



Big Breasts and Wide Hips by Mo Yan

Translated by Howard Goldblatt. New York: Arcade Publishing, 2004. ISBN 1-559706-72-4

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***Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, by Mo Yan. Translated by Howard Goldblatt.** New York: Arcade Publishing, 2004. ISBN 1-559706-72-4.

Christopher Lupke, Reviewer

The fiction writer Mo Yan (original name Guan Moye), born and raised in a peasant family in rural Shandong Province, has emerged, over a twenty-year period of steadily producing blockbuster novels and dozens of short stories, as a literary giant of the post-Mao period in China and a perennial contender for the Nobel Prize in literature. Having first achieved international acclaim for his classic work *Red Sorghum*, adapted for the screen as Zhang Yimou's breakout film of the same title, Mo Yan developed a reputation as a writer of "seeking roots" (*xun gen*) literature – a term attributed to Mo, Han Shaogong, Wang Anyi, and a few other of his contemporaries – literature from the 1980s that sought to re-establish the intellectual's traditional position of privilege as the purveyor of China's image in writing by peeling back the layers of ideology-laden rhetoric and excavating China's most fundamental cultural traits. The style of his writing could perhaps be crystallized by the term "uncanny purity." The subject matter is unequivocally brutal and bizarre but the style of writing is hypnotically simple and staid. Although the characters in his fiction can in a certain sense be said to be heroic, the heroism they exhibit is a far cry from the Maoist hagiography that had dominated Chinese narrative (from mainland China) for close to half a century. The unusual sensuality that characterizes his depictions of nature and bleeds into the unconventional lifestyles of his characters, the reconceptualization of peasant reality for a new audience both in China and abroad, and the relentless pursuit of the essence of national culture residing within the interior reaches of rural China has successfully slammed shut the door on any prayer that establishment party intellectuals harbored to revive the idealism of Maoist literary tenets.

This latest translation of a Mo Yan epic by veteran translator Howard Goldblatt represents the most recent incarnation into English of the Mo Yan style – a vernacular described by many as "magic realism" or "magical realism," a mixture of the bizarre and commonplace in the manner of Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Goldblatt, the preeminent translator of modern Chinese fiction with scores of translations to his record, is not someone who has come to Mo Yan by accident. Mo Yan is clearly one of his favorite writers, a writer to whom he has devoted a great deal of his en-

ergy in the last fifteen years. Goldblatt's own Chinese training as well as his literary predilections and personal leanings are ideally suited to Mo Yan's inimitable style. Goldblatt is highly skilled in Chinese and widely read in world literature of all stripes, but he is himself a person of the senses, a liver of life with working class origins and solid training in traditional and modern Chinese literature who possesses impeccable linguistic skills. Such training, experience, and interests are crucial in order to have at one's disposal the range of lexical facility and flexibility necessary to do justice to Mo Yan's idiosyncratic prose. Goldblatt's style can be at once elegant and erudite while at the same time visceral and almost grotesque. *Big Breasts and Wide Hips* probably posed as much of a challenge to him as any Chinese work, since through it Mo Yan has worked to perfect his interesting hybrid of matter-of-fact expression combined with some of the most vivid and unimaginable events to meet the page in twentieth century Chinese fiction.

Big Breasts and Wide Hips tells the story of Shangguan Jintong (whose given name could be translated something like "golden boy"), a sometimes endearing, sometimes infuriating scion of the Shangguan clan, a male child born as a twin with sister Yunü after seven sisters before them but, as with the previous seven, born illegitimately, as his ostensible real father was infertile. While not exactly structured in a chronological fashion, the overall structure of the work follows a general historical trajectory through the twentieth century. Yet this structure is complicated by the fact that it was radically edited and slimmed down for translation at the suggestion of the translator. The action of the novel basically follows the life of the antihero protagonist Jintong with an added chapter on "origins" explaining how his parents originally were married. Jintong is a malformed or, more precisely, not fully formed male growing up (or at least getting older) in a world more rough and dangerous than most of us – except perhaps holocaust survivors, refugees from ethnic cleansing or great disaster, and veterans of wars – can fully identify. His life parallels the historical development of modern China from the Boxer Rebellion (before his birth), through the War of Resistance, the land reform movement and Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution, and finally the post-Mao period of economic reforms and market economy.

The story of Jintong reveals crucial information about the author's style of writing as well as the manner in which he depicts China. The expansiveness of the narrative, which in

its essence is a work of monumental proportions and technique by a writer of great significance, also exemplifies a serious problem in the Chinese literary world today, that of the lack of editorial discipline among writers. What China lacks in the literary world is any sense of a healthy relationship with editors who can assist authors in trimming and shaping, and by extension improving, their literary expression. There are two very damaging attitudes pervasive among Chinese writers: one, as to the size of a work, the bigger (or longer) the better; two, suggestions that one's work needs editing tend to be taken as an insult and veiled hint that one's work is not worthy of merit. As a result, many works that could truly be great end up being only very good. Masterpieces are often flawed masterpieces. It is for this reason that Goldblatt's interactions with the author, which could easily have been construed as intrusive, have been essential to producing a book that, at 500+ pages in translation, is already taxing the attention span of all but the most dedicated reader. That Goldblatt convinced Mo Yan to reorganize the work and dramatically shorten it saved the novel from oblivion, in my opinion. The author likely shares this opinion, as editions subsequent to the baggy monster originally published in 1995 have been dramatically curtailed. Even so, the book is still a tome, but it is a tome one now can read with great pleasure.

The other important broad trait of the novel is its critical attitude toward Chinese culture. Jintong, as much a figure of pathos as anything else, is in a way a tool of Mo Yan's cultural critique. Jintong is a mammophile, unremittingly obsessed with women's breasts and with the milk they produce that sustains his life. Jintong grows up to be a man-child never fully weaned from the human nipple (although for many pages in the central portions of the work he drags along with him a goat from which he receives his suckle). What on the surface might seem to be a ridiculous cathexis to the mother figure is in fact an allegory for the dependencies that traditional Chinese culture fosters, for it has been a trend dating back to Lu Xun to use such inflammatory images as cannibalism and parasitic behavior to illustrate the ethical bankruptcy of Chinese culture – considered feudalistic – in the face of the modern cultural prowess of the West, characterized by individualism over relational subjectivity, equality over rigid hierarchy, and science over superstition. Mo Yan is not so much an innovator in this regard as he is the latest in a line of writers from the May Fourth through 1930s writers such as Wu Zuxiang, and including writers from Taiwan such as Bai Xianrong, Wang Wenxing, Wang Zhenhe, and Li Ang, to subject China to such a rigorous critique in his writing. In other words, *Big Breasts* could be read as allegory and satire

as much as it could be read as a hyper-realistic or magical realist account of peasant atrocity through the wars and revolutions that were encountered in the countryside throughout the twentieth century. Indeed, the satire in the novel centers on the critique of the Chinese notion of “filiality,” the duty that one perpetuate the family line by producing sons. This sense of duty is so absolute that Jintong's mother (referred to throughout as Mother), faced with the incontrovertible fact that her husband is sterile, is forced to have sexual relations with other men in order to produce an heir, is forced in other words to transgress on one taboo in order to avoid another. As the birth of daughters mounts, however, Mother's in-laws put increasingly greater pressure on her. Only the birth of the son brings her the sense of fulfillment that in traditional China befits a deserving mother. Ironically, this predominantly female family of Mother and eight sisters in which Jintong grows up is a direct result of the compulsion to beget sons. Of course, the father could have taken concubines, but since he is sterile that would not have done much good either. The ultimate irony is that in his entire life Jintong never really develops any sort of mature relationship with a woman and, most important for the purposes of the cultural logic of filiality, never himself produces a son. That Jintong never grows up, is never properly weaned, then, is emblematic of the modern intellectual critique in China that traditional Chinese culture is incapable of successfully producing fully individuated subjects.

Much also has been made of Mo Yan's “experimental” use of language. There is no question that his mixture of a soothing, idyllic style with violent and incredible imagery is distinctive. *Big Breasts* is narrated primarily with a mixture of first person (in the voice of Jintong) and a roving third person point of view which can insinuate itself into the perspective of other characters from time to time. In addition, many very strange things, such as the appearance of supernatural characters (bird people, fox people, animals that talk, and so on) do occur in his works, including this one. Nevertheless, I would suggest that his writing is not as radical as many have argued, which is not to say it is not creative and unique. While the structure of the narrative could be described at points as *style indirect libre*, it is far less challenging than that of James Joyce or even William Faulkner. This may in part be due to the times: as readers, we have grown accustomed to such flourishes some eighty to ninety years after their initial heyday. It is important to bear in mind that Mo Yan himself views his own style as a form of realism. The frequent comparisons to magical realism notwithstanding, Mo Yan's work does bear some resemblances to an author as creative, dynamic, and prolific as Faulkner. Over the years of reading Mo Yan's dissec-

tions of the quite real peasant community that is Northern Gaomi Township, in Shandong, one is at times reminded of the fictional yet no less palpable rural stage of Faulkner: Yoknapatawpha County, supposedly somewhere in the bayou country of Mississippi. Mo Yan etches the visual scheme of rivers and sorghum fields not with a loving nostalgia of a lost childhood home but with a dispassionate, near-serene tone. The geography that he lays out for the reader makes it unnecessary for one to visit the location. It is both unique, mapped in exquisite detail, and yet typifying (perhaps archetypal) of all peasant existence in China. There is some similarity with the world that Faulkner portrays, for within the cultural ticks and peculiarities of local life in the south lie the trials and betrayals that this titan of American literature would suggest epitomize the human condition writ large. Faulkner's exploration of interior consciousness, mirrored in his alchemizing of the English sentence into something rivaled only by Joyce, is different from the intellectual peregrinations and syntactic structures of Mo Yan. This might be because, unlike Modernists such as Faulkner who see the human condition as a prison of interior consciousness, Mo Yan sees the imprisonment of his characters as just the reverse – a banishment from individual subjectivity and full-blown self-reflection.

I therefore believe there is something more visibly radical in the structure of Faulkner's prose when compared to that of Mo Yan. Another, perhaps seemingly controversial, affinity is that between Mo Yan and Dickens. Admittedly, Mo Yan does not write of the urban landscape in the way Dickens has established London as the hallmark of his discursive geography. There is still an interesting parallel with the way that in *Big Breasts* the dizzying cast of characters is at least made manageable by the fact that each of the major characters returns at a subsequent stage of the novel (some

repeatedly) and is dealt with in one fashion or another. As Mo Yan's characters make their reentry into *Big Breasts* and their re-acquaintance with the protagonist, one is reminded of such characters as Uriah Heep or Mr. Micawber in *David Copperfield*, who may at any time lurk behind the next corner with proclamations that their luck is now finally about to improve. The recycling of the characters is an absolute imperative if this demanding text is not to totally slip into an unfathomable chaos. It provides a sort of scaffolding for the reader and a gauge for the development of the story. What Mo Yan's works contain, in contrast to Dickens, is the utter violence and viciousness that was part and parcel of Chinese history for most of the twentieth century. This subject matter may be somewhat repellent to the Western reader; however, it is necessary that it is written this way and important that we acknowledge it. This was the reality of China in modern times. Would anyone suggest we would not read of the Jewish holocaust in Europe because it was too violent or that it exceeds in gruesomeness the limits of our imagination or our stomachs? It may seem unimaginable, but it did occur. The Chinese historical experience from the Taiping Rebellion through the Cultural Revolution was as violent as that in any nation, and it demands depiction in literature. The remarkable quality of this Chinese author is the way, much as in Jerzy Kosinski's *The Painted Bird*, he chooses as his protagonists characters in their youth who do not have the benefit of perspective, characters for whom the call to describe things in a sober and placid manner, as if this were the way things should be because they have never experienced anything else, seems perfectly natural. This is why the utterly bare and occasionally somnolent tone of the narrative, at odds with the spectacular circumstances that it depicts, is the trademark of Mo Yan the writer.