

## Luo's Ethical Experience of Growth in Mo Yan's Pow!

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### Recommended Citation

Nie, Zhenzhao. "Luo's Ethical Experience of Growth in Mo Yan's Pow!" *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 17.5 (2015): <<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2772>>

This text has been double-blind peer reviewed by 2+1 experts in the field.

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**Volume 17 Issue 5 (December 2015) Article 14**

**Zhenzhao Nie,**

**"Luo's Ethical Experience of Growth in Mo Yan's *Pow!*"**

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol17/iss5/14>>

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Contents of **CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 17.5 (2015)**

Special Issue ***Fiction and Ethics in the Twenty-first Century*. Ed. Zhenzhao Nie and Biwu Shang**

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol17/iss5/>>

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**Abstract:** In his article "Luo's Ethical Experience of Growth in Mo Yan's *Pow!*" Zhenzhao Nie examines the protagonist's experience of self-discovery in the process of natural to ethical choice. Nie's analysis of the novel rests on the theoretical framework "ethical literary criticism" he developed. In the novel Luo's life is narrated in retrospect when he is attempting to become the disciple of a monk and although Luo does not find what he is searching for in religion, he arrives at a new stage in his life which is based on ethical principles. The young Luo is unable to make ethical choices as his decisions stem from his "animal factor." His craving of meat is a metaphor of the novel for materialism. Towards the end of the narrative, Luo's attempts at firing mortar shells are a symbolic gesture of breaking away from the past and of beginning a new life.

## Zhenzhao NIE

### Luo's Ethical Experience of Growth in Mo Yan's *Pow!*

In the Afterword of *Pow!*, Mo Yan writes that the novel gives voice to many people who "consciously or unconsciously, often wish they never had to grow up" (385; on Mo Yan's work see, e.g., Duran and Huang). "This sort of evocative literary theme," he points out, "was explored in a work by German novelist Günter Grass decades ago" (385). In Grass's *The Tin Drum*, the three-year old protagonist Oscar decides to not grow physically and remains the size of a child, although he matures mentally. Mo Yan explores the same theme from a diametrically opposed point of view when Xiaotong Luo, the protagonist of *Pow!*, recounts his life stories to a character called the Wise Monk. Mo Yan's explanation is that Luo's refusal to grow up is rooted in a fear of adulthood. I argue that Luo's desire to stop growing is a result of his lack of school education and thus his lack of principles of ethics. The narrative recounts Luo's childhood, the life-changing choices he makes while living in a fictional town called Slaughterhouse Village, and his existential transformation in which he changes from a reliance on what I call "natural choice" to "ethical choice" (see Nie, "Ethical Literary," Introduction, "Towards Ethical"). "Ethical choice" is a concept within the theoretical framework of "ethical literary criticism" the basic tenets of which are that human beings consist of an "animal factor" and "human factor": these two parts of human beings are markers which make up a person's identity (see Nie, Introduction 263).

Luo's telling of his story occurs in a temple of the Wutong, an ancient Chinese religion. This temple is presented as a site where Luo is able to express his feelings, confusions, and pursuit of life freely. The dual narrative converges in the temple where Luo's animal instinct and primitive desire are revealed in his confusion about personal feelings and life dilemmas. The Wutong temple is situated on the outskirts between two bustling towns. In front of the temple there lies a large stretch of grassland, where an enormous excavator is growling day and night. The orange-red machine, its soaring iron tentacles, and terrifying shovel bucket are in discordance with the musty and outdated aura of the dilapidated temple. As a historic relic, the temple is a reminder of the past, built with funds supplied by an ancestor of the village head, Lao Lan. It implies that Lan continues the family tradition of materialism and, as the reader learns later, becomes corrupted by the desire for money and power. In modern times, the Wutong temple is deserted by followers and visitors and incense is rarely burned. Nevertheless, initiated by Lao Lan, the local people decide to raise money to rebuild the temple because a legend predicts that worshipping the shrine's deities will make a devotee's penis bigger and bring profits. The Wutong temple is thus a symbol of sexuality and material desire which is significant in that Mo Yan explores how a child, confronted with sexual and material temptations, can develop a healthy personality.

In the Wutong temple, the animal world and the human world converge in the most bizarre and surrealist ways. The animal world is governed by the law of natural selection and abounds with different species: skinny and stinky foxes sneak into the temple and hide behind the shrine, three newly born kittens scurry under their mother's belly in search of her teats, snakes wriggle on the surface of water, fish leap out of the water, toads jump in the mud, flocks of bats fly out of the temple gate. The vivid description of the natural ecosystems in which being alive and procreating are the reigning principles stands in contrast with a society where material welfare becomes the ultimate goal of human life. The minute portrayal of wild cats preying on birds could be read as a metaphor of the human struggle for survival: "Singing birds perch on the branches of a huge ginkgo tree out in the yard; there are cat yowls in the chorus too — the cries of a pair of feral cats that sleep in a hollow of the tree and snatch the birds off its limbs. A particularly self-satisfied yowl enters the temple, followed a mere second later by the pitiful screech of a bird, and then the flapping of wings as a panicky flock takes to the sky. I don't so much smell the stench of blood as imagine it; I don't so much see the feathers fly and the blood-stained limbs as conjure up the image. The male cat is pressing its claws into its prey and trying to court favor with the tailless female" (1-2). The unsentimental description of the violent and bloody scenes is a realistic representation of a natural phenomenon and it also reveals a primitive brutality in the struggle for life.

The ecological environment of the Wutong temple as described in the novel forms a sharp contrast with the human community outside the temple. The temple is build for the worship of the gods instead of providing shelter for a variety of animals. Yet the Wutong temple, rather than a symbol of sacredness, has degraded into a site embodying the unsatisfied craving for material things. While Luo narrates his story to the Wise Monk, they see various characters come and go. A woman in a green overcoat sprawls through a breach in the temple wall, her hair pinned behind one ear with a red flower, and the rings on her fingers shinning in the bright sunlight. While the ring points to material desires, the woman also evokes sexual desire in Luo. At another moment, a woman storms into the temple during a cold rain, her wet white undergarments stick to her skin, highlighting the curves of her body and breasts. It is obvious that the Wutong temple itself is a site of sexual temptation where the "animal factor" in Luo is activated by primal urges. He comes to the temple in the hope of becoming the disciple of the Wise Monk, yet at this moment he cannot control his desire and wishes the woman

could take him away. In fact, by the end of his narration the idea of signing the novice contract with the Wise Monk has completely slipped his memory.

The Horse Spirit, one of the five Wutong idols worshiped by the local people at the temple, is the epitome of sexual and material desire. Half-human and half horse, the Horse Spirit reminds us of centaurs in Greek mythology, most of which are depicted as lustful, wild, drunk, and violent. Indeed, the Horse Spirit is the incarnation of the animal factor, the untamed nature in the human body. In traditional Chinese folk tales, the five Wutong spirits are thought to be supernatural beings who wander across the countryside indulging in all sorts of evil doings, including the seduction and rape of women. In literary works, the Horse Spirit tends to be equated with the God of Lust or the God of Evil, always with a leering smile. In the novel, Mo Yan provides a careful depiction of the Horse Spirit: "Have you ever seen a horse with a human head? A torch beam swings over to illuminate the Horse Spirit. First the face — a captivating face — then the neck — the spot where the human and horse necks ingeniously meet evokes seductive eroticism — and then lower, stopping at the unnaturally large genitals— testicles the size of papayas and a half-exposed penis that looks like a laundry paddle emerging from a red sheath. I hear masculine giggles in the dark" (177). Surprisingly, the Horse Spirit, despite its bad reputation, is basked in the adulation of followers. For the worship of the Horse Spirit shrines and temples are built and sacrifices are offered as part of the ritual. The idolization of the Horse Spirit indicates that the animal factor outweighs the human factor in people like Luo and Lao Lan. It also suggests their earthly preoccupation with sex and food. Although in Luo's narration the Wutong temple is ruined and barely supported by one last pillar and the Horse Spirit idol is crumbling to the ground, the influence of Wutong spirits lingers, most evinced in Luo's obsession with meat and sex. The celebration of a Carnivore Festival is officially financed and supported by the local government as the officials believe that the idolization of the Wutong Spirit will bring prosperity to the local economy. In the world of depravity, brutality, and carnivorous excess as recounted by Luo, people are losing contact with the human factor. The worship of Wutong spirits signifies the break-down of ethical conscience and social responsibility. In Luo's community which degrades into the state of ethical chaos, humans' rationality and integrity are devoured by ever-expanding desires. As such, the confusion Luo is confronted with is foreseeable: the change of traditional lifestyles and accordingly, moral values have misguided Luo into the celebration of free will and an indulgence of sensual pleasure and feasts. Indeed, the existence of the Wutong temple is a statement of the victory of carnal and material desire.

As the Luo's story is narrated in the Wutong temple, the narration reveals his understanding of society and his perspective on sexual relations. Corrupted by a materialistic society, Luo, although in his physical maturity, fails in adhering to ethical values with systematic concepts of right and wrong conduct. Unable to make correct life choices, his actions are unregulated by reason and moral duty. Luo perceives the world and understands people through physical sensation, not rational thinking. Reason, in my definition "is the capacity of acquiring knowledge consciously and making value judgments in certain circumstances. It is a virtue that distinguishes humans from animals" (Introduction 252, unless otherwise noted all translations are mine). Dissociated from reason and based on a set of misleading values, Luo is incapable of making ethical value judgments, not to mention making responsible decisions and moral choices. Caught in ethical confusion, he lacks the ability to form a non-sexualized understanding of women. In his puberty, he is so overwhelmed by his natural feelings that he cannot make use of his rational thinking. Curious about sexual relations between man and woman, his imagination of the physical contact between his father and his aunt is driven not by knowledge, but by a primal urge: "His hands roamed over her body, her buttocks and her breasts. Father's dark hands and Auntie Wild Mule's pale buttocks and breasts. I imagined his hands as wild and savage, like those of a marauder, squeezing her buttocks and breasts dry. She'd moan, her eyes and her mouth expelling light; Father's too. Wrapped in each other's arms, they'd writhe and roll atop a bearskin coverlet, they'd tumble about on the heated kang, they'd 'do it' on the wooden floor. Four hands groping and roaming, four lips pressing and crushing, four legs slithering and entwining, every inch of skin rubbed nearly raw ... creating heat and setting off sparks, until both bodies gave off a luminescent blue glint, like a pair of enormous, scaly, glittery, deadly serpents coiled in an embrace" (5).

In Mo Yan's narration we can see that "the animal factor is human beings' animal instinct, which is mainly controlled by their primitive desires" (Nie, "Towards" 97). As a child, Luo does not understand erotic relationships between men and women nor can he interpret the meaning of his father sleeping with his aunt or the woman's screams. However, his imagination goes wild infused with the power of his animal instinct. Although he suspects that they are involved in something sinful and awful, the imagination of desire somehow releases his primordial energy. Unrestrained by ethical codes, Luo has no ability to exercise rational judgment in order to make ethical choices. His feelings cannot be explained or justified by reason and this explains his intense attachment to meat: "Back then I was a child whose only thought was to eat as much meat as possible. Anyone who gave me a fragrant leg of fatty lamb or a delicious bowl of fatty pork, I didn't care who it was but I'd call him Daddy or go down on my knees and kowtow" (7). In the novel meat symbolizes young Luo's obsession with the animal factor, "the antithesis of the human factor" (Nie, Introduction 275). Commenting on ethical consciousness and ethical choices in Ian McEwan's *The Cement Garden*, Biwu Shang writes that "the ani-mal

factor is embodied in the natural will, which includes those primitive desires for food, and sex" (109). Similarly, in Mo Yan's *Pow!* meat becomes a wide-ranging metaphor for instinct, lust, and material desire. Meat and with it the animal factor is so important to the protagonist and the story, that it even occurs in the form of an opera which Luo attends and which is entitled "From Meat Boy to Meat God." As the name implies, the characteristic of Meat Boy is the excessive consumption of meat and his love of meat leads him to hold it even dearer than his own parents. To him, meat is the loveliest thing on earth, that which makes his soul take flight. Luo believes that "a happy life was defined by an unending supply of meat" (8) and life bereft of meat is not worth living. The dramatization of his carnivorous cravings implies that humans, when subject to animal instincts, are no different from common carnivorous animals. Luo's obsession with meat predominates all his other desires. In Mo Yan's description, Luo's feelings for meat are instinctive and spontaneous, in contrast with conscious experiences and subjective acquisition. Thus, he muses in a telling way about "the source of the meaty aroma that frequently assailed my nostrils, even when I was in class. When that happened, my teacher and my classmates ceased to exist and my mind filled with beautiful images of meat that expelled bursts of heated fragrance as it lined up and hopped along a road paved with garlic paste and coriander and other spices, heading straight for me. I could smell it now. I had no trouble picking out the smell of beef, of lamb, of pork and of dog, and beautiful visions swam in my head. Yes, in my head, where meat always has form and is imbued with language; meat is a richly evocative living thing with which I enjoy a close relationship. These meats call out to me: 'Come eat me! Come eat me, Xiaotong, and hurry'" (208).

Meat is young Luo's obsession and it nourishes him more than any other food. Indeed, his cravings for meat are never satisfied and he can consume endless quantities of it. Gifted with the ability to communicate with meat, he even feels its emotional needs and talks to it. While watching "From Meat Boy to Meat God," Luo feels that he is the incarnation of the Meat God: "Just look at the Meat God standing there. That's me in my youth" (210). Later the high-school dropout finds employment in a meatpacking plant and develops his deep emotional attachment with meat further: "Meats, dear meats, the time has come for me to feast on you so as to be worthy of your abiding love. To be loved and respected by such fine, uncontaminated meat has made Luo the world's happiest person" (219).

Like nearly all the characters in the novel, Luo experiences meat as the ultimate pleasure in life as his nature is purely sensuous. The meat-eating contest between Luo and three other youths is a reflection of a society that feeds on irrational will, animal instinct, and natural feelings. The massive power of irrationality rouses the spirit of viciousness and recklessness. Finally, Luo finishes eating 2.5 kilograms of cooked beef and wins the championship. It is in this contest that Luo's insatiable appetite for meat has reached its extreme. In a meat festival the craving for meat becomes the meaning of life for all villagers and worst of all, their carnivorous desire seems bottomless. Another character in the novel, Lao Lan's dead son (a parody of Luo), carries his love for meat to the extreme and dies of consuming too much meat. At his funeral, the father eulogizes his son by saying that "his only wish in life was to eat meat, and that wish was never denied him ... After consuming a ton of meat, he slipped away painlessly in his sleep. His was a happy life, and I carried out all the responsibilities of a father" (272). It is Lao Lan's choice, as shared by Luo, to base his lifelong happiness on meat eating. Luo is an extreme example of the type of people whose thinking, feeling, and will are centering on meat. For one time, it occurs to Luo, while eating artificial meat which tastes exactly like donkey meat, that he should free himself from the shackles of all earthly desires: if he will become a Buddha, so be it, but if not that, then a Taoist immortal, and if not that, then a demon. Such ideas demonstrating that somehow and somewhere he has some ethical principles buried in him, however, only flash by and are soon disappear.

The satisfaction of sensual and material needs become the guiding rules also of the administrative program of the local government. The deputy governor remarks at the opening ceremony of the meat festival that "many of our comrades are too conservative. There's nothing wrong with a Meat God and a Meat God Temple. They have rich implications and lasting appeal" (236). He continues to explain the practical implication of the symbol of carnal desire in modern society: "Paying respects to the Wutong Spirit shows that the masses yearn for a healthy, happy sex life, and what's wrong with that? Allocate some funds and refurbish it while you're building the Meat God Temple. Here you have two bright spots that will boost the economic development of the twin cities, so don't let other provinces come in and steal your thunder" (237). His idea of a Meat God temple signifies the official affirmation of the twisted system of morality and ethics. For government officials, regular meat eating is an important yardstick of a relatively affluent society and hence their worship of Meat God is not a symbol of superstition, but of the wish for a better life.

In Mo Yan's fictional world, the villagers are living in an age of immoral behavior, a literal incarnation of which is the meatpacking plant, a symbol of sex, lust, and power. As the cooperative's representative, Lao Lan is the incarnation of the Wutong Spirit: he increases his revenues by injecting water into meat and has numerous affairs with singers and film stars. The Wutong Temple, Slaughterhouse Village and the meatpacking plant are physical entities, as well as controversial sites in which desires are manifest. Luo and Lao Lan are lured into the traps of wild capitalism, the maximization of

lust and greed for money. Sexual desire and material desire are embodied in Luo's and Lao Lan's irrational will and behavior and their failure to make ethical choices shows that they are on the verge of transformation into animals. Luo's desperate love for meat is accompanied by the natural feeling of satisfaction unrestrained by reason. For Luo, the life choices he has made (for example, whether he should go to school or find employment in the factory) depend on the satisfaction of meat eating, a physiological need which appeals to natural feeling rather than the feeling associated with ethical needs and moral requirements. His moral deficiency is the best example of how reason recedes to primitive instinct and it surfaces when he chooses between physical desires and rational judgments. School education is the most efficient and effective way for a child to gather knowledge and obtain moral lessons. Luo, however, is controlled by his craving and decides to leave school. For him, "scavenging is life's encyclopedia. Picking up junk and sorting it into categories are the same as reading a book of facts" (191) and scavenging with his mother becomes his "elementary, secondary school and college" (191). The analogy between education and scavenging implies that on the one hand Luo, like an entrepreneur, is solely motivated by financial gain which in turn is related to the satisfaction of his sensual pleasure. On the other hand, he denies the significance of knowledge and moral teaching one could obtain from education.

Unable to appreciate the significance and value of education, Lao Lan neither has a definite life goal nor understands how to live. After earning a lot of money, he has the idea to work to the benefit of his village by spending on bridges, roads, schools, kindergartens, and nursing homes. Yet when compared with his desire jewelry, the interest of the local community is of little importance. Cheating becomes acceptable to make money, formaldehyde is injected into meat to make it last longer, and water is injected to make meat heavier. All immoral actions are completed for one purpose, to satisfy their "animal factor." Similar to Lao Lan, Luo's lack of school education is the fundamental cause of his craving for meat. It was not until at the age of eleven that Luo was placed in the first grade of Hanlin Primary School. Although he attends school at an older age than his peers, he chooses not to observe school rules or discipline but acts as he wants. It is hard for him to concentrate in class for forty-five minutes as he begins to feel dizzy after ten minutes and wants nothing more than to go to sleep. He disregards school regulations and follows his animal instinct. When he was asked how to divide up eight pears among four children, he answers in contempt, "Divide them up? You fight over them! This is an age of 'primitive accumulation.' The bold stuff their bellies, the timid starve to death and the biggest fist wins the fight!" (199). Interestingly, Luo's parents think differently as their miserable life has convinced Luo's father that "education is the path to success. Everything else will lead you astray" (227). Similarly, Luo's mother also comes to realize that going to school is more important than earning money. Luo, however, rejects his parents' advice and challenges the traditional notion that only with education can one advance in life (207). He is determined to set an example by living without education: "I hate school" (145).

Although Luo does not receive formal schooling, his desire for meat eating leads him to invent a new way of injecting meat with water. Normally, the workers attach a high-pressure hose to the heart of a newly slaughtered pig to inject water, but since the animal is dead, its organs can no longer absorb the water and most of the water flows away. Luo invents a method of injecting water into living animals, an idea he has as he watches a doctor administering an infusion. He justifies his method by asserting that "adding water to a dead animal is injection ... But adding it to a living animal is something different. It's cleansing their organs and their circulatory system. If you ask me, this meets both your output goals and your standard for high-quality meat" (245). Because of this novel device, Luo gets a position overseeing the of meat-cleansing workshop. Lao Lan is wholeheartedly supportive of Luo's invention and says that "we wouldn't be injecting meat with water—we'd be cleansing our cows of toxins and improving the quality of their meat. We can call it meat-cleansing" (246). Under this disguise, the cheating is officially accepted in the plant.

At the end of the novel, Luo fires mortar shells into the air which can be interpreted as a symbolic gesture of breaking away from the past. In the beginning, when Luo tells his story to the Wise Monk, he is physically, but not mentally mature. This means that although he has a human form, he still needs to demonstrate that he is a rational human being capable of making ethical choices. In ethical literary criticism, "natural and ethical selection are driven by different factors: "Different from natural selection which is completed through the struggle for existence in the stage of natural evolution, ethical selection is accomplished through teaching" (5). Hence moral teaching is a defining factor that differentiates humans from animals.

Despite Luo's hatred of formal education, his attempt to study as a disciple of the Wise Monk indicates that he does have a desire for moral teaching and guidance. The Wise Monk is benign, patient, and attentive to Luo. However, as the Wise Monk remains silent throughout the story, he can neither enlighten Luo on his moral confusion nor provide guidance for his future path. Although he should be wise, he seems gloomy, dreary, and irrational. Sitting up straight in the lotus position on a rotting mat in front of an ugly, crumbling Wutong Spirit idol, the Wise Monk looks as serene as a sleeping horse, running a string of purple prayer beads through his fingers. The narrator compares the Wise Monk's posture with that of a Wutong Horse Spirit behind him and thus implies his identification with the spir-

it, a symbol of lust. In fact, the monk leaves Luo in awe by twisting his own body so adeptly that he can perform oral sex on himself. It is not surprising that Luo cannot get any teaching from the monk. Functioning merely as a listener, the Wise Monk plays no positive part in Luo's self-reflection. Consequently, Luo's efforts to find consolation and guidance in religion turn out to be futile. However, a change in Luo towards ethics occurs when he realizes after the meat-eating contest that there is no point in meat eating any longer. The decision to stop meat eating indicates that he has gained the ability of making ethical judgments. As the symbolic gesture of setting him free from his past animal desires, Luo decides to begin his new life by firing mortar shells at everything he hates. His potential targets are people or items which he perceives as obstacles. He takes aim at the items associated with corruption, decay, and lust such as a Ming Dynasty mahjong table, a beauty salon, a banquet room, a township head's office in which an envelope stuffed with money is lying on the desk, a hot spring where well-off high officials enjoy themselves and the Wutong temple itself. These attacks amount to forty-one attempts, a symbolic number which connects Luo's growth experience to the Confucian saying that life begins at forty because then one has developed a mature outlook on life. At forty, one is sensible and able to distinguish good from evil, to resist temptation, and to learn how to take on social responsibility. The fact that Luo has fired forty-one mortar shells with forty misses suggests that the first half of his life is a failure. With the help of an old woman, the last shell hits his enemy Lao Lan and this could be read as the beginning of a new stage of his life. It also suggests that he would not be able to succeed without others' guidance and help.

With the success of Luo's last attempt to start an ethical life, the Wutong Temple has virtually collapsed with only one pillar struggling to support the shabby roof. The last shell cuts the ties between Luo and the Wise Monk as he stops putting faith in the monk. Shooting the forty-one mortar shells is itself an ethical choice as Luo decides to stand in opposition to the distorted system of morality and dissociate himself from those earthly desires. As Mo Yan states in the Afterword of the novel, Luo is determined "to recreate the days of youth and to contend with the blandness of life, to counter the futile struggle and the passage of time" (385). However, in this new stage of life Luo will be faced with more complicated ethical issues under different circumstances. After undergoing moments of confusion, Luo reaches the symbolic age of forty and will be able to apply Confucian virtues, that is, to use reason based on ethical principles to make life decisions.

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