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Colonial Ireland and Socialist China: A Comparative Study between James Joyce and Mo Yan*

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I

This essay is intended to illuminate some parallels between the Irish author James Joyce and the Chinese writer Mo Yan,[1] which may shed light on the role of art in an oppressive society. Mo Yan has "been profoundly influenced by some Western writers," including Joyce, whose works were introduced into China after the death of Mao Zedong, ending the Cultural Revolution in the late 1970s (Mo Yan, Preface xv). Distinguishing himself from other Chinese writers who simply imitate the narrative techniques or storylines of foreign writers, Mo Yan emphasizes

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1) Mo Yan, who won the Nobel Prize in literature in 2012, is best known for his first novel *Red Sorghum*, which was published in 1986 and in English in 1993 and made into an internationally-acclaimed movie *Hong gao liang* in 1988.

that he seeks to "understand [Western writers'] observations of life" and "how they view the world we live in" by "closely explor[ing] what is embedded in their work" (Preface xvi). Given his intention, it is highly probable that Joyce's works about colonial Ireland under multiple oppressions have attracted the particular attention of Mo Yan, whose major works comprise epic novels about China under various forms of oppression from the imperial and the republican to the Communist era. In fact, a part of the internal monologue by the fictional author "Mo Yan" in the last section of *The Republic of Wine*—Mo Yan's early novel written right after the Tiananmen Square massacre—suggests that the real-life Mo Yan is influenced by Joyce: "Faulkner learned from Joyce's *Ulysses* can't I also learn from you [Li Yidou][2]" (Mo Yan, *RW* 353). "Mo Yan" adds a little later that "some will say I'm obviously imitating the style of *Ulysses* in this section" (*RW* 355). Indeed, Mo Yan's writing in the last six pages of *RW*, in which the drunken writer's stream of consciousness flows without being interrupted by a single punctuation mark except the ellipsis of three periods at the very end, evokes Joyce's writing in the last chapter of *Ulysses*—spanning around thirty pages—which narrates Molly's midnight inner speech without any punctuation except the final period.

Like his contemporary Chinese writers who copy foreign authors' works, Mo Yan also seems to adopt Western writers' literary techniques, particularly Joyce's. It seems inevitable that Joyce has a special influence on Mo Yan in his writing style as well as in his world view. Characteristics of Joyce's writing, such as stream of consciousness, shift of narrative perspectives, anti-narrative, and neologism, arguably indicate that he belongs with not only modernist but postmodernist writers, just as his view on British Ireland suggests that he is postcolonial as much as he is colonial. The complexity or hybridity of Joyce's works in both theme and writing style may well suit Chinese writers, like Mo Yan, who faced a new China opening up to the West in the early 1980s for the first time after the founding of People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949. Having suffered a series of violent histories

2) Li Yidou's stories, along with his letters, were sent to Mo Yan for potential publication and constitute part of the main narrative in *RW*.

throughout the century—the Xinhai Revolution founding the Republic of China, the War of Resistance against Japan, the Civil War establishing the PRC, the Great Leap Forward with collectivization accompanied by the Great Famine, and the Cultural Revolution—the Chinese met the Western world when it was approaching or was already in the postmodern/postcolonial era. Thus, Chinese writers experiencing the late-twentieth-century China with the Four Modernizations may feel similar to the way Western modernist writers felt in the beginning of the century, while the writers in China were simultaneously encountering the postmodern world depicted in Western literature. In this context, Joyce's works, which feature themes and techniques of both modernist and postmodernist literature, can have a particular influence on Chinese writers like Mo Yan who need to deal with China's belated modernism, which is conflated with Western postmodernism.

Furthermore, Joyce and Mo Yan are connected by the horrors of their national histories, as mentioned earlier, which render their works peculiarly both modern and postmodern—or rather, Joyce's both colonial and postcolonial and Mo Yan's both socialist and postsocialist. It should be natural, then, that Mo Yan, who intends to "comprehend how [Western writers] view the world," becomes interested in Joyce as the latter's world, similar to the former's, is full of suffering from oppression. The "history" of Joyce's Ireland—ridden with multiple oppressions of colonialism, Catholicism, and nationalism—is "a nightmare from which [he is] trying to awake," and "from which [he] will never awake"; Ireland feels like an "old sow that eats her farrow" (Joyce, *U* 2.377, 7.678, 15.4582-83). Similarly, the history of China is depicted as cannibalistically oppressive in Mo Yan. Inheriting Lu Xun's view of traditional Chinese ethics of Confucianism as cannibalization of children (Tsai 15),[3] Mo Yan suggests that Communism, allied with Confucianism, is killing the future

3) Lu Xun, a leading figure of New Cultural Movement in the early twentieth-century China, states that China has been "eating human flesh" "for four thousand years" in "A Madman's Diary," ending the story with an appeal: "Save the children . . ." (Lu Xun XII, XIII). In *RW*, Mo Yan repeatedly refers to the story symbolizing the oppression of Confucian ethics, which emphasize filial piety (*xiao*) and loyalty (*zhong*), and which have cost children's lives in China.

of China. Children are "eaten" as delicacy by the Party dignitaries in *RW*; and all unborn second children, conceived in hopes of having a son against the one-child policy, are condemned through forced abortion in *Frog*.

From this perspective, this essay will explore the way Mo Yan's works evoke Joyce's, both in style and theme. In the following chapter, it will discuss characteristics of Mo Yan's writing which parallel those of Joyce's. Next, it will compare the two authors' attitudes toward their worlds, revealed in their works and other materials. Finally, it will argue how their views are commonly and uniquely modern and postmodern, resisting and integrating the hegemony at the same time.

II

Mo Yan is a prolific writer, having written so far eleven novels apart from other works which feature a variety of writing styles. His novels are mostly epic, yet narrated in almost all different styles. His first and epic novel *Red Sorghum* is rather simply written in the first-person non-chronological narrative, mainly about the life of the narrator's father and grandparents who ran a distillery and fought the Japanese in the Northeast Gaomi Township area in Shandong. His later epic *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* is, however, written in a more complex narrative structure, with two narrators alternating to tell the story of PRC in Northeast Gaomi Township until the year 2000 when the child narrator is born as the grandson of the other narrator Lan Jiefang. The story is told between the boy and Lan Jiefang, who is in fact the son of the boy's hired hand and his (the boy's) wife in the boy's previous life, as the boy is the sixth reincarnation of the landlord Ximen Nao who was executed during land reform and reborn as a donkey, an ox, a pig, a dog, and briefly a monkey. In other words, the novel is narrated alternately from the perspective of domestic animals, as reincarnations of Ximen Nao, and Lan Jiefang, born on the first day of 1950—the same as the Ximen-Nao donkey—whose lifetime coincides with the development of China in the latter half of the twentieth century.

At the end of the novel, on his fifth birthday, the boy summons and tells his grandfather: "My story begins on January 1, 1950. . . . ," which rewinds the novel to: "My story begins on January 1, 1950" (Mo Yan, *Life* 540, 3).

This cyclic structure, in which the narrative ends where it begins, is a characteristic of modernist works. The narrative structure in *Ulysses*, which describes a day in Dubliners' life in the 1900s, is arguably cyclic as the last chapter of Molly's after-midnight internal monologue can be followed by the beginning chapters of Stephen's and Bloom's mornings.[4] Yet the narrative in *Life and Death*, which retrospectively depicts the life in a small town in China changing through the second half of the twentieth century, is cyclic in the strictest sense: the last words of the narrative overlap or directly connect to its first. The circular structure of *Life and Death* more closely evokes that of Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, in which the very last word "the," in the last sentence "A way a lone a last a love a long the," arguably links to the first word "riverrun" in the book (Joyce, *FW* 628.15-16, 3.1). The first sentence in *FW* depicts the river Liffey as flowing "upstream, backward, continuing the westward movement at the very end" of the book, as Epstein argues, which makes the first sentence connected to the last: "*Away, alone at last, and loved, along the river ran*" (Epstein 11, 25). Both Mo Yan's narrative in *Life and Death* and Joyce's in *FW* flow in a cycle in which the ending is closely tied to the beginning. While Joyce's cyclic narrative in the book is based on Vico's cycles of history,[5] Mo Yan's in *Life and Death* symbolizes the cycle of rebirth, which is also an important theme in *Ulysses*, with words such as "metempsychosis," "transmigration of souls," and "reincarnation" repeatedly appearing, especially in Bloom's first chapter (*U* 4.339, 342, 361). Thus, it can be said that the theme of cyclic human history or life is commonly structured into the form of a cyclic

4) In fact, all of *Ulysses*'s eighteen chapters are separated by not only time but place, each place closely modeled after its counterpart in the real world of 1904 Dublin, which makes the narrative a tour of the city, set in a cyclic structure.

5) Giambattista Vico argues in *The New Science*, published in 1725, that history develops in a cycle of three stages—divine, heroic, and democratic—and the final *ricorso* (Epstein 14-15). Joyce "use[s] [Vico's] cycles as a trellis" in *FW* (qtd. in Epstein 14).

narrative in both Joyce's and Mo Yan's novels.

Another characteristic of the narrative in *Life and Death* is that it is told from the viewpoint of animals endowed with human consciousness, demonstrating Mo Yan's "hallucinatory realism."[6] Mo Yan's writing is known for hallucinatory or magical realism, which pervades most of his works, especially *RW*, in which the boundary is blurred between reality and fiction throughout the novel: the main narrative about the investigation of the Party bureaucrats' practice of cannibalism is fused with the subnarrative about the practice told in stories by the fictional writer Li Yidou; the fictional author "Mo Yan" merges with the character he has created. Magical realism in which reality and fantasy, or the present and the past, are mixed together is also a characteristic in Joyce's narrative—although the term was not popular in his time—particularly in *FW*, which, in comparison to the day life in *Ulysses*, is about the night life: "the dreamlike shapes of the eternal, unholy family" acting "the dream of old Finn, lying in death beside the river Liffey and watching the history of Ireland and the world—past and future—flow through his mind like floatsam on the river of life" (Ellmann 544-45). Even in the drama of "Circe" of the "nighttown" chapter in *Ulysses*, which amounts in length to a quarter of the whole novel, magical elements enter realism. The reality of the red-light district is conflated with the drunken consciousness of Stephen and Bloom: dead people—including Stephen's mother and Bloom's father and son—appear, objects talk, and the symbolic figure of Irish nationalism "*Old Gummy Granny*" wails (*U* 15.4578), all acting out the history of colonial Ireland as well as their private lives.

Realism with the addition of hallucinatory elements seems very useful for epic writers such as Joyce and Mo Yan, as it allows the narrative to flow freely through time and place while simultaneously endowing it with reality. Magical realism, which enables the reader to see the present reality from the perspective of the past

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6) Mo Yan is said to be influenced by the magical realism of Gabriel García Márquez, as the Nobel Committee praised in 2012 that Mo Yan's "hallucinatory realism merges folk tales, history and the contemporary" (https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2012/summary/).

or future or from the perspective of animals or things, helps the narrative dive deeper into reality, illuminating the epic truth hidden behind the façade of reality. In this sense, magical realism, with access to unreal, uncommon points of view, complements vulgar or absolute realism, which also commonly characterizes Joyce's and Mo Yan's writing, in uncovering the truth. Joyce's realism in "a style of scrupulous meanness" (Joyce, *SL* 83), or "stark realism" as Riquelme designates (Riquelme 104), was intended to invoke an "epiphany," "a sudden spiritual manifestation"—that is, the "splendor of truth" (Joyce, *SH* 211, 80).[7] Joyce's "stark realism" to effect the "splendor of truth" of colonial Ireland was influenced by the French realism writer Gustav Flaubert, who emphasized a style of "pitiless method," "the exactness of the physical sciences," as representing "the splendour of Truth" (qtd. in Gifford 256).

Similarly, Mo Yan's brutal or "harsh realism" (Orbac)—which is well demonstrated in the narrative of difficult times such as the Great Famine—to reveal the truth of Communist China is phrased by the prospective writer Tadpole in a letter, echoing Flaubert's metaphor of the "exactness of the physical sciences" in *Frog*: "*The writer must put himself on the dissection table and under the microscope*" (Mo Yan, *Frog* 211). Mo Yan's latest epic *Frog*, narrated by Tadpole —who intends to write a play—about his aunt Gugu for the Japanese writer "*Sugitani Akihito sensei*" to read, comprises five books, each headed by Tadpole's letter to the "*sensei*." While the first four books are written in crude realism about Gugu, an obstetrician who, faithfully observing the one-child policy, has aborted all unborn second babies—including the one Tadpole's first wife Renmei is pregnant with—the last book is written in dreamlike realism as a play of the same title as the novel. The novel or Tadpole's narrative in four books evokes the truth about himself, as he writes in the last letter: "*Now I understand with greater clarity . . . I was not just chief culprit, but the only one. For the sake of my so-called 'future,' I sent Renmei and her child to Hell*" (*Frog* 321). On the other hand, set in the real

7) See Joyce's realism and his theory of epiphany in "Epiphanies of Colonial Paralysis" (Kil 9-10).

world where babies are produced through surrogacy at a bullfrog farm, which coexists with "*a gloomy underwater world*" inside "*a cave*" where "*bawling babies [are] hanging down from above the stage, limbs flailing*," the play *Frog* reveals the truth in the history of Communist China. If the prose in four books unveils the personal truth of Tadpole's guilt, the drama illuminates the historical truth of Communist China: children have been killed and consumed in China like frogs which "everyone ate during the famine" (*Frog* 259), as suggested by the title word "frog," "sound[ing] exactly like the word for babies" in Chinese, both pronounced "*wa*" (*Frog* 79). In this respect, it can be postulated that magical realism, fused with raw realism, helps conjure up the epic truth in both Mo Yan and Joyce: the truth of Communist China and colonial Ireland, respectively.

Thus, to a degree, Joyce's and Mo Yan's narratives tend to be unreliable, as the truth is obscured between the narrative of surface-level reality and that of dreamlike reality. The text is often constructed in multiple narratives, with no authoritative metanarrative instilled, which suggests the author's rejection of or disbelief in the official history of British Ireland or Communist China. As the cyclic narrative structure in their epic novels signifies, the narrative of history or human life has no end or ultimate goal to reach. In Joyce, when the Anglo-Irish Protestant Mr. Deasy states in *Ulysses*, "All human history moves towards one great goal, the manifestation of God," justifying the history of British colonization, Stephen points "towards the window" and responds: "That is God. . . . A shout in the street" (*U* 2.380-86). Stephen or Joyce, for whom history is "a nightmare," views that human history moves in a cycle rather than moving towards "the manifestation of God" and that "God" manifests in a random epiphanic moment through trivial things or phenomena such as "a shout in the street." Thus, the narrative in Joyce, which flows endlessly in a cycle like "neverchanging everchanging water" or "the earth" perpetually moving "through everchanging tracks of never changing space" (*U* 17.233-34, 2309-10), is elusive, with no authority given. Stephen does not even "believe [his] own theory" about Shakespeare and Hamlet (*U* 9.1065), the idea of "consubstantiality" (*U* 1.658, 3.49, 3.59, 9.481, 17.534) like "metempsychosis" or

"reincarnation," which surrounds the whole novel. The nationalist narrative, as well as the British, of Irish history is mocked, as Bloom farts while remembering the "last words" from the bench of the nationalist hero Emmet: "*When my country takes her place among*. Prrprr. . . . Fff! Oo. Repr. *Nations of the earth*. . . . *Then and not till then*. Tram kran kran kran. . . . Krandkrankran. . . . *Let my epitaph be*. Kraaaaaa. *Written*. *I have*. Pprrpffrrppffff. *Done*" (*U* 11.1284-94).

In Mo Yan, the narrative authority is questioned through a character "Mo Yan," as in *The Republic of Wine* and *Life and Death*, who has written or is to write famous stories and novels written by the real author Mo Yan. While the author's satirical self-portrait "Mo Yan" appears as insecure, drunk and suicidal in the earlier novel, he is described as having "deviant talents" in the later one (*Life* 248). As "Mo Yan," "always ready to deceive people with heresy," is "in the habit of mixing fact and fantasy in his stories," the reader "mustn't fall into the trap of believing everything he writes" (*Life* 269). This way, the narrative—in the voice of Ximen's reincarnation—in the novel is made not only questionable but, in fact, claimed to be tainted by stories of "Mo Yan": "since a novelist by the name of Mo Yan came from there, fact and fiction have gotten so jumbled up, figuring out what's true and what's not is just about impossible" (*Life* 352). Mo Yan's such "radical storytelling technique" points to "the slipperiness of a single knowable truth" (Knight 78), either in the narrative of fictional work or history. Joyce's and Mo Yan's narrative style thus suggests the uncertainty about reality and realism as the representation of reality, as demonstrated by the ultimate ambivalence about the Party bureaucrats' practice of cannibalism—the main subject of the novel—in *The Republic of Wine* and the absence of the scene of Molly's adultery—the main event in the novel—from any of the narratives in *Ulysses*. The evasive voice in Joyce's and Mo Yan's narrative, showing "the unrealizability of a critical representational subject," indicates the authors' skepticism about the realizability of "a critical historical subject" (Yang 15).

III

It is interesting that Joyce's and Mo Yan's uncertainty about the possibility of a historical and representational subject with critical ability, which is suggested by the endless narrative written in crude realism mixed with magical realism in a puzzling voice, is similarly reflected in their strategies as the writers of the time. Stephen, representing young Joyce, declares to "express himself . . . using for [his] defense the only arms" of "silence, exile, and cunning" (Joyce, *P* 247). Self-exiled in Europe, Joyce was reserved about Irish politics, his narrative elusive about it, to the extent that his works were once considered apolitical. Likewise, Mo Yan, born Guan Moye, has taken the pen name "Mo Yan" meaning "don't speak" in Chinese, an "ironic expression of self-mockery" for a prolific writer like Mo Yan (Mo Yan, "Nobel Lecture"). Although unlike Joyce, he has remained in his home country—becoming the first Chinese citizen to win the Nobel Prize for literature—Mo Yan, like Joyce, has been criticized by his fellow writers; while Joyce was disapproved by Irish nationalist writers for abandoning Ireland, Mo Yan has been accused by anti-government Chinese writers, especially those in exile, of supporting the government. Mo Yan's critique on the Communist government, like Joyce's on the British, is presented "on the sly"; having "judiciously censored himself enough to flourish" in the so-called "gray zone," Mo Yan is "allowed to pursue his truth telling" (Knight 70). His speech at the 2009 Frankfurt Book Fair well summarized a defense of his art: "Some may want to shout on the street . . . but we should tolerate those who hide in their rooms and use literature to voice their opinions" (qtd. in Knight 71). In this sense, Mo Yan's view of literature as the expression of his "opinion" on life under the Communist government resembles Joyce's or Stephen's view of "artist" as "the intense centre of the life of his age" and "art" as "the very central expression of life" under the British colonial government (*SH* 80, 86). Thus, their works reveal their views on life in a repressed society, both in an ambivalent and reserved manner. Joyce and Mo Yan belong with those authors who do "not accept the idea that literature is for the purpose of fighting

for national self-realization, for social revolution, and against political oppression" (Laughlin 5).

Joyce and Mo Yan arguably believe in individual, rather than national or communal, rights and freedoms, albeit ambivalently represented in the text. Joyce's protagonists feel guilty for their individualistic beliefs or actions. Stephen declares, "*Non serviam*: I will not serve" "the imperial British state" or "the holy Roman catholic and apostolic church" or the "crazy queen" personifying the nationalist Ireland (*P* 117; *U* 15.4228, 1.640-44). The artist Stephen is "to forge in the smithy of [his] soul the uncreated conscience of [his] race" (*P* 253), believing that "in [his head] it is [he who] must kill the priest and the king" (*U* 15.4436-37), the symbolic figures of the "two masters," "an English and an Italian," of colonial Ireland (*U* 1.638). At the same time, however, he suffers from "agenbite of inwit"—"remorse of conscience"—for not serving his dying mother by declining to kneel down to pray for her or his starving siblings (*U* 1.481, 10.875, 879; Gifford and Seidman 22). Meanwhile, the Jew Bloom, who "belong[s] to a race" that is "hated and persecuted" and who claims colonized "Ireland" as "[his] nation," believes that "life" is "love"; "It's no use. Force, hatred, history, all that" (*U* 12.1467, 1430-31, 1481-85). Yet he has not been able to make love with Molly since the death of his only son, Rudy, "aged 11 days"; "carnal intercourse ha[s] been incomplete" for "a period of 10 years, 5 months and 18 days" (*U* 17.2282-83). Bloom somehow feels responsible for Rudy's death, contemplating, "If [the baby is] not [healthy,] [it's] from the man" (*U* 6.329); "Well, my fault perhaps. No son" (*U* 11.1066-67). While believing in love and that Molly "longed to go," he feels that "all is lost" after Molly presumably has an affair (*U* 11.640-641). Bloom has abandoned Molly in the name of love, leading to her adultery, as her inner voice narrates: "It's all his own fault if I am an adulteress" (*U* 18.1516).

In Mo Yan's novels set in Communist China, Lan Lian is one of the most individualistic characters, who persistently remains outside the People's Commune while allowing the rest of his family—his wife, her two children, and his son—to join it in *Life and Death*. Lan Lian believes in his individual right to remain an

independent farmer, yet at the same time claiming to be "one of Chairman Mao's subjects"; he insists, "This land and this house were given to us by the Communist Party, led by Chairman Mao" (*Life* 121). His step-son Jinlong—born between his wife and his late master Ximen Nao—who coerces him to enter the Commune, points out: "The whole country, awash in red, with only a single black dot, here in Ximen Village, and that black dot is you!"; Lan Lian's "one-point-six acres were a thorn in the side of the authorities, a tiny plot of land smack in the middle of the People's Commune" (*Life* 203, 207). Lan Lian, who believes in the "firm principle" that "even brothers will divide up a family' wealth," questions the economic efficiency of the Commune: "How will it work to throw a bunch of people with different names together?" (*Life* 351). He does believe in Mao's Party, however, which professes to guide the people toward a socialist society, as he cries at the news of Mao's death: "I loved Chairman Mao more than any of you imposters. . . . Chairman Mao . . . I received my plot of land from you—you gave me the right to be an independent farmer" (*Life* 334). In a socialist society, individuals are supposed to be granted equal rights to realize their potentials, as declared in *The Communist Manifesto*: "In place of the old bourgeois society . . . we shall have an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all" (Marx and Engels). In fact, the Constitution of the Communist Party of China professes that the Party is "the core of leadership for the cause of socialism" and that "the highest ideal and ultimate goal of the Party" is "realized only when the socialist society is fully developed and highly advanced" ("Constitution").

However, the socialist society, pursued by the Communist Party, to support the "free development of each" individual remains an ideal with the Party finally "giving up on the People's Commune" and the Marxist slogan "from each according to his ability and to each according to his needs" (*Life* 350). The Party has adopted a new "slogan" in the later stage of socialism in China, as mentioned in Mo Yan's another epic *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*: "Eight Immortals Cross the Sea, Each Demonstrating His Own Skills" (*Life* 467). Breaking up the Commune

might represent promoting individualism as the precondition of socialism, which, based on the full development of individuals, can be "the highest form of individualism" (Libretti). While people are "free to engage in business and get as rich as they can," however, "all anyone can see" in the so-called post-socialist China under the new slogan is "money" (Joyce, *Big* 462, 467). It is "the same as bringing back capitalism," as a village man complains; "After thirty hard, demanding years, we're back to the days before Liberation" (*Life* 350). Jinlong, as the Secretary of the Ximen Village Branch of the Communist Party, attempts to turn the village into "a resort with a Cultural Revolution theme"; he is in fact making "a capitalist paradise in a socialist country" (*Life* 421, 485). Although he claims himself as a "reformer," saying, "Our society has developed along with the changing times, and everything I've done has befitted those changes" (*Life* 499), it is difficult to believe that his reform plan contributes to the full development of the socialist society. A reform that costs peasants their living—as they protest, "Give us back our land" and "Down with corrupt officials" (*Life* 433)—would not lead to the socialist society for the "free development of all."

In this sense, Lan Lian's belief in individual rights conflicts with his trust in Mao's Communist Party, which fails to realize the socialist society of equality and freedom. Moreover, the Party embraces capitalism, based on free market competition, which leads back to the division and inequality between the rich and the poor. Nonetheless, Lan Lian, whose reputation has changed from "one of history's obstacles" into "part of the vanguard," still acknowledges the Party leader "Mao Zedong, or Deng Xiaoping" as the "sage" who "can change heaven and earth" (*Life* 351). His trust in the Party remains as robust as his belief in individualism reflected in his "firm principle" of individual ownership. It may well be argued here that Lan Lian represents a traditional loyal subject of Chinese emperor, as he is faithful to his late father-like master Ximen Nao[8] and claims that he is one of "Mao's subjects"—rather than his comrades—a term that should not

8) Lan Lian is strongly attached to his donkey, ox, and dog, mysteriously perceiving that they are Ximen Nao's reincarnations.

be used in a socialist society. Lan Lian's attitude toward the Party leader provokes a soldier fighting the Japanese in *Red Sorghum* who believes, "What China needs is an emperor! . . . The nation is the emperor's family, the family is the emperor's nation. That's why he governs so benevolently. But if a political [Nationalist or Communist] party is in charge, everybody's got his own idea . . . and everything's all fucked up" (Mo Yan, *Red* 283). For Lan Lian, the Communist Party led by Mao or Deng who he believes has power to "change heaven and earth," seems to have replaced the emperor. In contrary to the soldier's expectation, the Communist Party does not allow anyone to have his own idea but governs the nation as if a father ruled the family. In other words, Lan Lian believes in the Party that, like a benevolent emperor, grants all his subjects equal rights and opportunities. The Party turns out to abandon or adjust its ideal of socialism, urging all people to make money by any means possible, thereby bringing back all evils that used to be attributed to capitalism.

Lan Lian's mixed belief in individualism and the Communist Party mirrors Mo Yan's dilemma as a writer of socialist China, just as Stephen's or Bloom's guilt toward his family or the suffering Irish hints at Joyce's difficulty as an artist of colonial Ireland. As previously suggested, Joyce and Mo Yan believe in individuality, yet their individualities are not easily separated from their nationalities or social circumstances as they belong to nations oppressed by Imperial or Communist power. Particularly, the Irish suffered the Great Famine in the 1840s, which was caused in part by the British colonial policy, resulting in the loss of "twenty millions of Irish" and the near extinction of the Gaelic language (*U* 12.1240). The ghost of Stephen's mother called "Ghoul! Chewer of corpses!" in fact represents victims of the Famine who had to survive on "corpses" (Ulin 39-41), while Stephen's crying, "No, mother! Let me be and let me live" (*U* 1.278-79), displays his struggle and guilt toward the oppressed Irish at large. Also, Bloom's memory of his father who committed suicide, a mortal sin in the Catholic society, recalls the soup kitchen run "for the conversion of poor jews" during the potato blight (*U* 8.1073). The Famine, one of the most nightmarish events in Irish history,

provokes Stephen's and Bloom's feeling of guilt, which impedes the former from "fly[ing] by those nets" of "nationality, language, religion" (*P* 203) and the latter from making love. Similarly, the Chinese endured the Great Famine in the 1950s, which Mo Yan personally experienced in his childhood. The Famine is deemed to have been induced by the Communist Party's Great Leap Forward project, radical collectivization and industrialization, subsequently leading to the violent history of Cultural Revolution and forced family planning (one-child policy). Mo Yan's works, like Joyce's, are dotted with references to the Great Famine and its aftermath, which makes his protagonists like Lan Lian ambivalent between his individualism and the Communist Party policy.

IV

Joyce's and Mo Yan's attitudes toward their oppressed nations and histories are similarly ambiguous, indifferently distanced on one hand and faithfully connected on the other. Joyce's Stephen, who says, "My own mind is more interesting to me than the entire country" (*SH* 248), has to struggle with his mother's ghost which represents the Irish victimized by the Famine. Bloom who believes "life" is "love" does not overcome the suicide of his father—another victim of the Irish Famine—which, exacerbated by the death of his infant son, engenders his troubled relationship with Molly—who, having "the map of [Ireland] all" over her face (*U* 18.378), represents the Irish. Mo Yan's Lan Lian, who stands alone with his own minuscule plot in the middle of the Commune, claims to be a faithful subject of the Communist Party leader. Given their protagonists' such ambivalent attitudes weighing between their own beliefs and their people's, Joyce's and Mo Yan's narratives cannot end. The executed landlord Ximen Nao thus keeps coming back to life, in another form, to see and tell us how the world and one's own belief can change with the times; Molly's post-midnight internal monologue ends the day of *Ulysses* only with the prospect of another day dawning, her last word "Yes"

approving all (*U* 18.1609).

In conclusion, Joyce's and Mo Yan's works, particularly *Ulysses* and *Life and Death*, speak for the positive aspect of the authors' world view. Their epics address the difficult times of colonial Ireland and socialist China, respectively. Their attitudes, represented by their protagonists, toward their tragic histories and their people's denial of individual rights and freedoms are not entirely indifferent. They understand the complex nature of great tragedies such as the Famine which makes it difficult to tell right from wrong, that it would be impossible for anyone to get away with such histories and the aftermath. The ambivalence of the protagonists thus suggests that the authors embrace all different ideologies or belief systems, while their artistic individualism stands firm at all times. For this alone, Joyce and Mo Yan deserve to be recognized as postcolonial and postsocialist writers, respectively. They are faithful to their ideas of "art" in a way, with Joyce's art as "the very central expression of life" and Mo Yan's as the expression of his "opinion" on life. Both authors seem to agree with the idea that art is about life and reality, not an escape from them, which renders the role of art especially important in a society under oppression, as in colonized Ireland and China governed by the Communist Party with absolute power.

Their artistic efforts to illustrate the reality as they experience are also similarly remarkable. Joyce's works are all centered in Dublin, and he was particularly obsessed with depicting the city—not to mention real people he used as his characters—as it really existed in 1904 in *Ulysses*, as he boasted that if Dublin were destroyed, it could be reconstructed from the pages of his novel (Budgen 67-68). Likewise, all of Mo Yan's epics are set in his hometown Northeast Gaomi Township in Shandong, and the fictional "Mo Yan" is "bound to write about [all the villagers] sooner or later," as "every resident of Ximen Village will find himself in one of Mo Yan's notorious books" (*Life* 250). Mo Yan, who views "tiny Northeast Gaomi Township [as] a microcosm of China, even of the whole world" ("Nobel Lecture"), clearly shares Joyce's belief: "If I can get to the heart of Dublin I can get to the heart of all the cities of the world. In the particular is contained

the universal" (Power 65). It can therefore be argued that both Mo Yan's and Joyce's works of art, faithfully representing how they struggle with and embrace their own lives, show us we can do the same with our own particular world.

(Yeungnam U)

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Abstract

Colonial Ireland and Socialist China: A Comparative Study between James Joyce and Mo Yan

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This essay briefly compares James Joyce's and Mo Yan's epic novels, particularly *Ulysses* and *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out,* and examines the way the Chinese writer's works evoke the Irish author's in writing style and theme. Despite the apparent distance in time and place between them, the two authors share the experience of living under social and political repression. Joyce's Ireland, as a British colony, was stricken with ideological conflicts between colonialism, nationalism, and Catholicism, which were exacerbated by tragedies such as the Great Famine of the 1840s. Similarly, Mo Yan's China has suffered revolutionary projects imposed by the Communist Party, leading to violent histories such as the Great Famine of the 1960s and the one-child policy. As writers of oppressed nations, Joyce and Mo Yan both address the subject of reincarnation in their epics written in the style of a cyclic narrative, employing magical realism to help the narrative delve deeper into reality. Such writing style, along with an evasive tone of the narrative, suggests the authors' uncertain, ambivalent attitude toward their oppressive reality. As represented by their protagonists in conflict between individual and national rights and freedoms, Joyce and Mo Yan can be said to embrace the complex reality of colonial Ireland and socialist China, respectively. Resisting and simultaneously acknowledging the responsibility to their own nations suffering tragic histories, the Irish and the Chinese authors may well be recognized as postcolonial and postsocialist writers, respectively.

■ Key words : James Joyce, Mo Yan, colonial Ireland, socialist China, *Ulysses*, *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*, individual
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