

**DCCD 2020****Dialogue of Cultures - Culture of Dialogue: from Conflicting to Understanding****OVERCOMING INTERPERSONAL AND INTER-ETHIC  
CONFLICTS THROUGH THE ART OF READING FOREIGN  
LITERATURE**

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***Abstract***

The article, using Chinese literature as an example, demonstrates certain strategies of interpersonal and intercultural communication, reveals the mechanisms of misunderstanding leading to conflict, and outlines ways to overcome it. The specificity of fiction is determined as a special figurative way of knowing the world, which makes it possible to visually identify strategies for human behavior in situations of domestic and intercultural conflict. The work examines the problems and architectonics of two of the most important modern novels of the 2012 Nobel laureate Mo Yan – “Big Breasts & Wide Hips” and “Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out”, each of which becomes an artistic reflection of key moments in the history of China of the XX century. The main problems of concern to the writer are examined: the relations of “fathers and children” in the new Chinese society, humanism and cruelty during the fratricidal civil war, the problems of retribution and forgiveness, the glorification of the feminine as the most important life basis. The article demonstrates the unity of the main components of understanding foreign culture in the process of thoughtfully slow reading of foreign literature: it consists in combining three prisms: knowledge of national, in this case Chinese cultural traditions, their correlation with universal values, as well as specific national perception, taking into account cultural experience of a Russian reader. It is proved that the rapprochement of value orientations between the West and the East is inevitable, as is the dialogue of the cultures between our peoples.

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## **1. Introduction**

Nowadays, the problem of resolving interpersonal and inter-ethnic conflicts has become much more pressing than ever before, for today the feeling of being close to one another given to us by the Internet, very often turns into unexpected misunderstanding and hostility that do no favour to the process of intercultural communication. Quite a few works of philosophers, sociologists, as well as methodologists and teachers deal with the problems of today's intercultural and interpersonal conflicts (Abu-Nimer & Smith, 2016; Korporowicz & Sławik, 2016; Zhang, 2018). This fact proves that the awareness of sense of fragility of the world in the modern society makes us search for behaviour strategies described by different representatives of human sciences. For example, Tareva (2019) in her work defines the goal that embraces a number of branches of science at the present stage of the society's development; this goal being is to form the ability "to bring up a personality who will be ready to interact with a foreigner on the basis of the full understanding of his/her cultural background; to bring up a person who will be able at the same time to comprehend and realize one's national identity and to measure it from the foreign partner's point of view" (Tareva, 2019, p. 50).

## **2. Problem Statement**

Fiction undoubtedly has special didactic potential in reaching this goal. The objective of our study is to trace how a work of fiction that reflects and transforms the world around us, can also place the reader both into the intercultural dialogue and into the open conflict; it can uncover the reasons of the conflict and show the ways how to get out of it. We know that literary works can seek an insight into the macro- and microcosm of a human's soul and humanity's life. This unique property of belles-lettres makes it possible to use didactic conclusions both in the sphere of everyday ethics and within cultural dialogues trying to "unite the cultures and create the complex linguistic and narrative world view" (Burdusel, 2017, p.1).

## **3. Research Questions**

From this perspective Chinese literature can be regarded as an abundant source of intimate and large-scale situations illustrating the sense of national identity; and this should be taken into consideration while reading a Chinese literary work. For example, very warm relationship between women in a large family (that we often come across while reading Chinese folk tales) can be explained by the principle of polygamy that existed in a traditional Chinese family for many centuries. The Chinese attitude towards riots and new rulers coming to power has also a kind of national distinctness. Any riot or coup d'état will be regarded as legitimate if a ruler forgets about his direct duties, i.e. when he stops thinking about his people. Then the Heaven, which is the Supreme Power, turns away from the ruler: first come natural disasters (droughts, floods), then social upheavals (civil unrests, rebellions). The three best-known traditional Chinese novels of the Ming dynasty ("Romance of the Three Kingdoms" by Luo Guanzhong, "Water Margin" by Shi Nai'an and "Journey to the West" by Wu Chen'en) describe the events that show us the specific features of the Chinese' attitude to the shift of power.

Special interest for the problem of national identity in the Chinese literature arose at the end of the last century, when the events of the Cultural Revolution were replaced by the period of openness and social reforms. This new period defined new goals for the cultural advancement in general and the East-West cultural dialogue in particular. One of the new trends in literature got the name of “Chinese nativism”, or the “Root-searching movement” (another name: “Xungen movement”). The writers in their referring to the past not only tried to understand the key moments in the Chinese history, but also specify the main features of the national character by depicting these key moments. The essence of this trend is summed up in Khuziyatova’s article (2009) “On the category of personal agency in the Chinese literary studies of the 1980s”: “<...> one of the major questions has become the building-up of the new personal agency which will be able to create an individual as a self-consistent agent. The basis of this building-up process is the deep identity crisis which is being felt by the nation as a whole and especially by young Chinese writers. The revival of the personal agent, the individual, implies the writers’ desire to re-determine their relations with the authorities and their attitude towards the society whose basic principles were ruined after the Cultural Revolution” (p. 110).

#### **4. Purpose of the Study**

In our work, we set ourselves the goal of identifying and analyzing the reflection of the features of the Chinese national character in the works of Mo Yan, “Big Breasts & Wide Ass” and “Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out”. To show how, through careful reading of foreign literature, one can understand the causes of interpersonal and interethnic conflicts, find possible ways to overcome them successfully. And to prove that the dialogue of cultures can contribute to a deep knowledge of the human character and the world around us.

#### **5. Research Methods**

Using the comparative typological method, let us consider samples of slow reading of modern Chinese literature, one of the prominent representatives of which is Mo Yan, the 2012 Nobel Prize winner. The question about the writer’s creative method remains unanswered, but we can say he is quite inclined to the aesthetics of the Root-searching movement (xungen movement) literature. In his novels “The Republic of Wine” (Mo, 2016a), “Big Breasts & Wide Hips” (Mo, 2012), “Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out” (Mo, 2016b), “Red Sorghum” (Mo, 2018) the writer through the lens of history, ancient and contemporary myths is trying to break the major codas of human behaviour. Some literary critics have already noticed the writer’s attempt to create a polyphonic picture of the world, the picture that could show different points of view on the history of the 20th century China. As, for example, the article of Gandara and Sartori (2016) “Discursive Heterogeneity in Chinese Literature. A Semiotic Analysis of the Construction of the Narrator and the Narratee” (Gándara & Sartori, 2016) contains the idea of Mo Yan having created the specifically national type of narration. We also agree with Xu Hangping’s opinion that Mo Yan mobilizes the reader’s senses – the basis of our aesthetic imagination – to rethink official history and knowledge (Xu, 2018, p. 183).

## 6. Findings

The novel “Big Breasts & Wide Hips” is a real epic painting depicting the history of a family starting from 1939, as an integral part of the history of China. This book can be compared with M. Sholokhov’s novel “And Quiet Flows the Don”, for both of these novels contain pages that describe the deadly fratricidal civil war.

The main character is a woman called Shangguan Lu who gave birth to eight daughters and a long-awaited son from different fathers. She is the wife of a smith, and her position in the family depends on her ability to have a son, the bearer of the family name. So, her family and her cruel mother-in-law force her to be untrue to her impotent husband. At the beginning of the novel we come across the events which are shocking in their barbarous cruelty: Shangguan Lu is delivering a baby, and her mother-in-law is at the same time worrying about a donkey that can’t deliver her colt. The mother-in-law sends for the man who will assist the animal, not her daughter-in-law giving birth. The background of the plot is the village occupied by the Japanese, the revenge of the Japanese soldiers upon the villagers for the burnt-down bridge.

Each of the daughters of Mother (that is the name the narrator calls Shangguan Lu) has her own destiny. Each of them finds her own man (the elder daughter Laidi’s husband is Sha Yueliang, the second sister Zhaodi’s husband is Sima Ku, the third sister (Bird Fairy) Lingdi’s is Speechless Sun, the fifth sister Pandi’s husband is Lu Liren, the sixth sister Niandi’s husband is Babbit who is an American pilot); all of them first fight the Japanese, and then they begin to fight with each other, in other words, they become enemies. All the daughters leave home following their men. After they gave birth to their children, they sent out their own children and adopted to their mother Shangguan Lu. She breastfed them all: her own son, and her elder daughter’s stepson, and her granddaughter. She undoubtedly has a very strong personality; she fights for the life of all her children and grandchildren. She curses at her daughters, sons-in-law, threatens to throw away their “brats”, but none the less takes them and feeds them while their parents are fighting with each other. “If not for the war, you and I would be proper relatives”, says Communist Army Commander Lu to KMT officer Sima Ku while putting him under arrest (Mo, 2012, p. 278). That is the way Mo Yan advances through the book the idea of how anti-human and unnatural a civil war is.

It is also necessary to mention the narrator. He is that very long-awaited son of Shangguan Lu, his name is Jintong. He begins his story about his family from the time when he was in his mother’s womb. He has abnormal addiction to mother’s breast. He sucks the breast until he is seven and he is violently jealous of anyone who is trying to get to it; he even hates his twin sister who was born blind. Jintong was the hope of the whole family. His father, a Swedish pastor Malory, committed suicide after he had seen the soldiers of the anti-Japanese forces bullied and tormented Shangguan Lu. Malory is kind-hearted, but very weak. His son would grow up even weaker, and besides, very selfish. He is a taker spoiled by his mother, and that was quite clear right after he was born. The novel gives us a pessimistic prediction about absence of spirituality in the young generation. At the same time the writer praises the Woman, the Mother as one of the most powerful and invincible force of life.

No doubt, reasoning from the theory of hermeneutics, any work of art, let alone an epic novel, will contain ambiguous and controversial representation of the characters. The author’s position will also be

interpreted in an ambiguous way. If the work is created in a realistic way, then the author's position manifests itself through the depicted events. If the author creates his work in the post-modern key, then he will intentionally hide his attitude behind the events he is describing. So, the personality of Shangguan Lu and the author's attitude towards her can be perceived from different, sometimes quite unique, points of view. This should be taken into consideration while reading the book. For example, the feminist point of view on the nature of Shangguan Lu is based on the gender way of narration. This point of view treats the narration as the one that "contributes to the patriarchal ideology, thus proving the widespread image of mothers as loving and self-sacrificing beings, and of women as passive victims" (Du, 2016, p. 43). The aim of careful and reflective reading of the novel, as we see it, is to unite the three things: the knowledge of national (in our case – Chinese) cultural traditions, their relation to universal human perception, taking account of the Russian reader's cultural background.

Mo Yan's novel "Big Breasts & Wide Hips" not only uncovers the reasons for the fratricidal civil war, but also points out the way to overcome hatred and cruelty. The writer opposes ambitions of all types of conquerors, the man's aspiration for power and fame, to maternal forgiveness, hardworking nature, and tolerance. These moral values are undoubtedly close to Christian views on the man and his attitude towards the world. It is no coincidence that this traditional Chinese family includes Europeans as well: these are pastor Malory and pilot Babbit. Mo Yan's novel "Big Breasts & Wide Hips", the whole history of Shangguan Lu's family convinces us that the converging of Western and Eastern values is inevitable, as surely as inevitable is the cultural dialogue of our peoples.

One of the most common situations in the human intercourse, which can be characterized not only as a no-dialogue, but also as an open conflict, is the situation of contacts between representatives of different generations. This situation is typified in many literary works; in Russian literature it is called the conflict of "fathers and sons" following I.S. Turgenev's famous novel of the same name.

The works of contemporary Chinese writers allow us to see how this problem is being resolved in China. The art of reflective reading includes a number of various aspects, such as autobiographical, political, aesthetic ones. This art of reading helps us to get insight into two things, namely: the author's position, i.e. the writer's view of the problem of relations of different generations; and the transformation of the sense of national identity in the second half of the 20th century.

Mo Yan in his novel "Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out" delivers his narration in a specific manner. The author exploits the idea of a soul's reincarnation after death. A landowner called Ximen Nao who was shot dead, first reincarnates as a donkey, then as an ox, a pig, a dog, a monkey, and at last as Lan Jiasui, a baby born of incestuous relationship. Each of these incarnations becomes a storyteller for a certain period of time. All the stories taken together form up a picture of China's history for sixty years with its most dramatic events: the Collectivization, the Great Leap Forward policy, the Cultural Revolution, the policy of economic reforms. The author is sure that this manner of narration makes the story sound really true, for animals, unlike men, never play political games.

The location of the novel is former Ximentong estate in Gaomi county. One of the most impressive heroes of the novel is Ximen Nao's former farmhand Lan Lian. After his master had been executed, he marries master's concubine and brings up his master's children, Jinlong and Baofeng, as if they were his own flesh and blood. Lan Lian remains the only individual farmer who refuses to become a

member of the collective farm. His refusal is absolutely straight-out: the most precious thing for him is free labour, and he does not want to find himself under anyone's command. Lan Lian, first and foremost, is a toiler, against all odds he will cultivate his own strip of land. He loves it, this land of his. This feeling gives him strength to withstand the whole system. Lan Lian is an example of humane attitude both to people and to animals. When his donkey hurt one of its legs, he made a stump prosthesis out of an old boot. He resents a suggestion of slaughtering the donkey: "Would you take your father to the butchers if he broke his leg?" (Mo Yan, 2016a, p. 101). The author's idea of equality of all living creatures is quite natural for the hero.

The conflict of "fathers and sons" in Mo Yan's novel is shown first of all as severe fight of the young generation against everything that constituted a specific family code of behaviour. These ethical rules established by Confucius in the 5th century B.C. and later recorded by his disciples, were based on ancient myths containing the images of ideal rulers. The relations within the state should be exactly like those within the family, and vice versa. Honouring the seniors by the juniors had been incommutable law for more than 3,000 years. The harmony between "fathers" and "sons", between the ruler and the people was based on simple and clear relations. If the former takes care of the latter, then the latter will obey and respect the former. Violation of this principle by either of the parties will lead to disharmony, chaos, inter-personal or state conflicts. The unique Chinese ancestor veneration, respect of elders, turning back to the ancient history seeking for moral lessons applicable for current times – all these aspects of Confucianism were typical for the everyday life in China under the rule of different dynasties, including those which were not of Chinese origin. Those alien dynasties were getting assimilated step by step into Chinese culture. The words of great Confucius put a certain balance between the new and the old, the "sons" and the "fathers" – the harmony which would provide for the conflict-free development of the society: "If a man keeps cherishing his old knowledge, so as continually to be acquiring new, he may be a teacher of others" (Konfutsii, 2018, p. 22). It is by "cherishing the past" that all cultural and social transformations used to take place; this can be compared to a kind of evolution opposed to a revolutionary way which is also explained in the terms of "fathers and sons", rulers and the people.

The events that happened in the second half of the 20th century changed dramatically the relations not only within the society, but also within the family. Relying on the younger generation, Mao Zedong mixed up the spheres of influence of the young and the old and introduced a new version of "fathers and sons" conflict in China. The revolutionary-minded youth mesmerized by the ideas of making the world a better place, fighting the old world in all of its aspects, rejected the life foundations that had been in force for millennia. The Red Guards (the so-called Hong Weibing) and the members of the Zaofan movement (literally: rioters) got the right to judge the past, to judge their "fathers" and their ancient culture.

In the novel "Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out" the example of such intolerable attitude towards the older generation is Jinlong – Ximen's son who was born after his death. Jinlong is an adopted son of Lan Lian who takes care of him as if he were his own child. Lan Lian gives us an example of benevolence and tolerance towards his adopted son. Jinlong, who became a Red Guard during the Cultural Revolution, tells his stepfather to paint his face in red to conceal a big blue birthmark. But this does not make Lan Lian feel angry towards his son. The son is very much ashamed for his father because

in the whole country, which is red, there is only one black spot – that is his father Lan Lian, a self-employed farmer. Jinlong gives his father advice to hang himself so as not to kill him and avoid patricide.

Close and careful reading of the novel requires special commentaries on this situation. From the positions of European, and first of all Christian ethics, the son's demand is just monstrous; Christianity regards homicide and suicide as sins, for the former breaks the commandment "Thou shalt not kill", and the latter is a challenge to God Himself, it is the rejection of God's goodness. Chinese traditional ethics has a different principle: the man should always be guided by his sense of duty. If the man cannot do his duty, then he must withdraw with dignity. A good example of suicide that proved the dignity of an outstanding personality is the action of Qu Yuan, a poet and politician of the State of Chu in the first millennium B.C. He committed suicide, thus demonstrating his social attitude: his disagreement to make alliance with the State of Qin that later invaded Qu Yuan's native land. This act of moral courage of Qu Yuan has been remembered by the Chinese for more than two thousand years. Every year the Chinese celebrate the Dragon Boat Festival that commemorates the death of Qu Yuan.

So, the demand of the adopted son is no doubt cruel and inhumane, but far from being completely unreasonable. This should also be taken into consideration by those who are reading the novel. Nonetheless, the conflict of the son and the father is not just another side of the eternal problem of "fathers and sons". Jinlong's behavior and his later life are the reflection of the abysmal demoralization of the society during the Cultural Revolution. The end of Jinlong's career is dramatic and comic at the same time: he dropped his Mao Zedong lapel pin into the hole of the toilet, was immediately declared a counterrevolutionary and sent away to the country as a disruptive element.

The novel not only shows us the conflict of different generations because of ideological discrepancies, but also gives us a picture of authentic connection between "fathers" and "sons". Lan Lian's son, Lan Jiefang, understands that his father has chosen his own way, and he feels like a traitor because he joined the collective farm and brought there his ox, so his father will have to use just a pickaxe to cultivate his piece of land. And the ox – a reincarnation of Ximen Nao – demonstrates cast-iron will: the animal does not want to work on the land of the collective farm, and it will be beaten to death by Jinlong. In the context of the novel this scene is very symbolic: the son kills the reincarnation of his father in plain view of indifferently-looking crowd.

In depicting the events of the Cultural Revolution the tragic and the comic are intertwined. The absurdity of many events of that epoch are shown in the scene of staging a model revolutionary play. Lan Jiefang tells us this story and makes a remark: "All the other villagers, including the crippled and the blind, had joined the Red Guards" (Mo, 2016b, p. 191). Speeches of the village revolutionaries could be called "the theatre of the absurd": "Chairman Mao has called upon people to raise pigs. Raising pigs is a political act, and by doing a good job at it you're showing your loyalty to Chairman Mao" (Mo, 2016b, pp. 212-213) or "The old sows are aircraft carriers that will launch all-out attacks against the world's imperialists, revisionists, and reactionaries" (Mo, 2016b, p. 214). And then we can also quote Jinlong's utter: "Party Secretary Hong, from this day forward, all boars are my father, and all sows are my mother!" (Mo, 2016b, p. 215). One of the chapters in the novel is called "Pig Frolics", it tells us the whole philosophy of swinishness, because just another metamorphosis of Ximen Nao happened in the epoch of

unprecedented transformation of pigs when even a pig that becomes a principal narrator – this pig understands that not everyone who walks on two legs can be regarded as a human being.

These political events and economic cataclysms form a background to the love stories of the main characters. Just as in a classical novel “Dream of the Red Chamber” by Cao Xueqin, that was written during the Qing dynasty, in Mo Yan’s novel there is a situation when the “fathers” take advantage of the “sons”. Lan Jiefang loves one sister, but he has to marry the other one.

The younger generation living at the turn of the Millennium is represented by very diverse figures. Among them are: Jinlong’s stepson Huan Huan, and another guy, Fenghuang, both of them belong to the so-called “gilded youth”, they are children of top Party insiders. Lan Kaifang is a grandson of Lan Lian and son of Lan Jiefang; he is one of those who set his heart on fighting evil, and so he went to serve in the police. When Fenghuang blames the older generation for hypocrisy, it is Lan Kaifang who will defend his father, although he is very much hurt by his father’s betrayal of his mother.

The main characters of the novel – Lan Lian, Lan Jiefang and Lan Kaifang – all belong to different generations, but they have one trait in common: they cannot go against the establishment. Each of them defends his own choice, for, in the long run, it is a person’s own choice that is correct. Mo Yan in his novel “Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out” not only criticizes the system of the state authorities that led to the totalitarian regime, he also condemns social conformism. A self-employed farmer Lan Lian who has always been a white crow, an outsider who has been keeping his strip of land and protecting it from Jinlong and other revolutionaries, says after Mao Zedong died: “I loved Chairman Mao more than any of you imposters!” (Mo Yan, 2016b, p. 314). And these words are uttered by a man who has struggled for his right to remain a free peasant, to be not like all the others. Mo Yan condemns the “inside” slavery, the slavery that fears freedom, freedom of choice. This episode should also be commented on for a Russian reader. The Chinese society exposed crimes of the Cultural Revolution against humanity and intellectuals, changed its course and adopted the policy of openness, but did not recede from its past. And this is one of the characteristic traits of the Chinese national self-perception. Mo Yan’s novel “Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out” not only shows us the two paths of development of intergenerational relationships, of “fathers and sons” relations, when cruelty creates cruelty, and mercy gives birth to mercy and harmony, which leads to adopting the experience of the older generation. The novel also demonstrates the way to resolve a conflict through the example of non-aggressive attitude of both “fathers”, Ximen Nao and Lan Lian, toward their son Jinlong who was intoxicated by revolutionary ideas.

We conceive of world literature as a dynamic institution that has developed in response to changing historical conditions as well as to competing agents, visions, and values (Zhang, 2018, p. 2). Getting acquainted with the works of foreign literature, as well as learning foreign languages, proves that “native and alien cultures get intertwined (the alien is experienced through the native, the native is re-estimated through the alien), these two cultures determine the specific content of education which has a definite goal, that is to put into practice the dialogue of cultures, make this dialogue a dominating idea in the consciousness of the personality who perceives the entities of his/her native and alien cultures” (Tareva, 2017, pp. 304-305).

Russian and Chinese literatures of the 20th century have much in common. Both of them reflected the dramatic events: civil wars, Collectivization; our literatures conceived the mechanism of suppressing



the personality in a totalitarian state, showed hope for the transformation of the society on a humane and harmonious basis, posed a question about the causes of absence of spirituality in today's world.

## 7. Conclusion

The dialogue of cultures promotes deeper understanding of the world and the hope to preserve its integrity. The art of reflective reading of foreign literature allows us, through the artistic world view, to understand certain strategies of interpersonal and intercultural communication, look through the origins of misunderstanding leading to a conflict, and outline the ways to overcome this conflict.

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