



Posthuman Thinking on Humanity in *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*

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Abstract. The animal writing in *Life and death Are Wearing Me out* is representative in Mo Yan's works. The novel reveals the madness of human society and the ugliness of human nature through the animal perspective, and also records the development and changes of rural life in China over more than 50 years, from 1950s to the early 21st century. Animal writing in *Life and death Are Wearing Me out* contains the posthuman thinking, which not only sharply criticizes human nature and anthropocentrism, but also deeply reflects on the boundary between human and animals. And of course, in addition to criticism, Mo Yan also praises the goodness and fortitude of man and animals in the book.

Keywords: Posthuman · Life and Death Are Me out · Humanity

1 Introduction

Mo Yan is an important contemporary writer in China and his works often record the vicissitudes of Chinese society and history and reflect on human nature. Many of Mo Yan's works are speculative, subject to the interweaving influence of western magic realism and traditional Chinese literature and folk literature.

Published in 2006, *Life and Death Are Wearing Me out* is one of the most representative full-length novels of Nobel Literature Laureate Mo Yan. The novel tells the story of the protagonist, the landlord Ximen Nao, who cannot let go after his aggrieved death. In several rounds of reincarnation, he experiences and understands the vicissitudes, sorrows and happiness of rural China over more than 50 years, from the 1950s to the early 21st century. *Life and Death Are Wearing Me out* inherits the form of a type of ancient Chinese classical novel called *Zhanghuiti*. The style “*Zhanghuiti*” gets its name because each chapter has a different title and the paragraphs are generally the same in length with complete beginnings and endings. *Life and Death Are Wearing Me out* is also noted for drawing on the Buddhist concept of reincarnation to create the main plotline. In each round of reincarnation, the perspective of an animal, such as donkey, cow, and dog, is used as the lens through which the story events are focalised. Although animal writing and animal images are not uncommon in Mo Yan's works, including, for instance, *Big Breast Wide Hip* (1995) and *Frog* (2009), *Life and Death Are Wearing Me out* is distinctive for its heavy focus on animal writing and use of multiple animal perspectives.

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Life and Death Are Wearing Me out integrates humans and animals and challenges the boundary between humanity and animality. The novel superimposes various animal perspectives with the human perspective, which enriches character images and the storyline, and facilitates the reflection on human nature and human society.

2 Literature Review

As an important work in the history of modern and contemporary Chinese literature, *Life and Death Are Wearing Me out* has attracted much critical attention. The studies have hitherto covered the English translation of the novel, its narrative perspective, characters, use of local folk culture, cross-cultural comparison with fiction by, for instance, Haruki Murakami. Among them, studies on the strategies of English translation account for the majority, focusing on, for instance, the phenomenon of mistranslation, how to treat culture loaded words, and rewriting.

As a representative of Mo Yan's animal writing, *Life and Death Are Wearing Me out* has been investigated from perspectives related to animal characters and narrative. Regarding anthropomorphic characters in the novel, Cheng Wan argues that Mo Yan integrates animal and human psychological characteristics, instincts, emotions and behaviors. Anthropomorphic characters constitute the Other to human characters in the novel, encouraging readers to reflect on humanity through defamiliarisation. All kinds of animals participate in the course of human life and the novel represents the real world as closely as possible. Cheng believes that Mo Yan's novel delivers messages related to the meaning of life, which are often conveyed through a multiplicity of experiences from different perspectives of the anthropomorphic characters [1]. Liu Guangyuan argues that the stereotyped images of stubborn donkey and loyal dog are interconnected with human nature. Liu also directs attention to what animality and humanity have in common, i.e., the pursuit of freedom [2]. Zhou Ni thinks that the animal images in *Life and Death Are Wearing Me out* present a symbolic totem of simplicity, primitiveness, roughness and vitality [3].

In addition to animal characters, the novel has also been subject to study, focusing on animal narrative perspective and its fusion with human perspective. Zong Yuyu believes that although animals are bystanders to human society, they can to some extent continue the human spirit [4]. However, Zong fails to illustrate what the human spirit is particularly about. In *Life and Death Are Wearing Me out*, Mo Yan pours complex emotions and historical memories into the animal narrator, making the perspectives of animals and humans superimposed. Such a narrative method can expand the width of the narrative, and at the same time, the expression of literature becomes more ambiguous, and greater narrative freedom is obtained. Moreover, Mo Yan makes extensive use of first-person narration, enhancing a sense of intimacy and realism. Liu Minfeng observes that Mo Yan uses the device of reincarnation to enable a multiplicity of animal narrative perspectives [5].

Chen Gaofeng believes that the use of animals as narrators aims to expose the ugliness in human nature, and to critique and satirise society from a defamiliarised perspective. For instance, Chen suggests, "Mo Yan reveals the shameless, cunning, despicable and cowardly selfishness in human nature through the donkey's perspective" (Chen 1) [6].

In a similar vein, Xu Bingquan points out that “animals seem to have more feelings and wisdom than people, purer and nobler” (Xu 4) [7].

Although quite a few studies have investigated *Life and Death Are Wearing Me out* in terms of its anthropomorphic characters and animal narrative, three issues merit further attention. First of all, there is often a binary division between humans and animals, i.e., animals are believed to symbolise kindness, beauty, primitiveness and vitality, while humanity, in contrast, is ugly, greedy, selfish, and shameless. This kind of binary division prompts one to reflect on human nature that should have been more comprehensive and profound. Secondly, although the existing research revolves around a parallel of concepts, i.e., animality and humanity, in *Life and Death Are Wearing Me out*, there is little interpretation of the two concepts, in other words, what animality is, what humanity is, and what the relationship between them is. Given that animality and humanity form the cornerstone for the novel, it is necessary to clarify these two concepts.

Therefore, this paper will focus on how the novel represents animality and humanity especially through the use of anthropomorphic characters and the animal narrative perspective.

3 Theoretical Framework

Posthumanism challenges the tenets of traditional humanism, in particular, anthropocentrism that reveres human beings as the center of world activities (Badmington; Lundblad; Halberstam) [8]. With the development of the times, the progress of science and technology, and environmental crises, a series of issues, including, for instance, the boundary between human and non-human, the relationship between human and nature, have been subject to constant discussion and debate.

First, as to the boundary between human and non-human, Donna J. Haraway’s “A Manifesto for Cyborgs” is a seminal study, in which she argues that a series of “boundary breakdowns” (Haraway 68) [9] has subverted the established position of human beings and their clear-cut distinction from animals and machines. Man is no longer the center of privilege and support.

Another key aspect that features in posthuman thinking is the human-nature relationship (Taylor and Orning) [10]. Posthumanism criticises the self-centered superiority that urges human beings to destroy the natural environment and to kill and eat animals wantonly. But the gradual deterioration of the environment and frequent natural disasters, for instance, scorching weather, severe cold, sand dust, the plague, all accuse human beings of hubris and ignorance.

These two aspects are prominent in Mo Yan’s *Life and Death Are Wearing Me out*, since Mo Yan breaks the boundary between human and non-human, infusing the memories and emotions that are traditionally associated with humans into animals, and using the perspective of the animals to observe the story world. Thus, the novel integrates the beings of human beings and animals, and the two perspectives are inseparable from each other. Moreover, underlying the novel’s depiction of the vicissitudes of human society over decades is a keen perception of the human-nature relationship, though sometimes overt, while at others, covert. Thus, posthumanism turns out a useful perspective to examine *Life and Death Are Wearing Me out*.

4 The Fluid Boundary Between Humanity and Animality

Mo Yan experiments with, tests and stretches the boundary between animality and humanity through the representation of different rounds of reincarnation.

The first part of the book, “Donkey Miseries”, guides the reader to understand the origin of the whole story through the donkey’s perspective. The social critique of the despicable part in human nature is also achieved through the donkey’s perspective. Ximen Nao assumes the appearance of a donkey in the first round of reincarnation. “Causing me more shame and anger than I care to think about, ‘I am not a donkey!’ I roared. ‘I am a man! I’m the Ximen Nao!’” (Mo 13) [11]. These words imbued with strong emotions show that Ximen Nao retains the memory of his past life and resents the fact that he has become a donkey. However, “Much as I hated being an animal, I was stuck with a donkey’s body” and “there was no subduing the flourishing of a donkey’s habits and preference” (Mo 19) [11]. Thus, Ximen Donkey integrates the inner being of a human being and the outer appearance of an animal. In other words, he is a hybrid character in the posthuman sense.

Ximen Donkey is not only a captive animal raised by human beings, but also a participant in human society, gazing at and criticizing it. Recounting the experience of Ximen Nao, Mo Yan uses the first-person narration.

The first-person narration provides the reader with a direct access to the character “I”’s inner world as he or she is experiencing the events. The first-person narration has the characteristics of directness and vividness, which make it easier to stimulate sympathy and create a sense of suspension. Yet sometimes it can be biased. (Shen 103) [12].

Readers are afforded a direct access to the inner thoughts of the character Ximen Donkey. In chapter 5 “The Donkey Disrupts Proceedings and Jumps a Wall”, Ximen Donkey recalls the past atrocities made by Hong Taiyue, Huang Tong and others, and at the same time witnesses the same events happening again from the perspective of a donkey – Hong Taiyue tortures and forces Ximen Bai to confess the whereabouts of Ximen Nao’s hidden treasure, which is completely imagined by Hong Taiyue. The text foregrounds Hong Taiyue’s paranoia and the madness and inferiority of the Poor Peasant Brigade. Before long, Ximen Donkey is killed and eaten by hungry people because of the famine. Mo Yan writes at the end of the part “donkey Miseries”, “Then the famine came, turning people into wild animals, cruel and unfeeling. After eating all the bark from trees and edible grass, a gang of them charged into Ximen estate compound like a pack of starving wolves” (Mo 94) [11]. Thus in the end, animality and humanity become closely bound up together – a human being who suffers from famine is no different from a starving wolf.

The Donkey’s strong emotions are gradually toned down in the process of reincarnation. Ximen Nao reincarnated in the body of the donkey is full of resistance and contradiction and in many cases, he is subject to the influence of violent emotions. However, after being reborn as an ox, Ximen Ox has become less emotional, more docile and introverted. Moreover, different from Ximen Donkey who resents human beings, Ximen Ox may defend his master – every time Ximen Jinlong beats Lan Jiefang, Ximen Ox bumps Hu Bing who cheers on the side. However, unlike the bloody injuries caused by Ximen Donkey, though the power of an ox is much stronger than that of a donkey,

Ximen Ox's attack is quite tolerant and causes no real harm – “At first, a fight to the death seemed inevitable, but as time passed, it turned into a game” (Mo 127) [11].

Ximen Ox seems to epitomize the gentle part of human nature. Chapter 17 “Ravings and Wild Talk Turn into an Essay” demonstrates that Ximen Ox has such qualities as sentiment, docility and tolerance, as if he understands human nature or even has human nature. Soaked in his eyes with red paint splashed by the angry Ximen Jinlong, Lan Lian suffered from unbearable pain. “At that moment a strange sound – somewhere between a cry, a laugh, and a sigh – emerged from the ox shed” (Mo 156) [11]. Lan Lian also shouted, “Ox! My ox! You're all I have, my whole family” (Mo 156)! [11] The bond between man and ox is so touching that the madness of human nature becomes even more ugly. In the following parade, Ximen Ox was still docile, not even like a spirited animal – “your glorious image and your obedient behaviour seemed odd to people, especially to me” (Mo 159) [11]. Tattered shoes hanging from the horns of Ximen Ox not resisting serve as a sharp contrast to the madness and disorder of the crowd. At last, Ximen Ox lost control of his instinctive fear because the red flag accidentally covered his head. The docility of Ximen Ox makes human atrocities more hideous. Unlike Ximen Donkey who angrily rebels against human beings, the tolerance and sentiment of Ximen Ox add a touch of sadness to this tragedy caused by human cruelty and arrogance.

Another interesting difference between Ximen Donkey and Ximen Ox is that Ximen Donkey's story is focalised through his perspective, while the story of Ximen Ox, deeply associated with human emotions, is focalised through Lan Jiefang's perspective. Lan Jiefang's perspective reveals how much Ximen Ox shocks the human mind, as Mo Yan writes at the end of the chapter “The Strength of an Ox”: “Ximen Ox died on my dad's land. What he did went a long way toward clearing the minds of people who had become confused and disoriented during the Cultural Revolution” (Mo 199) [11]. And before Ximen Ox was burned to death,

Something occurred at that moment that stupefied everyone who witnessed it. Ximen Ox, you stood up on shaky legs, minus your harness, your nose ring, and your tether, a free ox, totally liberated from all human control. (Mo 199) [11].

This is not only an accusation of human atrocities, but also a powerful shock to human hubris, shaking the root of anthropocentrism. As the central tenet of posthumanism points out, human is not the privileged and protected center, because humans are never utterly distinct from animals or any other forms of the inhuman. Besides, book two “The Strength of an Ox” is not simply a critique of human nature, but a praise of Lan Lian who is as firm and persistent as Ximen Ox. As Mo Yan himself said in his speech, “Lan Lian in the novel who fights against the trend of the times is a true hero in my mind”. Thus, in the story about Ximen Ox, the text blurs the boundary between humanity and animality by foregrounding good qualities that exist in both humans and animals.

After experiencing a tragic and stirring life, Ximen Nao still can't let go the painful memory. Therefore, he continues to reincarnate and this time, he becomes a pig named Pig Sixteen. Pig Sixteen further integrates the desirable qualities in both humans and animals and can be called a wise and thoughtful pig. Unlike Ximen Donkey and Ximen Ox, Pig Sixteen belongs to not only human society, but the world of wild boars. Although immediately after becoming a pig, Ximen Nao for a time resists the identity of a pig because he is disgusted with the image of dirty pigs. But he soon surrenders to the instinct

of pigs – the pleasure of eating. Yet on the other hand, he has the complex thoughts and ideals of a man:

Lan Lian stuck by his obstinacy to remain apart from the masses, so it was necessary for me, Pig Sixteen, to use my great intelligence, extreme courage, and extraordinary physical abilities to accomplish something that would stun the world, and crowd my piggish way into human history. (Mo 306) [11].

Pig Sixteen is a typical “round character” in E.M.Forster’s sense of the words, i.e., this character is multifaceted and complex and often undergoes significant changes throughout the plot development. Foster believes that the “round character” have higher artistic values, can add a sense of wonder and realism to the story and more importantly, “can show human nature and life in its complexity” (Shen 57) [12].

In the growth process of Pig Sixteen, the emotion and memory of Ximen Nao gradually become blurred, “I don’t mind admitting that I’d pretty stopped linking myself with that poor bastard Ximen Nao of many years before” (Mo 237) [11]. When he finds that he has been unable to communicate with Lan Lian, his previous master and partner, and Lan Lian is even hostile to him, frustration makes him feel.

All creatures on earth follow their own nature. Birth, old age, sickness, and death; joys and sorrows, partings and reunions, are dictated by irreversible objective laws. I was a boar at the time, so I had to carry out my boar responsibilities. (Mo 306) [11].

So far, Ximen Nao has completely accepted his identity and nature as a pig and started to put down the obsession of his previous life, thereby regaining the most valuable part of human nature, i.e., wisdom and kindness.

However, surprisingly, in the process of acquaintance, combat and reconciliation with the wild boar Diao Xiaosan, Pig Sixteen gradually integrates himself into the world of boars. In chapter 32 “Pig Sixteen Chasing the Moon and Becomes King”, influenced by the wild boar Diao Xiaosan and the great changes of human society, Pig Sixteen decides to break away from human beings, rebel against human beings, and eventually become the king of wild boars. Thus, Pig Sixteen, different from Ximen Donkey or Ximen Ox, becomes reconciled with his new identity as an animal and transcends the human sphere as a total outsider, an observer who records human vicissitudes and the great changes of the rural life. Pig Sixteen at first tries to implement the system of human society, but it is strongly opposed by the wild boars – “you can abdicate if you want, but if you plan to stay on as king, you’ll have to respect local customs” (Mo 345) [11]. Since then, Pig Sixteen has started to identify with and obey the law of the jungle in the animal world. He starts to respect the natural laws and animal nature. Ultimately Pig Sixteen sacrificed himself for saving children who fell into the glacier – “at the moment I was human, not a pig; by no stretch of imagination was I a born hero, but I was basically good and willing to do anything for a just cause” (Mo 389) [11]. Pig Sixteen demonstrates the fluid boundary between man and animal.

The story of Dog Four represents the last round of reincarnation in *Life and Death Are Wearing Me out*. At this time, Ximen Nao still has anger, but the object of his anger changes from Hong Taiyu and Huang Tong who caused his unnatural death to the Lord Yama who cheated him in the last round of reincarnation. After being reborn as a dog, he does not resist or even feel as humiliated as when he was reborn as a donkey or pig, but peacefully comes to terms with the identity of a dog. Like Pig Sixteen, human nature

and animal nature are perfectly integrated in Dog Four. The major difference is that Dog Four's life is more deeply rooted in the human world as Pig Sixteen's. In chapter 41 "Dog Four Watches over a Student", Dog Four escorts Lan Jiefang's son on his way to school every day and organises his life in a way that resembles men's. For instance, he establishes an association for all the dogs and leads the association as its president. It can be seen that Dog Four not only gets integrated into human life, but also becomes socialized and humanized. In book four "Dog Spirit", the author uses two alternating perspectives of Lan Jiefang and Dog Four, a man and a dog.

If Pig Sixteen is an outsider to human society, then Dog Four is an observer who is closely bound up with human society yet with a calm and detached sentiment and attitude. The Donkey's observation is coloured with his own strong emotions, while the Dog remains detached – he is just recording the social changes and the stories of people around him. As the family dog in Lan Jiefang's home, he can hear, watch and even be able to smell the stories that happen in this family. Dog Four also has some advanced ideas, which coincide with Posthumanism. Though he lives in Lan Jiefang's home, he doesn't think himself a pet, "I never watch the pet channel, those things, isn't like a living dog, but some furry electronic toys" (Mo 427) [11]. He refuses to be a human accessory or plaything, regarding himself equal to humans. This is a direct critique of human hubris and self-centered superiority. Dog Four lives with a calm state of mind, and ends up being the only animal that dies naturally in the four rounds of reincarnation. After his death, in the face of the Lord Yama's query, he frankly answers, "My hatred is all gone, Great Lord" (Mo 546) [11]! Having experienced too many rounds of reincarnation and too many stories of joys and sorrows in the world, Ximen Nao finally understands the essence of life, and puts down hatred and obsession.

5 Conclusion

Mo Yan demonstrates the nomadic subject of Ximen Nao, who through different rounds of reincarnation experiences his identity as always on the way and fluctuating between animality and humanity. The author reveals and criticizes the evil side of humanity and the madness of human society from the perspective of anthropomorphic characters. At the same time, it shows the changes and development of the rural life in China over the past 50 years. In addition to criticism and denial, Mo Yan also dialectically praises the kindness embedded in human nature.

Unlike many posthuman works that explore the definition and boundary of humanity through integrated beings like artificial intelligence and cyborg, *Life and Death Are Wearing Me out* employs the device of reincarnation to convey the nomadic identity of Ximen Nao that shifts between animality and humanity. Although Buddhism and elements from traditional Chinese folklore, such as reincarnation and Lord Yama, in themselves are not the focus of Mo Yan's novel, they do play a key role in providing a way to represent the identity of Ximen Nao that transgresses the boundary between human and nonhuman.

Life and Death Are Wearing Me out is a unique literary work in that it creatively combines religion and folk culture with modern Chinese stories, centering anthropomorphic characters as the narrators and narrating from the human and animal perspectives

alternatively. From the perspective of anthropomorphic characters, Mo Yan criticizes the ugliness of human nature and the madness of society, yet he also sings praise for the good side of human nature at the same time.

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