

Literary Analysis of Abortion  
in the Short Story “Explosions”  
by Mo Yan  
of the People’s Republic of China

*Jeff Koloze*

**ABSTRACT:** This paper reviews demographic considerations of abortion and the one-child policy in the People’s Republic of China that form the basis for contemporary literary works concerning abortion. After a brief discussion of other fictional works, the paper focuses on abortion passages in the short story “Explosions” (1985) by Mo Yan. The literature is reviewed using formalist explication and aspects of reception theory.

A review of any literary work on abortion in the People’s Republic of China (PRC) presents researchers with an immediate problem. Should discussing the topic rely on sociological documentation of abortion as practiced on the mainland, or does another perspective apply? Can one take strictly a political view towards the matter, or does one need to consider factors usually associated with other literary theories, such as the role of women from a feminist literary viewpoint or the confrontation of ideologies from a Marxist perspective – the latter being the literary theory that one would almost automatically think would apply when speaking about life in Communist China? For purposes of this study, the practices of formalist explication combined with reception theory seem to be the optimum means by which selected literary artifacts will be evaluated, primarily because the theories can afford American researchers and students of literature insights into the interaction of the ideological confrontation between official, received statements on one of the most controversial matters in the Chinese world (national policies on birth control and reproductive rights when confronted with failed

birth control as leading to abortion) and the notions held by millions of Chinese whose attitudes and opinions towards compulsory birth control and forced abortion are becoming increasingly evident in the West.

#### Abortion and Demographic Concerns in the PRC

The number of annual abortions performed in the People's Republic is staggering. It is estimated by Aird<sup>1</sup> at eight million per year between 1971 and 1985, for a total of 111,960,987 abortions (p. 40). Other sources indicate the figure is close to thirteen million annual abortions currently, versus twenty million live births; thus, about 40% of all pregnancies per year are aborted.<sup>2</sup> What is perhaps most curious about the number of abortions performed is that the wide practice of abortion in China is the result neither of a history of abortion agitation nor the pronouncements by pre-communist governments against abortion. In fact, if the exploration of Nie into Buddhist and Confucian respect for pre-natal life is accepted,<sup>3</sup> then Chinese history argues against such an openness towards abortion.<sup>4</sup> Countering claims that abortion in China was implicitly allowed because there was no clear prohibition against it, Nie further argues:

While it is true that the early medical literature rarely if ever explicitly proscribes performing abortion, this should probably not be interpreted as representing a permissive attitude on the part of ancient doctors. Rather, the silence is likely to indicate that medical abortion was regarded as so obviously unethical that there was no need to include it in lists of professional precepts, just as medical ethics documents whether ancient or modern rarely explicitly

---

<sup>1</sup> J.S. Aird, *Slaughter of the Innocents: Coercive Birth Control in China* (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute Press, 1990).

<sup>2</sup> S. Canaves, "China's 13 Million Annual Abortions Flagged as a Cause of Concern," web blog post of 30 July 2009, retrieved from <http://blogs.wsj.com/chinarealtime/2009/07/30/chinas-13-million-annual-abortions-flagged-as-a-cause-for-concern>.

<sup>3</sup> J.-B. Nie, *Behind the Silence: Chinese Voices on Abortion* (Lanham MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> See especially chapters three, four, and seven wherein Nie evaluates the positions of the major religions toward abortion and respect for pre-natal life in the Imperial and Republican eras.

state that physicians should not murder or kill.<sup>5</sup>

As early as the late 1970s scholars had discussed demographic changes in the PRC and considered the consequences of several official policies designed to curtail population growth, including compulsory birth control and abortion of a second child. While pointing out that official population figures were difficult to determine (since the PRC had not devoted sufficient resources to ascertaining the extent of population growth after the founding of the nation and because of censorship), Aird<sup>6</sup> had commented on the disastrous effects that complete

---

<sup>5</sup> Nie, p. 78.

<sup>6</sup> J. S. Aird, (1982, June). "Population Studies and Population Policy in China," *Population and Development Review*, 8/2 (1982): 267-97.

To illustrate the effects of censorship on this issue, Aird states: "The main reason so few national population data appear in Chinese sources, however, is central censorship. No national population figures can be made public without prior authorization by the State Council. Even officials of the SSB [State Statistical Bureau] cannot use such figures in their articles and speeches until they have been cleared. This policy has been in effect since the earliest years of the PRC. It was applied more stringently between the collapse of the Leap Forward in 1959 and the fall of the 'Gang of Four' in 1976, but it has never been relaxed entirely. To this day, the full results of the 1953 census have not been made public. The very brief census communiqué issued upon the completion of the work in November 1954 gave only the national total, breakdown by sex, ethnic group, rural and urban residence, and province, and a few details about age composition and the extent of errors in enumeration" (p. 271).

Government censorship of scholarly activity is well-known, but the following example by Aird *vis-à-vis* the issues of concern in this paper further illustrates its disastrous effects: "After the start of the Leap Forward in spring 1958, Mao reaffirmed his earlier views that a large population was an asset for China's national development, adding that poverty was beneficial for China because it made people more revolutionary and inclined toward change. For the next four years birth control work languished. Other spokesmen echoed Mao's sentiments, and all but one of the Chinese scholars who had stressed the importance of controlling human fertility were silenced. The economist Ma Yinchu, who had argued the urgent need for control of population growth on grounds very similar to those now used to justify the same policy, courageously refused to abandon his convictions, despite some 200 attacks on him in 1958 alone, and continued to defend his position until 1960, when he was obliged to surrender his post as president of Beijing University and was refused further

implementation of the one-child policy would have on China:

There are some disadvantages to a too-rapid reduction in fertility. Sudden changes in the size of age cohorts cause similar changes in the demand for age-related goods and services, in the facilities and personnel that provide them, and in the allocation of resources that they require – changes that can result in dislocations and inefficiencies that adversely affect national development. Both Lin and Liu have indicated that the Chinese family planning authorities do not expect or want to achieve the sudden, universal adoption of the one-child family because they are aware of the problems of a distorted age-sex structure; but family planning propaganda and some of the provincial family planning regulations convey a different impression.<sup>7</sup>

Contemporary scholars often elaborate the effects of these policies within the larger context of their areas of studies, whether political or social criticism.<sup>8</sup> Pronouncements from the PRC itself ratify the notion that China is experiencing a dire population situation. The Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the United States of America states:

Some lawmakers and family planning officials support [a law explicitly banning sex-selective abortions] because of the serious imbalance in the ratio of genders in the population. China has 119 boys born for every 100 girls, much higher than the global ratio of 103 to 107 boys for every 100 girls.<sup>9</sup>

The Chinese Academy of Social Sciences confirmed this gender

---

access to the public print" (p. 283).

<sup>7</sup> Aird, p. 289. See also p. 296n78: "A recent study has shown that the sudden adoption of the one-child family throughout China could seriously distort China's age-sex structure by the year 2000 and even more so by 2050 and cause wide swings in dependency ratios."

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, the following anthologies and monograph: Gloria Davies, ed., *Voicing Concerns: Contemporary Chinese Critical Inquiry* (Lanham MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), Hok Bun Ku's *Moral Politics in a South Chinese Village: Responsibility, Reciprocity, and Resistance* (Lanham MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), and Lawrence R. Sullivan, ed., *China Since Tiananmen: Political, Economic, and Social Conflicts* (Armonk NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1995).

<sup>9</sup> The Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the United States of America, "Abortion Law Amendment to be Abolished," retrieved on 6 June 2006 from <http://www.china-embassy.org/eng/xw/t260068.htm>.

imbalance in a January 2010 report that “indicates the figure has climbed to 120 boys born for every 100 girls as of 2006 and says that, by the end of 2008, there were 38 million more men in China than women born after 1980.”<sup>10</sup>

#### Literary Response to Abortion in the PRC

What is perhaps the most noticeable feature of abortion in the PRC is the silence attending it at the popular level. In virtually every other nation abortion as a political issue rouses intense passions. Demonstrations on both sides of the issue and legislative efforts to address abortion matters are standard events elsewhere. Many scholars, including Mosher<sup>11</sup> and Nie, have argued that fear of the consequences of speaking against official abortion policy may account for the inaccurate perception that abortion enjoys apparent support in the PRC.

There are, however, emerging voices of dissent towards the national policies on reproductive matters, and their presence is significant given the new liberty of thought finding its expression in literary matters, which is a relatively recent phenomenon in the PRC. Mo Yan<sup>12</sup> asserts this renaissance of liberated thought about controversial issues in his discussion of how China moved from having writers produce politically-correct work to a literature in tune with their own sensibilities:

As the 1970s wound down, our Chairman Mao died, and the situation in China began to change, including its literary output. But the changes were both feeble and slow. Forbidden topics ran the gamut from love stories to tales of Party blunders; but the yearning for freedom was not to be denied. Writers wracked their brains to find ways, however roundabout, to break the taboos. This period saw the rise of so-called scar literature, personal accounts of the horrors of the Cultural Revolution. My own career didn't really start until the early 1980s,

---

<sup>10</sup> S. Ertelt, “Report: China's One-Child, Pro-Abortion Policy Creating Nation of Bachelors,” retrieved on 5 February 2010 from <http://www.lifeneews.com/int1432.html>.

<sup>11</sup> S. W. Mosher, *A Mother's Ordeal: One Woman's Fight Against China's One-Child Policy* (New York NY: Harcourt, Brace, 1993).

<sup>12</sup> “Mo Yan” (translated as “Don't Speak”) is Guan Moye's *nom de plume*. Cataloging systems in American libraries consider “Mo” as the author's surname, and this formatting of the Chinese name will be followed here.

when Chinese literature had already undergone significant changes. Few forbidden topics remained, and many Western writers were introduced into the country, creating a frenzy of Chinese imitations.<sup>13</sup>

Moving from a general statement about political correctness to wondering why the Chinese are silent about abortion specifically, Nie asserts:

Creative writers enjoy greater freedom of speech in China today than scholars in the humanities and social sciences, and literary works often constitute the best window into the concerns and opinions of ordinary people on many social issues. While a medical humanities scholar may fail to find an outlet for an article that argues that abortion is ethically wrong, a fiction writer may sometimes be able to express a similar opinion without falling afoul of the authorities.<sup>14</sup>

In fact, the apparent Chinese silence on abortion seems to exemplify two principles that Nie identifies: first that “guarding one’s tongue is a basic survival strategy in an authoritarian regime” and, second, that “the bitter pain of abortion for many Chinese [is] a pain that goes beyond what words can describe.”<sup>15</sup> The latter is an eminently challenging task for writers.<sup>16</sup>

Admittedly, dissent against abortion could be challenging for literary critics to evaluate, embedded as it is in works that still struggle

---

<sup>13</sup> Yan Mo, *Shifu, You’ll Do Anything for a Laugh*, trans. Howard Goldblatt (New York NY: Arcade, 2001), p. 13.

<sup>14</sup> Nie, pp. 29-30.

<sup>15</sup> Nie, pp. 35, 36.

<sup>16</sup> The short story “I Am Not a Cat” by Tang Min in *Running Wild: New Chinese Writers*, ed. David Der-Wei Wang and Jeanne Tai, trans. Amy Dooling (New York NY: Columbia Univ. Press, 1994), originally published in 1990, may be one of many narratives that attempts to verbalize what is excruciatingly difficult for many Chinese women. Reading not so much like a fictional account as like a diary entry, the narrator uses first-person pronouns as she relates the miscarriage that her cat suffers and her own abortion at a provincial clinic. The story openly speaks of the “one child per family policy” (p. 159). The narrative concerning the abortion itself is similar to other accounts with which Western readers may be more familiar. This short story, then, may be one of many forthcoming explorations of abortion experiences that Chinese women may come to write.

to stay within the cultural and mostly political norms attendant on literary production within the PRC. Some critics may even be hesitant or reluctant to discuss abortion in contemporary Chinese literature at all.<sup>17</sup> Perhaps critical reticence can be attributed to a myopic view of various theories. For example, feminist criticism of the literature on abortion in the PRC could be developed, were it not for a stifling political correctness that prevents feminist critics from evaluating literature that shows abortion in a negative light. Other literary theories may be similarly saddled with political perspectives that influence their perception and interpretation of the literature. One aspect of literary concern that needs to be developed, however, is the juxtaposition and interaction of official pronouncements on abortion in the PRC and writers' responses to those pronouncements. Of all the literary theories that could help to make certain Chinese works more meaningful to Western readers, especially on the controversial topic of abortion, formalist criticism and reception theory, with their focus on the literary artifacts themselves, will seem the most effective tools to use to assist the reader in an appreciation of the literature.

Two works that exemplify the contentions between official pronouncements and creative effort are the poem "Abortion" by Zhen Zhang<sup>18</sup> and the short story "Explosions" by Mo Yan. Poetry in the PRC may be on the forefront of a revolutionary trend that Western scholars are noting with greater frequency. Crespi, for instance, comments thus on developments of modern poetry in the PRC post-Cultural Revolution:

[O]fficially sanctioned Mao-era poetry recitation, while unique in terms of the pressures placed on performers to measure up to extreme ideological standards of the times, represents just one episode in a continuing history of poetry recitation as a cultural practice. Even as the theorists and practitioners of recitation invoked a quite modern idea of pure revolutionary passion, the

---

<sup>17</sup> For example, in "The Literary World of Mo Yan," *World Literature Today* 74/3 (2000): 487-94, Wang summarizes the short story "Baozha" (English, "Explosions"), which concerns the one-child policy and abortion, as the story of "a young man trapped in the uncertainty and restlessness of marriage and family, who achieves temporary release by means of explosive bodily movements" (p. 493).

<sup>18</sup> Z. Zhang, "Abortion" in *Out of the Howling Storm: The New Chinese Poetry*, ed. Tony Barnstone (Hanover NH: Univ. Press of New England, 1993).

concept of expression informing that invocation derived from China's earliest poetic theory. Moreover, examining official poetry recitation also gives the lie to the myth of a uniquely monolithic revolutionary culture, especially when one considers reciters' own reception of these poems. Instead of the transparency and assured purity of intent that one generally experiences when reading the era's officially sanctioned poems in written form, reciters' accounts of giving concrete voice to the poetry intimate a sense of self-doubt spurred by formidable ideological dilemmas – dilemmas that eventually even appear in print on the pages of poetry recitation primers.<sup>19</sup>

It is especially interesting that any deviation from the accepted script of government-acknowledged poetic production occurred in the vocal production of such poetry – vocal delivery perhaps being a freer mode than print, which could more readily affect an artist's career.

Written poetry on abortion is becoming just as revolutionary as its recitation counterpart. The poem "Abortion" by Zhen Zhang is a representative example of work by Chinese authors who are beginning to broach the topic as a way of responding to official PRC positions. The poem has marked similarities with other post-abortion syndrome poems with which Western readers are familiar, such as Gwendolyn Brooks's "The Mother"<sup>20</sup> or Lucille Clifton's "The Lost Baby Poem."<sup>21</sup> One item in the critical commentary about the poet is repeated consistently: mysteriousness. According to Tao, the "self" that Zhang writes "is spontaneous, capricious, sometimes mysterious; [she] remains very much herself as a woman in her creation of mysterious urban worlds [and is credited with] a type of metropolitan women's writing in which the self remains mysteriously private."<sup>22</sup>

This mysteriousness could obscure the resistance implied in the poem by one key term: "I looked long into my uterus at your

---

<sup>19</sup> J. A. Crespi, *Voices in Revolution: Poetry and the Auditory Imagination in Modern China* (Honolulu HI: Univ. of Hawai'i Press, 2009), pp. 166-67.

<sup>20</sup> G. Brooks, "The Mother" in *Literature for Composition: Essays, Fiction, Poetry, and Drama*, 5th ed., ed. Sylvan Barnet, Morton Berman, William Burto, William E. Cain, and Marcia Stubbs (New York NY: Longman, 2000).

<sup>21</sup> L. Clifton, "The Lost Baby Poem" in *Good Woman: Poems and a Memoir, 1969-1980* (Brockport NY: BOA Editions, 1987).

<sup>22</sup> N. Tao, "Introduction: The Changing Self" in *Eight Contemporary Chinese Poets* (Sydney, Australia: Wild Peony, 2006), p. 23.

unwarranted being.”<sup>23</sup> Granting the accuracy of the translation, that the child should have been called “unwarranted” and not “unwanted” or “undesired” suggests a deeper conflict at work in an otherwise straightforward poem manifesting the trauma of post-abortion syndrome. Moreover, what is absent from the poem is especially telling. Nowhere can an allusion be found to the abortion as having been essential to the survival of the nation, an idea found in other texts that suggest abortion as a “remedial measure” (the standard euphemism used to refer to abortion) meant to guard against excessive population growth. Instead, the narrator speaks of how the unborn child’s “brothers and sisters will all be informed / that you are the oldest son,”<sup>24</sup> a futuristic claim that the one-child policy does not apply in her case since the persona will have other children.

The Short Story “Explosions” (1985) by Mo Yan

“Explosions” by Mo Yan<sup>25</sup> is, among those to be considered here, perhaps the clearest literary work that responds to official PRC positions on abortion.<sup>26</sup> The narrative concerns a man in the Chinese armed forces whose wife is illicitly pregnant with a second child. Against the wishes of his father, the husband forces his wife to abort the child. This simple reduction of a fifty-page short story ignores several elements that illustrate the conflict between official pronouncements on the forced abortion policy and on the implementation of that policy and its effects on ordinary Chinese citizens.

The story is notable for containing three “official” references to abortion as a population control measure. Interspersed evenly in the story (the first and second references are announced early in the story and then halfway through the narrative), the first reference occurs when, questioned by his father regarding why his wife must abort, the narrator

---

<sup>23</sup> Z. Zhang, “Abortion” in *Out of the Howling Storm: New Chinese Poetry*, ed. Tony Barnstone (Hanover NH: Univ. Press of New England, 1993), p. 132.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Yan Mo, *Explosions and Other Stories*, edited and translated by Janice Wickeri (Hong Kong: Chinese Univ. of Hong Kong Press, 1991).

<sup>26</sup> Mo Yan, “Explosions” in *Explosions and Other Stories*, ed. and trans. Janice Wickeri (Hong Kong: Chinese Univ. of Hong Kong, 1991).

refers to official orthodoxy:

Think I wouldn't like to have a son? But I already have a daughter; I've already been issued a one-child certificate. As a government cadre, I have to take the lead in responding to the nation's call. How can I avoid it?<sup>27</sup>

The rhetorical questions are unanswered, thus forcing the reader to examine the passage in detail. The above passage opens with a question, not an assertion of the man's desire, and testifies to the subordination of the individual's interest to that of the state. That not one, not two, but three statements of fact immediately follow the man's subordinated desire is noteworthy in a number of respects. The accumulation of facts becomes overpowering to the man himself and to his wife, pregnant with an illicit child. The rhetorical effect is obvious. A person could attack one fact well but arguing against two facts is more challenging, requiring more effort; presenting three or more reasons to support an issue could make an attack against an argument cumbersome. Attacking an argument bolstered by three solid reasons is even more difficult in a narrative that purports to be a transcription of a dialogue between characters on the controversial matter of abortion. Thus, the man makes any challenge to his position that much more difficult for his wife. The hierarchy of the facts further disables challenges to the official abortion policy. Acknowledging one's social obligation to the state ("responding to the nation's call") should precede the issuance of "a one-child certificate," which in turn leads to the birth of a licit child. Here, the chronology is reversed, and the more personal and intimate fact of the existence of a human being is replaced by the impersonal fact of the national duty, the last fact mentioned, resonating in the minds of both the husband and his wife. The last rhetorical question of the passage thus closes all opposition to the one-child policy: it is ineluctable.

The second reference to the official PRC policy is even smaller in terms of words. Trying to reason with his wife, the narrator says, "Just think, there are a billion people in China. If everyone has two children, what's going to happen to China?"<sup>28</sup> This rhetorical question, too, is

---

<sup>27</sup> Mo, "Explosions," p. 3.

<sup>28</sup> Mo, "Explosions," p. 24.

unanswered, but the power of the passage can be understood by a closer examination of the elements. Here, however, one fact is related, followed by an acknowledgment that most families would want to have more than one child. This passage ends with the rhetorical question that forces one to speculate, not on the future of the more personal family unit, but of the abstract nation.<sup>29</sup>

The third reference to PRC abortion ideology, however, breaks the author's or the character's inability to answer questions about the one-child policy and invites substantial commentary. While the following passage does not answer the questions involving the prevention of free choice and the social effects of the PRC's abortion policy, much information is provided to empower readers to determine answers for themselves. In the abortion clinic's waiting room, the narrator reaches in a drawer for a book that a nurse had consulted and recounts:

In my tense gropings, my hand bumps into *Obstetrics*; *Obstetrics* bumps into my hand. I can't wait to open it. It smells of iodine and hand cream. Nurse An has made red and blue marks to highlight the black lines of text and has scribbled notes in the white margins. The obstetrics expert writes: Knowledgeable people world-wide have expressed grave concern over the rapid growth of population. The accelerated pace of population growth has already seriously destabilized the planet. Humanity is heading for a devastating outcome: a population explosion.... Nurse An notes: How I envy you, Liu Xiaoqing! The obstetrics expert writes: Induced abortion is an effective measure in the thorough implementation of birth control policy. We must rid the masses of women of their horror of it. At the same time we must recognize that abortion is not minor surgery. Neither the one performing it nor the one undergoing it should take abortion lightly. Nurse An notes: Zorro is a great guy. Anna is a fine girl. I've got to....<sup>30</sup>

This passage contains several elements worthy of attention *vis-à-vis* literary responses to the PRC policies regarding forced abortion. The first item immediately noticeable is the use of the antimetabole or

---

<sup>29</sup> The merger of the idea of the individual, the family, and the nation might be perfectly consistent, however, with Chinese philosophy. Nie (p. 55) asserts that Chinese culture necessarily conflates the notions of "country," "people," and "society" in ways that Western readers would find difficult to understand.

<sup>30</sup> Nie, pp. 51-52; ellipses in original.

chiasmus, a literary figure of speech that had not been used heretofore in the story but that is obvious on first reading. The suddenness alerts the reader that the passage is significant, an action comporting with the purpose of an antimetabole or chiasmus (to emphasize the paradox of a situation).<sup>31</sup>

The Western reader may not realize the importance of the use of the title of the obstetrics book. In the United States publication by the U.S. Government Printing Office is restricted to official federal documents, whereas all publication in the PRC is controlled by the state.<sup>32</sup> Instead of identifying the source for the “information” that follows as the government of the PRC, the author chose to represent the government by the title of a volume officially sanctioned by the government. Thus, the use of synecdoche becomes especially important as a safe, politically-correct instrument of reaction to the PRC policies.

Moreover, the “obstetrics expert” is significantly anonymous, in contrast to the interpolation, twice, of a clearly identified human being, Nurse An, whose commentary after each of the expert opinions has nothing to do whatsoever with the official statements. Nurse An’s comments certainly interject comic relief into an otherwise serious situation. The anonymous obstetrics author make a distinct proclamation in a stand-alone sentence: “Neither the one performing it [abortion] nor the one undergoing it should take abortion lightly.” One wonders whether the admonition to maintain sobriety in the performance of

---

<sup>31</sup> Corbett calls the figure of speech “antimetabole” in the third edition of his *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student* (New York NY: Oxford Univ. Press, 1990), p. 442, while Murfin and Ray identify the figure as “chiasmus” in the second edition of their *The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms* (Boston MA: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2003), pp. 53-54.

<sup>32</sup> One work of Mo Yan’s not used in this study suffered state censorship, but the work was published as originally intended, thanks in part to a Western (Taiwanese) publisher. The note by Howard Goldblatt, who translated *Hung kao liang chia tsu* (Beijing: People’s Liberation Army Publishing House, 1987) as *Red Sorghum* (New York NY: Viking, 1993), states on the copyright page: “At the request of the author, this translation is based upon the Taipei Hongfan Book Co. 1988 Chinese edition, which restores cuts made in the Mainland Chinese edition, published in 1987 by the People’s Liberation Army Publishing House in Beijing. Some deletions have been made, with the author’s approval, and minor inconsistencies, particularly in dates and ages, have been corrected.”

abortion extends to the literary performance as well, which, in this case, has obviously been abrogated by not one, but two instances of humor.<sup>33</sup>

Finally, the absence of quotation marks throughout the story does not impede determining who is speaking but it does have an ancillary effect in this passage. The ostensibly objective claim by the obstetrics expert about a “population explosion” (bolstered by an ambiguous source called “knowledgeable people world-wide”) is as unsubstantiated as the claim that “[i]nduced abortion is an effective measure in the thorough implementation of birth control policy.” The lack of an identifiable source of these bold claims reduces them to mere slogans, a linguistic artifact with which many Communist Chinese are familiar. Nurse An’s claims, in contrast, are much more personal and subjective. The reader would tend to believe the nurse’s claims for several reasons: they are “revolutionary,” having been written in the margins of a politically-correct medical textbook; they are personalized, containing the high human emotions of envy and love; lastly, they are inviting in the sense that a reader could identify either with Liu Xiaoqing, a popular film star, or with Zorro, a swashbuckling hero. One could not easily identify with the impersonal claims of an official textbook when one is offered identifiable humans instead.

Oblique criticism of the abortion policy of the PRC certainly helps to create passages of literature that are enjoyable not only to read but also to examine, and the hesitancy to openly criticize the abortion policy in fiction is understandable if one thinks of the political consequences that writers would suffer if their works became too counter-ideological.

---

<sup>33</sup> The specific mention of the colors red and blue could also reference another counter-revolutionary act of Nurse An if one considers these colors traditional ones used in editing and correcting texts. Commenting on Mo’s novel *Red Sorghum*, Braester writes that: “The novel’s rich imagery also seems to undermine official nationalist narratives. The color red that pervades the story – from the red sorghum and the red dog leader to the blinding red light and the generous splashes of blood – is far different from the glorious red flag of the PRC, the color of which is thought to have come from the blood of revolutionary martyrs. If Mo Yan’s sensuous colors lend themselves to symbolic interpretation, it is one that goes against the grain of official PRC ideology.” Yomi Braester, *Mo Yan and Red Sorghum: The Columbia Companion to Modern East Asian Literature* (New York NY: Columbia Univ. Press, 2003), p. 542.

Even Mo, who asserted so forcefully in a 2001 anthology of his short stories that contemporary Chinese writers aim “to break the taboos”<sup>34</sup> of the Mao era, finds it difficult to challenge state orthodoxy directly. In “Abandoned Child,” a short story written in the mid-1980s that concerns infanticide more than abortion, the narrator, who saves a newborn girl abandoned in a field, relates a near apology for government ineptitude:

The period after Liberation, owing to improvements in living standards and hygiene, saw a significant drop in the occurrences of abandoned children. But the numbers began to rise again in the 1980s when the situation grew very complicated. First, there were no boys at all. On the surface, it appeared that some parents were forced into acts of inhumanity by rigid family planning restrictions. But upon closer examination, I realized that the traditional preference for boys over girls was the real culprit. I knew I couldn’t be overly critical of parents in this new era, and I also knew that if I were a peasant, I might well be one of those fathers who abandoned his child. (*Shifu*, p. 172)

Three matters in this passage are worthy of attention. First, “infanticide,” the deliberate abandonment of a newborn child with the intent to have the child die, is euphemistically called an “act of inhumanity.” Second, the revolutionary fervor of the Mao era seems to have held everything in place, for it was “after Liberation” that “living standards and hygiene” improved; however, it is significant that “the situation grew very complicated” a decade safely removed from the Mao era (“in the 1980s”). Finally, responsibility for the intended infanticide rests neither with the government nor provincial family planning cadres notorious for overzealousness in forcing abortion on peasants; the “real culprits” are not even the parents but the “traditional preference for boys over girls.”<sup>35</sup> Perhaps the reticence to target official PRC material and sources indicates that the liberty of thought which Chinese authors strive for is

---

<sup>34</sup> Y. Mo, *Shifu, You’ll Do Anything for a Laugh*, trans. Howard Goldblatt (New York NY: Arcade, 2001), p. xv.

<sup>35</sup> Mo ends this section of the story, an enumeration of “four general categories” of “abandoned children” (p. 170) with a statement that seems to apologize for any challenge to the political orthodoxy of the preceding paragraphs: “No matter how much this concept tarnishes the image of the People’s Republic, it is an objective reality, one that will be difficult to eradicate in the short term. Existing in a filthy village with foul air all around, even a diamond-studded sword will rust” (p. 172).

still emergent.

#### Future Research and Questions

Unlike American, Canadian, and European literature, no full-length novel concerning abortion as a primary topic in Chinese literature is yet available in translation. According to Feeley, Mo's most recent novel, *Frogs*,<sup>36</sup> "is about a woman whose job is to enforce the one-child policy." But Mo's translator, Howard Goldblatt, affirms that the novel, recently released in Chinese, will be translated into English by the end of 2010 (personal communications).<sup>37</sup>

Similarly, no film devoted to the issue of abortion is available for study. The 1998 film *Xiu Xiu [The Sent Down Girl]*<sup>38</sup> could be included in this paper as an example of directorial response to the abortion policy of the PRC but has been excluded for several reasons. First, the abortion episode purely illustrates a reaction to an undesired pregnancy resulting from multiple sex partners, not a pregnancy resulting either from failed contraception or a target of the PRC's one-child policy. Second, the abortion episode, although depicted as an obviously negative choice on the part of the mother, speaks more about the changed character of the young woman sent from the city to the steppes during the Cultural Revolution than it says anything as a statement against PRC policies. Finally, the abortion episode is altogether much too brief and does not amplify the failed relationship between the aborted mother and the man who platonically loves her. Moreover, no full-length drama on abortion has been discovered that can merit study.

---

<sup>36</sup> Y. Mo, *Wa [Frogs]* (Shanghai: Shanghai wen yi chu ban she, 2009).

<sup>37</sup> The author wishes to thank Mr. Joseph Hau, Chief Business Strategist for PacifiComm Associates, LLC, and Ada Wong and Linda Dowling (Chinese researchers/interpreters) for their extensive research into and translation of internet literary resources critiquing the novel. Mr. Hau answered numerous questions concerning contemporary Chinese culture and translated key Chinese terms to assist in an explication of the novel's plot and major themes. Persons interested in learning more about business strategies in the People's Republic of China or other nations within his company's scope may reach him at the Columbus, Ohio corporate office: 614-442-7614.

<sup>38</sup> *Xiu Xiu [The Sent Down Girl]*, Dir. Joan Chen, Perf. Lu Lu, and Lopsang [videodisc] (Paramount, 2004).

The dearth of abortion narratives across genres may change, however, when Chinese women find their “voice” to express their feelings and thoughts about their abortions. Western readers are familiar with the empowerment that women experienced during the twentieth-century feminist movement when women could speak freely about their marriages, their employment, and – most importantly – their sexual dissatisfaction and past abortions. Voicing such concerns led to important developments for American women. Thus, Mosher’s *A Mother’s Ordeal: One Woman’s Fight against China’s One-Child Policy* (1993) could qualify as a narrative on the forced abortion policy within the feminist tradition. The Chinese women who either aborted or performed abortions who responded to Nie’s sociological surveys may become freer to express their feelings and thoughts on abortion in longer literary works – such thoughts and feelings still trapped behind the phrase “so bitter that no words can describe it.”

While many questions remain and must be relegated to future research, three can be offered here in closing. First, why is Chinese abortion literature not commonly studied in the West? Are all such writings from Chinese women on the issue of abortion similar to *samizdat*, underground literature? Some examples of an emerging literature documenting women’s abortion experiences, especially those involving post-abortion syndrome, have been identified above, and many more exist that have not been included in this study. Exploring such literature may help Westerners to appreciate these women’s experiences and to share in their suffering.

Second, how will the West respond to narratives depicting the Chinese forced-abortion situation? Politically, the West’s reaction to the extreme population control measures in the PRC often depends on the ideology represented in the White House or 10 Downing Street. One hopes that, besides responding to the extremely poignant situations of women living in the harshest of totalitarian regimes, Western critics and readers will act to alleviate their suffering despite ideological differences.

Third, perhaps the most difficult question to address is whether the Chinese abortion experience as evidenced in contemporary fiction can assist Westerners in a re-evaluation of the effects of legalized abortion in their own countries. Most Western nations have had legalized

abortion for several decades now, and its disastrous social effects – whether legalized only in special circumstances or, as in the case of the United States, legalized throughout the nine months of pregnancy for any reason whatsoever – are increasingly documented by researchers, especially those concerned with post-abortion syndrome. One hopes that the Chinese experience can encourage the West to confront abortion problems honestly – as honestly as Mo Yan attempts in his work on the subject.