far from existing in an asocial world, actively participate in society. This occurs when the activities of Nüwa are submitted to a “judgement of Solomon” that problematises the definition of human identity in terms of the family tree and kinship descent.

Far from raising man to supreme mastery, the new fictional language games, deployed as they are through the signifying chain of the frogs, reaffirm the writer’s obsession with interspecies being endowed, moreover, with sacred meaning. In this respect *Frog Babies* is closely connected to *The Frog God* by Pu Songling, an author practically wright Li Xingdao, since Gao compares himself to the figure of the impartial Judge Bao. But Mo Yan’s dramatised episode proposes a version aimed at the relationship between bio-ethics and the world of real living beings. This drama, and the novel itself, ends after the judgement in favour of the genetic mother, with the failed suicide of the Aunt, trapped by her guilty conscience over the multitude of abortions she has performed throughout her career as a midwife. From then on she remains obsessed by the croaking of frogs, which sounds like the cries of babies from beyond the grave. Mo Yan, *Frogs*, op. cit., pp. 291-340. We should remember that Li Xingdao’s played inspired Brecht to write his *Caucasian Chalk Circle*. Li Xingdao’s play was translated into French by Stanislas Julien. See Li Hsing-dao, *Hoel Lan Ki ou l’histoire du cercle de craie*, London, Oriental Translation Fund, 1832.

41. See Mo Yan, *Wa (Frogs)*, Shanghai, Wenyi chubanshe, 2009. This tale is most probably the product of a long gestation, because in an essay written several years ago, Mo Yan promised to write a novel about frogs: “Hongshui, niuw a” (Floods and bullfrogs), in Mo Yan sanwen xinbian (A new collection of essays by Mo Yan), Beijing, Wenhua yishu chubanshe, 2010, p. 160. In fact, certain episodes in the novel recall the scenes described in the essay, such as the frogs invading the village after the heavy downpours in the 1960s.

42. The last part of the novel is written as a theatrical parody in which Chen Mei, the clan-mother, is promised to write a novel about frogs: “Hongshui, niuw a” (Floods and bullfrogs), in Mo Yan sanwen xinbian (A new collection of essays by Mo Yan), Beijing, Wenhua yishu chubanshe, 2010, p. 160. In fact, certain episodes in the novel recall the scenes described in the essay, such as the frogs invading the village after the heavy downpours in the 1960s.

43. Shiniang, (the Tenth), a reincarnation of the frog divinities, marries Kun Sheng (bachelor Kun) at the same time as the house is invaded by bactrians. The house undergoes a series of misfortunes after the husband offends them by ill-treating his wife. Peace and prosperity return when the wife is once again respected and the rites are properly observed in the sanctuary dedicated to the frog deity. She then gives birth to two boys. See “Qingwa shen” (The Frog God), in Pu Songling, *Liaozhai zhiyi* (Chronicles of the Strangest), Beijing, Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1989, pp. 1440-1450.

44. This constant play with the slippage of pronouns is particularly striking in the writer’s use of *we*, which in the published French translation Chantal Chen-Andro does not hesitate to translate as “nous” [we]. Mo Yan, *La dure loi du karma*, op. cit. pp. 555-556. See the original Mo Yan, *Shengei pila*, op. cit. pp. 384-387.
“I is another” means rather that “I is they,” insofar as the "we" is the incarnation of an infinitely transposable instance, like a chain of contagious metamorphoses. In the absence of a utopia of universal coexistence, this “we,” designed to rally others as much as to implicate them, at least raises the hope of rediscovering what another butcher’s son, Pierre Dac, a humorist and member of the French resistance, incisively summed up as the missing link between monkey and man.

*Translated by Jonathan Hall*