The Ghost and the Censor

Loss in Parallax

EMILY NG

ABSTRACT The history of modern China has been filled with loss in many senses. From certain angles of vision, loss, remembrance, and forgetting orbit around figures of political repression in the People's Republic of China (PRC), particularly that of censorship. These approaches posit a link between the Chinese state, national public amnesia, and international transparency that may occlude other configurations of knowing, speaking, and mourning—those of public secrecy, for instance, including stagings of the unspeakable through aesthetic and literary forms. This essay explores such configurations through Mo Yan's *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* (2008). In the novel, narrated largely by the reincarnated specter of an executed landlord, desire and loss travel between historical, carnal, and cosmic registers while operations of violence, politics, and memory both evoke and depart from common liberalist accounts of the PRC. On a world stage of global reading communities, the tethering of the village ghost to coordinates of apparently knowable historical time pairs with the author's ambiguous position vis-à-vis the formal sign of unknowability—censorship. The text, the (partially) censored author, and their circulations together point to productions of loss in parallax, at once hosting and abstracting loss.

KEYWORDS Mo Yan, China, censorship, ghost, parallax, loss

The name struck him, but Ximen Nao could not retrieve its significance. "Ximen Bai—that had a familiar ring to it. Ximen Bai. I tried to recall what that name meant to me." Despite initial yearnings for his former wife Ximen Bai after his execution during land reform, links between past and present have grown looser with Ximen Nao's two reincarnations, first as a donkey, and now as a pig. The village party secretary is discussing the political primacy of pigs for nutrition in the case of combat, and Ximen Bai has been called to be the task of feeding them. As Ximen Nao ponders the name, Ximen Bai's face appears in front of his pen. "I was racked by spasms, as if I'd been electrocuted. . . . The gate to my memory was flung open and the past came flooding in."

"Xing'er, you're still alive!" Ximen Nao shouts. But rather than the human voice he expected, the words turned into a shrill screech the moment it passed through his

DOI 10.1215/26410478-10437037 | © 2023 Emily Ng
This is an open access article distributed under the terms of a Creative Commons license (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0).

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/critical-times/article-pdf/doi/10.1215/26410478-10437037/2007581/10437037.pdf by guest on 28 September 2023

throat, not only scaring the humans around him but stunning himself—a reminder of his new bodily vessel. "With infinite sadness I returned to reality, returned to the now. Now, it's long since I've not been Ximen Nao. I'm a pig!" Noticing the wrinkles around her eyes and white in her hair, the reincarnated Ximen Nao tries with all his might to calculate his former wife's age using his animal capacities—but the smell of sunflowers soon gets in the way, confusing him as he is drawn by the sweet scent, plump leaves, and golden petals.

Narrating the intensity of this encounter, Ximen Nao—speaking from the future storytelling "now" of his sixth reincarnation as a human boy—notices that the audience is no longer listening. "Brother, or should I say, Uncle, you seem a bit bored. I see that your puffy lids are closing over your eyeballs, and your nose seems to be emitting some snores. . . . If you're not interested in the lives of the pigs, let me tell you about the lives of the dogs."[1]

In Mo Yan's (2008) *Life and Death are Wearing Me Out*, the reader follows the specter of Ximen Nao, a former landlord executed during the rural land reform campaigns of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), through his time in the afterworld and his reincarnation across multiple lifetimes within his home village. From the start, cosmic time, along with an absurdist sensibility, is mapped onto notably concrete, recognizable political time. The opening line of the novel tells us that the story begins on January 1, 1950, shortly following the formal victory of the Communist Party and its establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) on October 1, 1949. We meet Ximen Nao as he proclaims his wrongful death amid torture in the courts of hell. Chinese Buddhist depictions of bodily torment in the underworld, common since the tenth century onward, merge with twenty-first-century references—Ximen Nao is thrown into a vat of hot oil and "sizzled like a fried chicken" (*LD*, 3). [2] The chapters then move across the ensuing Maoist and post-Mao eras, paralleling Ximen Nao's reincarnations as a donkey, ox, pig, dog, monkey, and finally, a large-headed human boy.

In the scene above, memory operates across multiple lifetimes, embodied (in) capacities, and sensorial distractions of new lives, such that formal politics at once takes shape and recedes in face of other temporalities of encounter. Moreover, what may be a potent recollection for the storyteller is at times unable to sustain the attention of the reader-listener. Diverging from liberalist accounts of censorship often associated with the PRC, Mo's story of remembrance and forgetting does not pivot on a banishment of memory enacted by the party-state, but on the multiplying of lives that leads to new worldly relationalities, including an eventual capacity for letting go. This letting go—evoking Buddhist concepts of nirvana and exit from samsara—releases Ximen Nao from cycles of animal reincarnation, transforming him into a storyteller and thus allowing for his tale to be told six lifetimes later.[3]

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/critical-times/article-pdf/doi/10.1215/26410478-10437037/2007581/10437037.pdf by guest on 28 September 2023

Through such works as *Life and Death*—what Jeffrey Kinkley calls China's new historical novels—the Chinese village is reiterated as a space of historical loss and historical critique.[4] Distinct from chronotopes of the rural idyll, in which rurality is textually constituted by its timelessness and idealization, rural China in these new novels is cast as history-laden and dystopic: the village becomes a repository of the darker sides of modern political history.[5] Mo Yan's literary works, including *Life and Death*, have been variously lauded and spurned for their deployment of rural vernacular, socialist phraseologies, crassness, absurdism, and blurring of magic and realism, with critic appraisals ranging from "wildly creative" and "controversial" to "apolitical" and "lacking" in conviction. This ambivalence in Mo's reception is tethered not only to the juxtaposition of the absurd and historical in his novels but also to his position as an ambiguous figure with relation to the Chinese party-state, signaled in part by the mixed status of his works vis-à-vis state censorship.

In this essay, I consider how the placement of the village ghost in *Life and Death* within the coordinates of (apparently) knowable historical time, paired with the marking of the novel's author with a formal sign of unknowability—censorship—together point to productions of loss in parallax, at once hosting and abstracting loss. Although the novel speaks to tendencies and temporalities beyond Communist or even human history and politics, the village ghost is able to circulate on a global stage of world literature by way of partially eclipsed readings centered on liberalist desires for particular styles of transgression and transparency vis-à-vis the Chinese state. My interest in attending to the cosmic politics easily overlooked in such readings arises from my ethnographic work on Maoism and spirit mediumship in rural China, which also encounters a cosmopolitical world that does not fall neatly into liberalist readings of freedom and repression.[6] Through a discussion of parallax as potential critical movement, this essay turns away from appraisals of the novel and the author centered on subversion against the state, toward dynamics of public secrecy and stagings of the unspeakable.

Remembrance, Appetites, Returns: On Violence and Revolution

Prior to his series of rebirths, Ximen Nao ponders aloud to the reader, frustrated with officials of the underworld: "They knew I was innocent, that I had been falsely accused, but for reasons I could not fathom, they feigned ignorance. So I shouted, repeating myself, the same thing over and over"—"I am innocent [*yuanwang*]!" (*LD*, 4). In line with Chinese accounts of the *yin* spirit world, Ximen Nao is on his path of becoming a *yuangui*—a ghost who dies a wrongful (*yuanwang*) death, is filled with grievance, and often returns to the world of the living to enact vengeance or demonstrate their innocence.

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/critical-times/article-pdf/doi/10.1215/26410478-10437037/2007581/10437037.pdf by guest on 28 September 2023

As a donkey, Ximen Nao lives through early Communist policies and campaigns of the 1950s, during which his owner, Lan Lian—Ximen Nao's farmhand during his former human lifetime—becomes the only person in China to refuse to join the People's Commune, instead choosing to farm independently. Although Ximen Donkey is able to use his animal body to intervene in human affairs according to his previous relations—causing a scene to distract the village head from tormenting his former wife, for instance—the links between his past-life memory, volition, and actions begin to deteriorate. Convictions and sentiments from his former human relationships are overtaken by animal tendencies and desires. Peering at villagers he had once known, Ximen Donkey thinks to himself: "These men looked familiar to me somehow"—yet, as his master shows up with feed, it "brought an end to my recollections," disrupting the return of his human memories (*LD*, 32). Reflecting on relationships between villagers, Ximen Donkey admits: "Truth is, I wasn't all that interested in what they were doing now. As a potent male donkey, my immediate concern was the female donkey with the saddlebag baskets that was standing there right in front of me" (*LD*, 40).

Throughout the text, as in this instance, what prevents the recollection of his life as a human and the righting of past wrongs is not state repression—as is commonly portrayed or presumed when the Maoist era is evoked—but the oscillating desires of the reincarnated protagonist in his ever-changing embodiments, his carnal attractions and sensorial distractions. In the scene at the opening of this essay, Ximen Nao's recollections of his former wife are blocked and interrupted by his new embodiment and the fragrance of sunflowers.

At times, such animal senses are luxuriated in in an effort to keep painful humanlike thoughts at bay. In his later reincarnation as a piglet, Ximen Nao catches a glimpse of a young couple laughing: "They were holding hands, and that sent fragments of historical memory flashing through my head, all of which I wanted only to forget. I shut my eyes so I could concentrate on the joys of a baby pig at its mother's teat" (*LD*, 228). The overwhelming power of animalistic tendencies thus points to the difficulty of abiding by recollections of and commitments to the past, as well as the desire to forget. This pairing speaks to an ethics of historical memory in which the human animal falls short; written in an era of rampant postreform consumerism, it also hints at the extent to which so-called base instincts and appetites may, over time, take precedence over historical rectification.

Yet again, although the story of Ximen Nao's reincarnation begins with what we are told is his wrongful execution as a kindhearted landlord, thus mapping the originary moment of the tale onto the ideological cruelty of the party-state's campaigns, the origin of violence—including the question of its political nature—is by

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/critical-times/article-pdf/doi/10.1215/26410478-10437037/2007581/10437037.pdf by guest on 28 September 2023

no means clear as the text moves forward. Indeed, although the state is ever-present—whether in the form of the village People's Commune Revolutionary Committee, Village Brigade Party Secretary, or political slogans and campaigns—what drives village life hints more at the vicissitudes of human and animal desires and tendencies than the forces and structures of state apparatuses. Or rather, it hints at desires and tendencies that fueled, animated, and exceeded state politics as such; ongoing yet ever-changing faces of cruelty, betrayal, lust, desire, compassion, and ambivalence seem to fill the passage of historical time rather than the central principle conveyed in liberalist accounts of socialism—a violent statist suppression of personal desire and liberty.

When the Cultural Revolution is inaugurated in the village, the Red Guards are described as wanting to "enhance the pleasure, visual appeal, and the ability to draw a crowd when they were parading capitalist roaders" (*LD*, 156).[7] Amid the parade and struggle session of the county chief, the loudspeakers blare so intensely that wild geese fall out of the sky.[8] The crowd's attention turns immediately to the geese—whose meat is considered a delicacy—and the prospect of a sumptuous dinner. "The first person to get his hands on a fallen bird must have been wild with joy, until, that is, everyone around him tried to snatch it away" (*LD*, 158). Chaos ensues as villagers scream and trample over one another, grabbing at the wild geese. The narrator of the scene—Lan Jiefang, the son of the farmhand Lan Lian—sits atop a tree, watching from above:

> I saw the birds fall from the sky and watched as they were torn apart by people. I saw the whole range of expressions—greed, madness, astonishment, suffering, ferocity. . . . All this reminded me of tales of wartime, and even though the county annals of the Cultural Revolution recorded the wild geese incident as a case of bird flu, I believed then, and I believe now, that they were knocked out of the sky by the high-volume shrillness of the loudspeaker. (*LD*, 159)

The trampling leads to seventeen human deaths and numerous injuries; as the scramble quiets, the parade begins again, the road now stained with blood and feathers. The first recorded deaths of the Cultural Revolution in the village, as we are told by the narrator, were thus a product of this wild goose incident. Even as political campaigns and battles continued in the months to come, "the number of casualties paled in comparison with this incident" (*LD*, 158).

Here, the corporeal violence of the Cultural Revolution—widely viewed as the epitome of politicized brutality during the Maoist era—arises in the interstices of political infrastructure and human appetites: the noise of the loudspeaker, the desire for the delicacy of wild goose meat, and the willingness to get one's share at the expense—including life—of another.

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/critical-times/article-pdf/doi/10.1215/26410478-10437037/2007581/10437037.pdf by guest on 28 September 2023

Staring at the Unsayable: The Nobel Complex and the Parallax View

Soon after receiving the Nobel Prize in Literature, Mo Yan was described by US commentator Evan Osnos in the *New Yorker* as exemplifying China's "Nobel complex."[9] After outlining contentions surrounding past PRC-born winners of the Nobel literature and peace prizes, Osnos notes with distaste that Mo Yan had lately grown "closer to the [Chinese] establishment" in contrast to his earlier years as a writer, "when some of his works were banned." The piece concludes with "hopes" that the Nobel would eventually "become less important to China," citing Liu Xiaobo—a previous Nobel Peace Prize winner who would be imprisoned in China for his work—on the "childish" nature of China's obsession with the prize.

The sentiment, surrounding both Mo Yan's prize and the question of Chinese writers, is not an uncommon one and points to what might be considered as part of a set of mutual historical symptoms.[10] On the one side, there is the sense that the Nobel Prize, along with the Olympics and other such stagings of "friendly" international competition, is hypercathected in China's quest for global recognition, inheriting, in the *longue durée*, the rise of modern nationalism following China's encounters with Western imperialism.[11] On the other side, there is the sense among many Western critics that a Chinese writer or artist cannot be recognized as such, lest they are forced into a position of imprisonment or exile, and in the case of the work itself, for it to be formally banned. For writers said to toe the line in their relationship to the state, some room is given if, as the turn of phrase goes, "at least" *some* of their works had been banned.[12] (In 2005, a *Time* magazine piece applauded Mo Yan as "one of the most famous, oft-banned, and widely pirated of all Chinese writers."[13]) There is thus, on one side, the act of seeking recognition from prize committees largely governed by the symbolic geography of the initial "humiliation" of foreign invasion, and on the other side, that of according works value based on the very censorship the West denounces, whose presence is nonetheless called forth as the legitimizing act on the part of the Chinese state. The antagonism sits as a provocation for Chinese authors to choose between their loyalties to liberalist and nonliberalist regimes, in an international game of disavowal. How, then, to think such conundrums of loss, disavowal, and censorship?

Here, I use the figure of parallax to explore the multiple gazes at play. Combining *para-* ("alongside, near, toward") and *allassein* ("to exchange"; *allo*, "other"), parallax derives from Greek *parallaxis* ("change, alternation, [or the] inclination of two lines meeting at an angle"), from *parallassein*, ("to alter, make things alternate"). More specifically, *parallaxe* was used in mid-sixteenth-century French to denote the "apparent displacement of an object observed, due to an actual displacement of the observer."[14] In its technical usages, parallax refers to the displacement or difference in the apparent position of an object when viewed along distinct lines of sight. In astronomy, it may be when a star is viewed from different points of the earth's

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/critical-times/article-pdf/doi/10.1215/26410478-10437037/2007581/10437037.pdf by guest on 28 September 2023

orbit. In weaponry, it is defined as the difference between the perceived and actual alignment of the target with the ammunition when using a focal scope (e.g., on a bow or rifle). In optics, it describes the slight difference between the view from one eye versus the other—this difference is what allows for depth perception. At a general level, parallax speaks to the capacities of perception fundamental to existing in multiple dimensions as such. Meanwhile, parallax can also help articulate particular movements and angular relations.

One recent conceptual use of parallax is seen in Kojin Karatani's rereading of Marx and/through Kant, in which he displaces common readings of the Kantian transcendental as a simple middle point or exteriority to rationalism and empiricism. Instead, he insists on the centrality of parallax in Kantian thinking, produced by an irreconcilably multiple position, and critique as a *movement between*: "it is the 'parallax' between positions that acts."[15] Here, parallax is described not merely as seeing through the other's viewpoint or seeing oneself through the eyes of the others but as the rendering of all perspectives as simultaneous "optical delusion" *and* the only means of acknowledging the true place of knowledge—*through* "transversal and transpositional movement."[16] This includes, for Karatani, not only the movement of thought in a narrower sense but also the conceptual dislocation occasioned by, in the case of Marx, the spatial movement of exile and migration, paired with exposure to conditions of economic crisis.

In anthropology, parallax—used to describe a juxtaposition of knowledges across disparately located knowers, or relocations within a knower—has been said to capacitate the critique of culture as a stable ethnographic object, to approach relational irresolution as a mode of knowledge that generates depth rather than searching for a stable truth, and to offer theorizations that momentarily produce an empirical configuration for inquiry.[17] While the epistemologically cumulative or deepening effects evoked in these anthropological approaches are also relevant for literature (how might one "understand" a novel such as *Life and Death* from multiple positions in its global circuit), what concerns me here is how parallax might speak to loss and its destruction, in this case as they pivot around questions of censorship and knowability.

In *Defacement*, Michael Taussig draws on Benjamin's thoughts on exposure and revelation and a Hegelian labor of the negative to address the theme of secrecy.[18] Rather than presuming the mutual exclusivity of exposure and secrecy, in which truth requires the former and destroys the latter, Taussig suggests that certain forms of social knowledge point instead toward public secrecy, involving not unveiling against unknowing but rather *knowing what not to know*. Extending Taussig's rendering of public secrecy to Chinese visual culture, Margaret Hillenbrand describes an aesthetic category she calls the photo-form, linked to questions of historical disavowal and public secrecy following incidents of

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/critical-times/article-pdf/doi/10.1215/26410478-10437037/2007581/10437037.pdf by guest on 28 September 2023

collective violence and loss.[19] In a departure from common accounts of modern Chinese history that rely on the pairing of (state) censorship and (public) amnesia, photo-forms, for Hillenbrand, expose the "unsayable but unforgotten."[20] Moreover, certain instances of the photo-form bring together a "parallax viewing community," inviting viewers to "stare straight at the unsayable."[21]

While she focuses on the peculiar power of visual images in her conceptualization of the photo-form, Hillenbrand's reading of public secrecy and aesthetic form is helpful for approaching the figure of the village ghost as well as questions of censorship and circulation in contemporary Chinese literature. As Hillenbrand notes, the quality of the very-known-and-very-secret does not rely on the maker's political status, as the photo-form may be deployed in artworks commonly considered subversive as well as in nationalistic uses of imagery by the state. In works such as *Life and Death*, turning to literary form and public secrecy shifts the question away from whether or not a work is indeed subversive vis-à-vis the state (and whether it is deserving of accolades accordingly), toward how such works stage the unspeakable. Indeed, the pen name Mo Yan—translated as "don't speak"—flaunts the notion of the unspeakable (the name was said to be inspired by his mother's early warnings in his youth against saying too much).

The figure of censorship and its sometimes blatant staging of deletion is also present in Freud's descriptions of psychical processes between the conscious and unconscious. Across discussions of dreams, hysteria, and psychoses, Freud uses the figure of state censorship—especially the Russian censorship that newspapers as well as Freud's own letters underwent during World War I—to describe apparently meaningless content:

> Even the deliria of confusional states may have a meaning. . . . They are only unintelligible to us owing to the gaps in them. . . . Deliria are the work of a censorship which no longer takes the trouble to conceal its operation; instead of collaborating in a new version that shall be unobjectionable, it ruthlessly deletes whatever it disapproves of, so that what remains becomes quite disconnected. This censorship acts exactly like the censorship of newspapers at the Russian frontier, which allows foreign journals to fall into the hands of the readers whom it is its business to protect only after a quantity of passages have been blacked out.[22]

While censorship could be pictured as that which fully halts the passage of inadmissible materials from the unconscious to the conscious, thus rendering them fully unknowable, Freud's descriptions of unconcealed gaps—akin to the *visibly* blacked out sections of newspapers at that time—are not unrelated to what Hillenbrand describes of the photo-form and are crucial to the very possibility of psychoanalysis as such.[23]

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/critical-times/article-pdf/doi/10.1215/26410478-10437037/2007581/10437037.pdf by guest on 28 September 2023

But some differences remain between Freudian censorship and public secrecy. If the central aim of psychoanalysis, conventionally understood, is to bring unconscious materials into consciousness, the notion of public secrecy—and the parallax viewing community generated from it—speaks to a different movement of knowledge, distortion, and deletion. The "task" implied in the case of public secrecy is not so much to unearth and make transparent once and for all what was once hidden but to dance with social-political formations of unspeakability. In *Life and Death*, the text conveys a sense of loss partly by moving across absurdist renderings that distort and magnify select tendencies of persons and crowds, metahistorical dimensions of loss (through Buddhist cosmologies of desire, suffering, and reincarnation), and internationally well-known historical reference points that evoke party-state campaigns—land reform, the Cultural Revolution—whose intrigue for certain foreign audiences is not unknown to Mo Yan and other Chinese writers.

By contrast, from the perspective of certain global readerships, what renders loss legible in contemporary Chinese literature tends to be the pairing of recognizable historical reference points with the censored status of the author. The presumed task, within a logic of transparency, would be to "give voice" to the censored author in a space external to the site of censorship. Not unlike a topographical approach that would render consciousness and unconsciousness mutually exclusive in space, knowledge is figured as lacking in one site while present in another, with the censor acting as guard in between. But if we follow instead a logic of public secrecy, knowledge and the unsayable are instead in ongoing copresence and redeployment, and indirect formulations take on strategic and aesthetic significance.[24]

Worlding the Ghosts of History

Returning to the theme of loss and its destruction, let me close with the question of failed mourning. In "Mourning and Melancholia," Freud associates the incapacity to mourn with the inability to bring loss into conscious knowledge.[25] The lost object there is positioned between conscious and unconscious topographies, poised between several potential angles of vision. Likewise, the subject hovers between a mourning able to consciously perceive and metabolize what's lost and a melancholia in which a particularized loss is neither present nor explicit. Such undetectability, for Freud, acts to disable decathexis and thus the movement of desire. Less explicit in this essay, yet ever present, is also the parallax gaze of the analyst, whose own angles of vision together constitute the loss that was and the (recognition of) loss to come as analysis proceeds. To process loss in the analytic setting also calls for parallax movements between multiple psychic positions within and between the analyst and analysand.

Since Freud, many have pointed to the importance of addressing collective dimensions of loss and the need to rethink the ethics and politics of mourning

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/critical-times/article-pdf/doi/10.1215/26410478-10437037/2007581/10437037.pdf by guest on 28 September 2023

and melancholia.[26] In the instance here, dystopic visions of loss provided by the figure of the village ghost host a parallax view—a spectral gaze of the deceased not known, or at least not fully perceived as such, by the community of the living. The ghost holds both the wisdom and suffering of repetition through reincarnation. Yet, as in the case of Hillenbrand's photo-form, what is hosted by the specter here may be closer to a public secret—disavowed and distracted but not unknown, unsayable yet unforgotten: painful histories of the Maoist and postreform eras, histories moved by appetites and their cruelties. From another angle of vision, the ghost hosts what certain readerships might imagine as that which is fully unknown or not-to-be-known by the Chinese populace and marked by the formalized sign of unknowability, censorship. The censored author, then, becomes the only author whose truth-form is recognizable in this particular parallax view of historical loss: to win the desire and recognition of an external gaze, loss must be marked as unknowable to the community to whom it "belongs."

A global appetite for recognizable signals of loss—historically legible events at once seen by certain sides of the international community as tragedy, and specifically as *censored* tragedy—implicitly demands a doubled position for those who lived through such events. An analytics centered on amnesia renders them the containers of memory while also being the ones left "in the dark"—to know yet not know, rather than to know what not to know. In this manner, loss circulates on the other side of the former Iron Curtain through its abstraction (loss typologized as inflicted by Communist repression), with censorship acting as both its vehicle and its sign. While this may allow for a certain work of mourning at the global scale, forms of loss that fail to align with liberalist imaginations of the censoring autocratic state become exterior to these forms of circulation and are often read instead as political naiveté or complacency. Elsewhere, my ethnographic work on contemporary Chinese spirit mediumship describes a sense of cosmopolitical implosion since the death of Mao, and a return of demonic, corrupt spirits in his absence, counterintuitive to Western renderings of Maoist religious repression and post-Mao religious revival. The ghost, then, can host a multitude of historical remembrances while gesturing toward their cosmic dimension. In speaking to loss in parallax, perhaps the task may be to continue turning with the dissonant reverberations of loss, in their singularities as well as their contending abstractions, and through the multiplication of movements and gazes, perhaps loosen, if even for a moment, the rigidity Freud had associated with an impossibility of mourning.

EMILY NG is assistant professor of anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania. She is the author of *A Time of Lost Gods: Mediumship, Madness, and the Ghost after Mao* (2020). With regional attention to China, her research interests include madness, subjectivity,

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/critical-times/article-pdf/doi/10.1215/26410478-10437037/2007581/10437037.pdf by guest on 28 September 2023

cosmopolitics, and how historical worlds and wounds reverberate across geographies and generations.

Acknowledgments
Thanks go to Esther Peeren, Hanneke Stuit, Basit Kareem Iqbal, Rajbir Singh Judge, Milad Odabaei, Samera Esmeir, Stefania Pandolfo, Samuele Collu, Angelantonio Grossi, the *Critical Times* editorial committee, and the three anonymous reviewers for their generative feedback on earlier versions of this essay. Part of the paper was presented at the 2022 American Anthropological Association Annual Meeting, for a panel on dreams organized by Cristiana Giordano and Laura Meek. Writing was supported by the project Imagining the Rural in a Globalizing World (RURALIMAGINATIONS, 2018–23), which received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program (#772436).

Notes

1. Mo, *Life and Death*, 231–32 (hereafter cited in the text as *LD*).
2. Teiser, "'Having Once Died and Returned to Life'"; Mo, *Life and Death*, 3.
3. For a double reading of trauma in *Life and Death* through psychoanalysis and Buddhism, see Huang, "Buddhist Perspective."
4. Kinkley, *Visions of Dystopia*. In an analysis of what he calls China's new historical novels, which includes *Life and Death*, Kinkley describes this genre's merging of the dystopian novel with historical fables, in contrast to previous Western dystopias centered on future technology and society and earlier Chinese literature that approached the past as a golden age. The rural landscape in these texts, far from being cast as idyllic, is painted as at once carnal and gruesome—the ancestral hometown is filled with cruelty, and the peasantry is far from virtuous or heroic, as Maoist discourses and other existing tropes of the "pure and simple" (*chunpu*) farmer may have suggested.
5. Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*. The place of history in these contemporary novels set in the village parallels nonfiction works such as documentary filmmaker Wu Wenguang's Memory Project, in which villagers across Chinese provinces are approached as carriers of modern Chinese history. This is by no means accidental: the Maoist administration explicitly mobilized the rural in its call to revolution, given the seeming impossibility of an urban proletarian revolution in a largely agrarian China. Thus, I'm not putting into question the centrality of political history to the formations of rural life but rather taking note of the way that the village comes to be figured as fundamentally historical in such contemporary accounts.
6. See Ng, *Time of Lost Gods*. When I tried to describe the otherworldly Maoist politics of the spirit mediums I met in China to friends and colleagues in the United States, my work was often restated within more legible frames and periodizations (e.g., the historical trauma of the Cultural Revolution) that I explicitly noted were not what my interlocutors' accounts pivoted around.
7. A "capitalist roader" (*zouzipai*) is a Maoist-era term referring to those within the Communist Party who were deemed to have capitalist tendencies (to walk the capitalist road/path).
8. "Struggle session" refers to public sessions of political critique and denunciation during the Maoist era, often described as violent and humiliating for those subjected to the session.
9. Osnos, "Mo Yan and China's 'Nobel Complex.'"

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/critical-times/article-pdf/doi/10.1215/26410478-10437037/2007581/10437037.pdf by guest on 28 September 2023

10. The sentiment was shared by many, even if paired with distinct critiques. Chinese literary scholar Perry Link answered in his *New York Review of Books* piece "Does This Writer Deserve the Prize?" with the conclusion that Mo Yan is no Liu Xiaobo, even if those like Mo should not be "demanded" to "risk all" as Liu has done. In an interview with *Der Spiegel*, Mo was repeatedly pressed on what were seen as contradictions between signs of his status as a "regime loyalist" and the seemingly "unequivocal criticism of the state" in his writings (Mo, "Nobel Literature Prize Laureate").
11. Lovell, *Politics of Cultural Capital*.
12. On the selective translation of Chinese novels and the nearly identical paratextual discourse surrounding a wide range of translated Chinese authors (including Mo Yan) focused on censorship, sensationalism, and Communist repression, see Tong King Lee, "China as Dystopia."
13. Morrison, "Holding Up Half the Sky."
14. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. "Parallax," https://www-oed-com/view/Entry/137461, last modified June 2005.
15. Karatani, *Transcritique*, 4.
16. Karatani, *Transcritique*, 4.
17. See, respectively, Ginsburg, "Parallax Effect"; Zee, *Continent in Dust*; Ballestero, "Theory as Parallax and Provocation."
18. Taussig, *Defacement*.
19. Hillenbrand, *Negative Exposures*. The book opens with Beijing-based photographer Xu Yong's 2014 photobook *Negatives* (*Dipian* 底片), in which sixty-four images of his photography are shown as enlargements of their negatives. The contents of the images are hard to make out at first sight, shown as they are in inverted coloration. Yet, what is ciphered is by no means fully inaccessible. As Hillenbrand writes, the photobook's epigraph "clearly flouts the taboo, stating that 'these photographic negatives were taken 26 years ago, in 1989'"—the year of the Tiananmen Square incident, which led to the military massacre of student demonstrators (xiv–xv). The number of pages also stages the well-known Chinese euphemism for the incident—*liusi*, "six-four," standing in for June 4, the date of the event. On the back cover, instructions are given for interacting with the negative images with one's iPhone or iPad by using the color inversion function, which then allows for a "reveal" of the photographs in their noninverted colors. Rather than conceal, the negatives "stare straight at the unsayable" and "visualize the disavowed of history as ghosts" (xviii).
20. Hillenbrand, *Negative Exposures*, xx.
21. Hillenbrand, *Negative Exposures*, xviii.
22. Freud, *Interpretation of Dreams*, 532.
23. Freud has also likened the passage from unconscious to consciousness as the photographic process from negative to positive, albeit selectively.
24. Jullien, *Detour and Access*.
25. Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia."
26. Butler, *Precarious Life*; Cheng, *Melancholy of Race*; Comay, *Mourning Sickness*; Eng and Kazanjian, *Loss*; Pandolfo, *Knot of the Soul*.

Works Cited

Bakhtin, M. M. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981.

Ballestero, Andrea. "Theory as Parallax and Provocation." In *Theory Can Be More than It Used to Be: Learning Anthropology's Method in a Time of Transition*, edited by Dominic Boyer, James D. Faubion, and George E. Marcus, 171–79. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015.

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/critical-times/article-pdf/doi/10.1215/26410478-10437037/2007581/10437037.pdf by guest on 28 September 2023

Butler, Judith. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. New York: Verso Books, 2004.
Cheng, Anne. *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001.
Comay, Rebecca. *Mourning Sickness: Hegel and the French Revolution*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010.
Eng, David, and David Kazanjian, eds. *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003.
Freud, Sigmund. *The Interpretation of Dreams*. New York: Basic Books, 2010.
Freud, Sigmund. "Mourning and Melancholia." In *The Penguin Freud Reader*, edited by Adam Phillips, 310–26. New York: Penguin, 2006.
Ginsburg, Faye. "The Parallax Effect: The Impact of Aboriginal Media on Ethnographic Film." *Visual Anthropology Review* 11, no. 2 (1995): 64–76.
Hillenbrand, Margaret. *Negative Exposures: Knowing What Not to Know in Contemporary China*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020.
Huang, Yiju. "A Buddhist Perspective: Trauma and Reincarnation in Mo Yan's 'Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out.'" *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 28, no. 2 (2016): 285–312.
Jullien, François. *Detour and Access: Strategies of Meaning in China and Greece*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004.
Karatani, Kojin. *Transcritique: On Kant and Marx*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003.
Kinkley, Jeffrey. *Visions of Dystopia in China's New Historical Novels*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2015.
Lee, Tong King. "China as Dystopia: Cultural Imaginings through Translation." *Translation Studies* 8, no. 3 (2015): 251–68.
Link, Perry. "Does This Writer Deserve the Prize?" *New York Review of Books*, December 6, 2012.
Lovell, Julia. *The Politics of Cultural Capital: China's Quest for a Nobel Prize in Literature*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006.
Mo Yan. *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*. Translated by Howard Goldblatt. New York: Arcade, 2008.
Mo Yan. "Nobel Literature Prize Laureate Mo Yan Answers His Critics." Interview. *Der Spiegel*, February 26, 2013.
Morrison, Donald. "Holding Up Half the Sky." *Time*, February 14, 2005. https://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,1027589,00.html.
Ng, Emily. *A Time of Lost Gods: Mediumship, Madness, and the Ghost after Mao*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2020.
Osnos, Evan. "Mo Yan and China's 'Nobel Complex.'" *New Yorker*, October 11, 2012. http://https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/mo-yan-and-chinas-nobel-complex.
Pandolfo, Stefania. *Knot of the Soul: Madness, Psychoanalysis, Islam*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018.
Taussig, Michael. *Defacement: Public Secrecy and the Labor of the Negative*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999.
Teiser, Stephen F. "'Having Once Died and Returned to Life': Representations of Hell in Medieval China." *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 48, no. 2 (1988): 433–64.
Zee, Jerry. *Continent in Dust: Experiments in a Chinese Weather System*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2021.

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/critical-times/article-pdf/doi/10.1215/26410478-10437037/2007581/10437037.pdf by guest on 28 September 2023