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Preliminary Study on the Concern for the Grassroots in Mo Yan's *Sandalwood Death*

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Abstract

This paper attempts to explore the issue of grassroots concern in Mo Yan's long novel, *Sandalwood Death*. Published in 2001, the novel immediately caused a stir, eliciting both high praise and criticism. Behind the surface of exaggerated violence and language, the novel conceals a treasure Mo Yan unearthed from a folk perspective. As the 1985 "Root-Seeking Literature" manifesto declared: "Literature has roots, and the roots of literature should be deeply embedded in the soil of the national cultural tradition; without deep roots, the leaves will struggle to flourish." Our responsibility is to "release the thermal energy of modern concepts to reforge and burnish the 'national self'." *Sandalwood Death* continues Lu Xun's theme of critiquing the national character, deepening it and demonstrating profound significance.

Keywords

Mo Yan; *Sandalwood Death*; Grassroots Concerns; National Character.

1. Introduction

Mo Yan won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2012, a monumental recognition for Chinese literature. Literary works are often canonized through such awards, and Mo Yan's timely emergence as a cultural hero generated interest in both his life and works. Contemporary Chinese literature is a living tradition-short-lived yet impactful. In the 1990s, China's market economy unleashed unprecedented vitality, which, while significantly improving the standard of living, also subtly altered cultural pursuits. In the 1980s, the publication of a new novel could ignite fervent discussions among students, while in the 1990s, the trend shifted toward business ventures, and literature began to cater more to consumerism and entertainment. Today, new media competes with traditional outlets, and text increasingly appears on mobile screens and microblog posts, pushing printed works further into the background. Mo Yan's writing, with its vast and unrestricted language, exudes an uncontrollable, wildly imaginative spirit, unlike the restrained nobility of literary works associated with the elite. Scholars like Sun Yu in *Mo Yan, the Singer Who Meets Lu Xun* have explored how Mo Yan's writing subtly resonates with Lu Xun's, while Zhang Qinghua's *The Bridle of the Heavenly Horse: On Mo Yan in the New Century* discusses the dramatic and localized aspects of Mo Yan's works[1]. Miao Lifang's *The Rituality of Torture and Folk Revolutionary Psychology: A Spiritual Analysis of Sandalwood Death* focuses on the psychology of folk revolution as manifested in the depiction of torture[2].

While much has been written about his use of folk perspectives, polyphonic structure, and themes of life and power, fewer discussions have addressed the specific depiction of grassroots characters in *Sandalwood Death*. This paper aims to analyze the text, opening gaps in the details to approach the "writing of the common people". The article is divided into three sections: the first explores the narrative aesthetics of language in *Sandalwood Death*; the second analyzes three key grassroots characters-Qian Ding, Sun Bing, and Sun Meiniang; and the third examines the novel's anti-feudal themes.

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2. Narrative Aesthetics

In 2001, Mo Yan published *Sandalwood Death*, which has since become one of his most important works. After two decades of writing, he aimed to reach a new artistic height with this novel, and indeed, *Sandalwood Death* achieved a new level of success[3]. The novel features bold depictions, violent in style, and a language that does not shy away from colloquialism. The characters' psychology and dialogues are raw and filled with tension, showcasing his strong command of language within his high-density literary kingdom in Northeast Gaomi Township.

2.1. Folk Writing

Reading *Sandalwood Death* evokes the sensation of being part of a performance, akin to listening to a play rather than reading a modern novel. The rhythm of the words draws the reader into the text, creating an atmosphere that recalls classical drama. The novel is deeply rooted in local culture, it is grounded in its place, magical-realistic in tone, and distinct from modernist or romantic narratives. Contemporary Chinese literature often aims for grand narratives, with many authors aspiring to record monumental histories. This contrasts with Western Romanticism and Modernism, and is quite different from the " modern literature" style that emerged after the May Fourth Movement. Mo Yan has admitted that his generation grew up reading the Red classics, and as Chen Xiaoming points out, works like *Youth Song* served as their youthful enlightenment.

Folk and city represent two opposing concepts in Chinese literature-people are born in rural areas, move to the cities as they grow, and then later look back nostalgically at their rural roots. This sentiment is evident in modern literature through rural novels and the subsequent Chinese modern regional novels (exemplified by Shen Congwen). Lu Xun is credited with pioneering the genre of rural novels in modern literature, with works like *Hometown, The Madman's Diary*, and *Blessing* standing as key contributions. As Zhou Zuoren noted, these novels bring a "grounded" quality to literature, reflecting the realities of society while breaking away from the "self" image of the May Fourth period and returning to solid ground[4].

At the same time, there are writers who lament their "lack of homeland": "I envy those who come from the countryside, for in their memories, there is always a home that lingers with an endless sense of nostalgia. Even though this home may be a poor, desolate, and prosaic place, as long as they wish, they can freely imagine that something they have lost still resides there in that unaware homeland, offering them self-forgiveness and solace." [5] The distance between human life and the homeland is the essential reason for the emergence of rural emotions. Mo Yan's Nobel Prize recognition underscores his conscious use of indigenous culture, which does not merely follow Western literary trends. This approach validates the notion that what is national is also universal.

2.2. Vibrant Language

" 'Do you think I really want to pluck off Sun Bing's beard? Although he lost the beard contest today, his beard is actually one of the finest in the world. If he were to pluck it off himself, I wouldn't even have the heart to let him! The reason I challenged him was, first, to suppress his arrogance, and second, to provide some entertainment for all of you. Sun Bing, I pardon you. Keep the rest of your beard, and go back to singing opera)!'

Sun Bing kneeled and kowtowed(孙丙跪地磕头).

The crowd marveled in astonishment(群众感叹不已)

The local gentry showered him with flattery(乡绅谀词连篇)."

Qian Ding's flowery words were grandiloquent, followed by a series of three short sentences of equal length (the Chinese notes), arranged line by line, pushing the emotions to a crescendo. The character of Qian Ding leaps vividly off the page. Literary works are composed of the linear

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progression of language, and the charm of language structures the allure of the literary work itself.

There are also some other short phrases:

Lord Wang said, 'All for the Emperor! Execute !'" [6]

The character , Lord Wang, is the Minister of Justice, and was tasked with executing the eunuch Xiao Chong Zi. To fulfill the Emperor's orders flawlessly, he had to use an inmate sentenced to death to test the punishment of the "Yan Wang Shuan."

This unprocessed, raw language of the people, drawn from the vastness of life, represents a fresh direction in literary writing. The "play within a play" technique is particularly noteworthy. Sun Bing, a performer himself, casually recites lines of opera, adding color to the narrative. The interplay between the "cat's voice (an operatic tune)" and the main text amplifies the pace, propelling the work to a fast-paced climax toward the end.

3. Writing of Grassroots Characters

Sandalwood Death features a large group of grassroots characters. Aside from the bureaucrats in the imperial court (excluding Qian Ding), Emperor Xianfeng, Empress Dowager Cixi, Emperor Guangxu, and the German Governor Krode, the rest are from the lower classes. Qian Ding, the county magistrate of Gaomi, holds a relatively low-ranking position and does not exhibit the malicious behaviors typical of the upper echelons of feudal society, so he can be analyzed as part of the grassroots characters.

3.1. The Timid Qian Ding and the Straightforward Sun Bing

"It is said that the sandalwood is a friend of the Buddhist faith, one who does good deeds and accumulates merit... but who has ever seen a sandalwood peg used to impale a person? Such is the immoral punishment of the end of the dynasty.-Cat's Voice, *Sandalwood Death, Elegant Tune*"

This is the inner voice of the county magistrate, Qian Ding, placed in Chapter 18-*The County Magistrate's Final Song*. Towards the end of the novel, as Zhao Jia prepares for his execution, Qian Ding attempts to seize the opportunity to shoot Zhao Jia, but accidentally kills a small clerk instead, failing to save the man. Later, when accompanying Yuan Shikai and the German Governor Krode to inspect the execution, he impulsively considers killing both Yuan Shikai and Krode but hesitates, unable to act. He is trapped in a moral dilemma between conscience and the rigid feudal hierarchy, making him a pitiable and conflicted character.

In contrast, Sun Bing is a rebel against feudal propriety. In a feudal society where commoners would never dare to challenge the authority of the county magistrate, Sun Bing boldly competes with Qian Ding in a beard contest. He embodies the traits of a "hero": "I want to show off on the high stage, to make my fellow villagers awake, to make the foreign devils tremble in fear." The formidable feudal system confines these inner cries for justice, making them mere echoes.

3.2. The Pitiful Meiniang

"That morning, my father-in-law, Zhao Jia, never imagined that in just seven days he would die at my hands-dying in a way even more tragic than an old dog loyal to its duty..." This is the opening of *Phoenix Head*, where Meiniang's story begins. She is at the heart of the novel's network of relationships. Her father, Sun Bing, leads a peasant movement opposing the construction of a German railway, angering the colonizers. And Zhao Jia, is ordered to execute her father using the "Sandalwood Punishment." Her lover, Qian Ding, is in charge of overseeing the execution. Mo Yan uses the local dialect of Gaomi to portray Meiniang, an uneducated, fiery character, making her come alive before the reader.

It could be said that *Sandalwood Death* is almost entirely focused on the lives of the grassroots. If we were to compare it to one of China's classical Four Great Novels, *Sandalwood Death*

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resembles *Water Margin*: both works give the reader a strong sense of the rural atmosphere and Chinese cultural flavor. *Water Margin* was written by people of the past about people of the past, while *Sandalwood Death* is written by modern people about the past[7].

4. Anti-Feudal Themes

4.1. A Violent World in the Novel

The depiction of the feudal bureaucracy in the novel is especially vivid. To punish the arrogant eunuch Xiao Chong Zi, who had stolen Emperor Xianfeng's treasured sword, the Emperor orders the Ministry of Justice to use the brutal "Yang Wang Shuan" punishment, subjecting him to excruciating torment until death. Zhao Jia and Granny Yu execute the punishment in front of the Emperor, his concubines, and the ministers. Faced with such a cruel punishment, the courtiers cry and wail, falling to their knees in agony: "Although the Emperor's orders were directed at the eunuchs and palace maids, the officials from the six ministries and the nobles were all on their knees, bent as if their legs were broken, bowing their heads incessantly." In the county hall where Yuan Shikai, Krode, Qian Ding, and Zhao Jia are present, Qian Ding dares not speak above a whisper in front of Yuan, only nodding in obedience to everything. The rigid class system of feudalism has deeply ingrained the idea of hierarchy in the people's hearts, reaching its extreme in the Qing Dynasty.

Sandalwood Death presents a completely alienated portrayal of history. Ancient China created a brilliant and splendid classical civilization, but beneath the official records, there are parts that are hard to mention and deeply uncomfortable. Mo Yan depicts the feudal world and the trauma of modern China. Chinese modern literature emerged amidst the turbulent changes of the May Fourth Movement, and over the past century, it has been saturated with suffering. Chen Xiaoming, in discussing the avant-garde writing style, said: "To preserve the life energy that allows literature to break through its own boundaries, each piece of writing must pass through difficulties and valleys, experiencing life and death. In short, it must come to life through death." [8] *Red Sorghum* and *Big Breasts and Wide Hips* address the Japanese invasion, while Frog touches on the tragic national issues. These works embody the vitality of literature itself. Literature naturally aligns with history-history gives birth to literature, and literature records history. By documenting a world of trauma, examining the survival dilemmas of modern humans, and probing the self, writers transcend their own limitations, and through this, the times are not merely defined by the passage of time.

4.2. Exploration of National Character

Mo Yan's writing seems to carry a natural connection to Lu Xun's work. In *Sandalwood Death*, we can see the shadow of Lu Xun's critique of national character. Lu Xun's works depicted late Qing and early Republican China, expressing the existential cries of intellectuals during the May Fourth era. The theme of "eating people" in *A Madman's Diary* is amplified by Mo Yan in *Sandalwood Death*, serving as another brutal interrogation of human nature[9].

Sandalwood Death is seen as bloody, cruel, and uncomfortable to read. Its harsh tone has led to criticism of Mo Yan's works, with some claiming that his success is due to catering to the Western fascination with the exotic, "other" China. Similarly, Zhang Yimou's film *Red Sorghum*, adapted from Liu Heng's novel *Fuxi Fuxi*, faced similar criticism for its "Sinocentric" "Oedipus" plot, accused of being a fabrication that distorts the true nature of ancient Chinese society. "Mo Yan holds a strong belief in historical justice, which is evident in his works like Frog, *Sandalwood Death*, and *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*. He has never abandoned this belief, always questioning the history of the 20th century. He cannot ignore the scars of the nation. He wants to write about the struggles of the people, the authenticity of the nation, and the pain it has endured." The novel ends with the "County Magistrate's Final Song," where all the characters

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on stage propel the "play" to its climax. Much like Cao Yu's *Thunderstorm*, this tragic play concludes with the deaths of all the major characters: Qian Ding, unwilling to live, climbs onto the stage and attempts to kill Sun Bing; he is blocked by Zhao Jia and accidentally kills him instead; Zhao Jia and Qian Ding fight, and Sun Meiniang kills Zhao Jia; in the end, Qian Ding kills Sun Bing, and Meiniang, driven mad, flees. Sun Bing's awakening of justice brings an end to the "immoral punishment," thwarting the imperialist powers' plans [10].

Zhang Qinghua notes: "The reason *Sandalwood Death* has been so highly praised is that it takes Lu Xun's critique of national character as its foundation and, with greater scope and a more nuanced pen, resurrects one of the most tragic and stirring moments in modern Chinese history. It creatively deepens the cultural motifs and symbols that Lu Xun left behind in his exploration of the Chinese collective memory-the theme of the 'bystander,' the theme of 'bloodlust,' and the transformation of murder into a grotesque comedy of violence, all of which are magnified in Mo Yan's hands."

5. Conclusion

The novel concludes with Sun Bing's words: "The play... is over..." The novel abruptly stops, leaving the reader with a sense of fear and pity after an intense exploration. *Sandalwood Death* takes an imposing, grand stance, writing about the rural stories of old China that have been diluted by modern society. Dai Jinhua, in *Invisible Writing: Studies on Chinese Culture in the 1990s*, mentions that young people have begun to understand and engage with society through films and TV dramas. Indeed, we have grown increasingly accustomed to consuming news and discussing issues on our phones, unaware that the vast amounts of information we consume online are but the sediment of deeper truths. We marvel at how Mo Yan transformed a familiar, outdated tale of resistance against the Japanese into the vibrant narrative of *Red Sorghum*, and how he turned the tale of an executioner from a bygone era into a tragic, artistic narrative. This tragedy can only be fully understood from the perspective of the grassroots. As Lu Xun once said, "Tragedy destroys what is valuable in life for us to see." Cruel punishment destroys a person's life; the executioner destroys his own soul; the onlookers destroy their own conscience. In this sense, *Sandalwood Death* continues Lu Xun's critique of national character, unveiling one facet of feudal Chinese society and turning it into a dramatic play. Although it is bloody and violent, beneath its surface of harshness lies a force that penetrates the heart and leaves the audience shaken.

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