
Mo Yan, a brilliant and controversial Chinese author and winner of the Nobel Prize for literature in 2012, uses writing to elucidate the development of the People’s Republic of China, beginning with the extreme poverty and famine of the early years, through the adversity of the Cultural Revolution, and on to the country’s economic rise. Yan, an apolitical figure, is more controversial outside of China because many view his writing as cruel and lacking humanity, while Chinese readers perhaps view his writing as an explanation of their history and a former way of life. As a reader of the former type, I offer a review of Mo Yan and his work as an outsider looking in.

Mo Yan’s *Frog: A Novel* is written as an epistolary novel, made up of five books, with each book being preceded by a letter from the narrator to an unknown Japanese mentor. The novel’s fifth and final book concludes with a nine-act play. For western readers, the arrangement of the novel takes some getting used to, as it is not a common format used by western authors.

*Frog*, beautifully translated from the original Chinese edition to English by Howard Goldblatt, takes readers on a barbaric journey through China’s history, primarily focusing on the implementation of the government’s one-child policy. The policy was one of many extreme measures used to slow China’s birth and population rates in the 1970s. *Frog* focuses on the brutal execution strategies used by authorities to enforce this policy, and the determination of the people to circumvent it.

Set in the rural town of Gaomi, China, the narrator of the novel, Xiaopao, tells a story about the life of his aunt Gugu. Gugu, a once highly-revered and well-known midwife, delivered thousands of children in Gaomi when it was acceptable for Chinese families to have as many children as they pleased. Gugu’s modern midwifery skills and methods were crucial for the town of Gaomi, as the old midwife practitioners used ‘witchlike’ child birthing methods that were sometimes lethal to both mother and child.

With the onset of the Cultural Revolution, Gugu’s role drastically changes from revered midwife to hated abortionist. Gugu’s unflattering loyalty to the Communist Party is proven in the novel when she states, ‘I have always been a Party member, and I will die a Party member!’ (58). Her loyalty continues to flourish when she becomes the head of the Communist Family Planning Committee, responsible for executing China’s one-child policy at all costs. Gugu, abetted by her devoted intern, Little Lion, mercilessly execute the policy by forcing vasectomies upon men and the implantation of intrauterine devices (IUDs) and late-term abortions upon women. The people of Gaomi attempt to defy the policy, but each attempt turns out to be an unsuccessful one. It isn’t until two mothers die in Gugu’s care that she loses her fervor for executing the one-child policy, and is compelled to retire.

Near the end of the novel, Xiaopao, the narrator, shifts focus from Gugu to his wife, Little Lion, and a modern-day bullfrog farm located in Gaomi. The bullfrog farm is a façade, disguising a woman surrogacy operation taking place at the establishment. At a post-menopausal age, and under the influence of deeply-rooted Chinese culture, Little Lion feels as though she has failed in her role of matriarch. She has never been able to have children, thus she has never been able to provide her husband with a son to carry on the family name. For the sake of her matriarchal role and Chinese culture, she pays a woman surrogate, Chen Mei, to birth a child for her and Xiaopao, a son. *Frog*
concludes with a nine-act play that describes the exploitative maltreatment of Chen Mei, the surrogate mother of Little Lion and Xiaopao’s son.

The novel *Frog* is at times challenging, to say the least. Mo Yan brutally illustrates the harsh realities faced by the people of Communist China during the Cultural Revolution. This may prompt some readers to withdraw from the text, but doing so would be a mistake. Though the novel may seem to only be an alarming representation of the history of China and its people, it is so much more than that. Yan’s use of magical realism brings the novel to life. Readers are introduced to colorful characters and descriptive settings. To see the novel for its true value is approaching it with an open and interested mind. Mo Yan’s *Frog: A Novel* is a dynamic work of art.

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