Becoming-Animal in Mo Yan's *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*

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Abstract:

This article explores the phenomena of "becoming-animal" of three protagonists in *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, namely, Mother, Third Sister, and Birdman Han. Becoming-animal is much preferred to the idealized humans because of the novelist's larger cosmology of animals, as influenced by historical, literary, and philosophical sources. Mo Yan's cosmology of animals is a crystallization of the Chinese philosophy of *ren* (仁) and provides an instructive solution to the theoretical dilemma between animal and animality studies in the Western academic world.

Keywords: Mo Yan, becoming-animal, philosophy of *ren*, animals

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Big Breasts and Wide Hips marks the acme of Mo Yan's artistic creations. This first mainland Chinese Nobel Prize Laureate for Literature even informs readers in an interview: "If you like, you can skip my other novels, but you must read *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*. In it I wrote about history, war, politics, hunger, religions, love, and sex" (Mo, "My Three American Books" 476). In the novel, Shangguan Jintong, the eighth child of a patriarchal family, narrates the vicissitudes of his Mother ranging from the 1930s to the 1990s in a village in Shandong province. Under the constant family pressure of producing a male heir, Mother gave birth to seven successive daughters and finally had a baby boy (Jintong) whose father was a Swedish priest. Among the seven sisters, Third Sister falls in love with Birdman Han, who can understand the avian language and communicate with birds. When her fiancé is captured by the Japanese to work as a forced laborer in a mining camp, Third Sister becomes Bird Lady. Birdman Han fortunately escapes from the camp and hides himself in the woods of Hokkaido for thirteen years. In the latter half of the novel, Jintong becomes a parrot trainer in the years of Chinese economic reform

and prosperity. The family saga recapitulates the development of new China. The publication of Mo Yan's most representative work, however, immediately kindles great controversies among scholars. On the one hand, *Big Breasts* is labeled a tedious repetition of the "my grandpa says" narrative technique (Lou 64), a "counter revolutionary novel" with "pornographic descriptions" (He 233), a violent breach of "historical realism" and "an artist's bottom-line conscience" (Chen 49). On the other hand, critics vehemently defend the book. *Big Breasts* challenges the rigid stereotype of "either a good or a bad guy" in Red Classics and explores the complexity of human nature (Yi 699), becomes "the greatest novel ever produced since the birth of new Chinese literature" for its superb artistic structure, grand epic narration and profound philosophical reflection (Zhang, "On *Big Breasts and Full Hips*" 70), and ushers Chinese literature into a new era of artistic height (Lu 234). Specifically, Qinghua Zhang acclaims the novel as "the masterwork of new historicism in prose" (Zhang, "Mo Yan and the literary trend" 40). David Wang also reads "the Literary World of Mo Yan" as a series of neohistorical movements "from paradise to outhouse," "from official history to unofficial history," and "from subject to body" (487-492). Likewise, Hongtao Liu interprets the novel as a regression from grand nationalism narration to local colorism (Liu 31). However, Douwe Fokkema argues differently: Mo Yan has "protracted [a] family quarrel" into national history (Fokkema 153). What fascinates Fokkema is the author's "exuberant fabulation" and "metalinguistic commentary," which constitute unique features of Chinese postmodernism and make it distinguishable from the European and American versions (Fokkema 153). Ning Wang reads postmodernism in China as Chinese writers' conscientious responses to the confrontation with Western influence (Wang 905). Rong Cai interprets *Big Breasts* from the perspective of the problematic national identity of the Chinese: the difficulty of integrating the traditional Chinese cultural self with the modern Western technological other (Cai 108). Similarly, Howard Goldblatt reads Jintong's "oedipal tendencies and impotence" as "a regression of the human species and a dilution of the Chinese character," but he underscores the theme of "a failed patriarchy" (Goldblatt xi). Along with this feminist reading, Shelley Chan argues that Mo Yan moves from the Fatherland of *Red Sorghum* to the Motherland of *Big Breasts* to delineate "the suffering body of female protagonists" that becomes both the "object and agent of writing in the author's reconstruction of history" (Chan 497).

Despite the number of diverse critical voices, few scholars pay attention to a prominent feature of the book: animals. In fact, Mo Yan even says that "because of my childhood experience, whenever I am going to write, animals rush to my mind

immediately" (Mo, *New conversations* 370). Therefore, an investigation of the animals found in *Big Breasts* will deepen our understanding of Mo Yan's larger cosmology of the world and his contribution to the current theoretical debate on animal studies in the Western academic world.

The human-animal relationship in *Big Breasts* is intriguing. In the long history of evolution, human beings gradually distinguish themselves from animals and become the center of the earth. Language, as a water-shedding milestone in the evolutionary process, bespeaks the intellectual superiority of human beings to nonhuman animals. In other words, animals and humans square off from opposite poles with the purpose of marginalizing animal others to establish the human self. Mo Yan challenges these binary oppositions and presents some thought-provoking scenarios for readers to ponder over the relationship between human beings and animals. In the 1980s, Shangguan Jintong was employed as the director of the Eastern Bird Sanctuary. Here the birds were trained to speak human language. When Jintong arrived at the sanctuary, he "was greeted by a 'Good Morning' from a black mynah on a golden perch. The bird ruffled its feather as it 'spoke.'" More than that, the bird even gave him some individualized attention. "'Shangguan Jintong,' the mynah bird said. 'Shangguan Jintong.' The bird's greeting shocked and elated him" (Mo, *Big Breasts* 492). Language is traditionally regarded as an exclusive possession of human beings, but here the birds in the novel demonstrate amazing linguistic capacity. Furthermore, the bird's pronunciation is of "Pure Oxford English," a marker of refined English gentlemen. If the birds' linguistic capability to imitate human language is amazing, then their ability to speak "Pure Oxford English" goes beyond imitation. "Oxford English" epitomizes an acme of Western civilization and symbolizes a tantalizing dream for many English learners who are not able to speak in this prestigious accent even after many years of assiduous practices. Birds' linguistic competence challenges the anthropocentric assumption of animal inferiority. This point is further reinforced. These avian creatures can even do translations, another highly intellectually linguistic game. One of "two mynahs dressed in red jackets and little green hats" announced "Ladies and Gentlemen, how do you do! The second mynah translated into fluent English. Thank you for honoring us with your presence. We welcome your precious advice—more translation" (Mo, *Big Breasts* 497). If the birds' ability to speak human language evinces their intelligence, then their adroit applications of language to appropriate contexts reveal animal creativity.[1] Apart from language, the birds have also learned other pleasing arts, such as

1 To be more accurate, the birds do not actually translate different languages. However, the author endeavors to instill this impression in the readers' minds.

dancing and singing. "A flock of well-trained wild chickens performed a welcoming dance" in the courtyard, and they purposefully diversified their dancing patterns, "paring off as couples one minute and spinning in the air the next, in perfect cadence with the music" (Mo, *Big Breasts* 497). The singing of the birds takes on the full appearance of a ritualistic performance. A hill mynah first gave a brief introduction, "today I'm going to sing a historical song, which I respectfully dedicate to Mayor Ji." Language is seamlessly fused into its pragmatic situations. Then "ten canaries hopped out onto the stage to sing the opening bars in their lovely voices." After this initial warm-up, "the hill mynah began to rock as her voice rose in song" (Mo, *Big Breasts* 497).

While animals are endowed with linguistic competence to conduct a series of important ritualistic actions, Jintong, one of the protagonists in the novel, is deprived of language and reduced to the level of the animal. The Eastern Bird Sanctuary's sole purpose of employing Jintong is to sexually trap female Mayor Ji. Linguistically, Jintong is tongue-tied, a sharp contrast to the fluently speaking birds; psychologically, his preoedipal attachment to maternal breasts bars him from normal social activities; socially, his criminal record becomes a stain in his life. Therefore, his only value lies in his physical or animal feature: he is a good-looking hybrid. And he is trained as a parrot to repeat certain fixed phrases. "Lianlian put Jintong through the sort of day-and-night training that Parrot used on his birds, instructing him on what a powerful woman likes to hear" (Mo, *Big Breasts* 494). Then Jintong "*parroted* the exact words Geng Lianlian had coached him to say" to Mayor Ji to win her affection and consequently a financial loan to Bird Sanctuary (Mo, *Big Breasts* 495). The juxtaposition of the fluent birds and a dumb human being jeopardizes our accustomed assumption of men's linguistic superiority. Mo Yan goes a further step and metamorphoses Jintong into a peacock, echoing the famous Chinese classic of Chuang Chou's transformation into a butterfly. After his frequent interactions with these birds, Jintong dreams he actually becomes an animal. "He finally fell asleep, and almost immediately dreamed that peacock feathers had grown on his body. Fanning his tail feathers, like a gorgeous wall, he saw thousands of little dancing spots" (Mo, *Big Breasts* 492). He even speaks in bird language. "He complained to them in peacock-talk" when the workers "grabbed a handful of his colorful tail feathers and pulled" (Mo, *Big Breasts* 492).

Many scholars, such as Howard Goldblatt, Shelley Chan, and Rong Cai, contend that Jintong is not a sufficient example to illustrate the relationship between human beings and animals because of his salient oedipal attachment. And Jintong is merely a foil to build up the image of the hero in the novel: Mother. These critics

are partially justified in epitomizing Mother as the image of an idealized human being. Mother went through many political upheavals in China: the Japanese invasion, Chinese Civil War, starvation period, Cultural Revolution, and Opening Up and Reform. Despite constant political conflicts, Mother endures all the hardship and holds together the big family with an adamant belief: they are all my children, regardless of their political ignominy. She becomes the person closest to the idealized human in the story. With her "big breasts and wide hips," Mother represents the suffering of all Chinese, and consequently their strong will to survive and passionate love of life. "Dying's easy; it's living that's hard. The harder it gets, the stronger the will to live. And the greater the fear of death, the greater the struggle to keep on living" (*Big Breasts* 416). However, Mo Yan does not intend to make an idealized figure of her. "In the first six chapters, I have built up a great image of a classic mother: patient, generous, selfless, devoting, tolerant, like the Earth," Mo Yan explains to an interviewer, "but after the seventh chapter, readers find the noble mother image suddenly collapses" (Mo, *New conversations* 100). In the place of an idealized human being, Mo Yan creates another type of character: becoming-animal.

"Becoming-animal," as a Chinese literary concept, can be traced to Chuang Chou. In the well-known metamorphosis story, Chuang Chou transforms himself into a butterfly in a dream. "Once Chuang Chou dreamt he was a butterfly, a butterfly flitting and fluttering around, happy with himself and doing as he pleased. He didn't know he was Chuang Chou." Upon his awakening, Chuang Chou has a philosophical reflection the relationship between animals and human beings. "Suddenly he woke up and there he was, solid and unmistakable Chuang Chou. But he didn't know if he was Chuang Chou who had dreamt he was a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming he was Chuang Chou." Master Chuang abandons anthropocentric certainty about arrogant human identity and comes to realize the sovereignty of animal subjectivity. Instead of simply interpreting it as a human dream, Chuang Chou equally accentuates the agency of the butterfly who was "dreaming he was Chuang Chou." Therefore, in his corporeal entity, Chuang Chou discovers the interaction and coexistence of human beings and animals. "Between Chuang Chou and a butterfly there must be some distinction! This is called the Transformation of Things" (Chuang 49). Chuang Chou's dream of "becoming-animal" does not only stay on the level of philosophical speculation, but also has physical concretizations. The King of Chu sends two officials to invite Chuang Chou to administrate the state. Chuang Chou responds to their invitation with an interesting example. "Now would this tortoise rather be dead and have its bones left behind and honored? Or would it rather be alive and dragging its tail in the mud?" With this animal illustration, Chuang

Chou decides to become an alive tortoise who can "drag [his] tail in the mud" (Chuang 188). Irving Goh is insightful in pointing out the interesting relationship between the Way and animal philosophy. However, Goh interprets "becoming-animal" in Chuang Chou as a strategy to disappear "from totalizing politics" in the quest to "escape the capture of life by politics, to reclaim life as it is without the demands and limits imposed by politics" (Goh 118). In fact, becoming-animal, this paper argues, is more than a political strategy and it ushers men to go beyond anthropocentrism and to explore the posthumanism relationship between human beings and animals. In other words, becoming-animal deterritorializes the human subject and opens an enclosed self to dynamic changes. In this transformation, both the human being and the animal have retained their initial entities, but also become something else. Their means of communication are no longer monopolized by linguistic signifiers. The certitude of human subjectivity fades away and man embraces animal other onto his self. In spatial proximity with animals, human beings renounce their hubris and dominance and become symbiotic with animals.

Mother concretizes such an example of becoming-animal. "Don't worry about me. Your mother is like an earthworm—I can live wherever there's dirt" (Mo, *Big Breasts* 416). Beyond the metaphor, she even physically imitates birds' regurgitation. One evening, Mother rushed home from the commune mill where she worked. She ran straight to the water-filled basin, "where she fell to her knees, grabbed the rim with both hands, stretched out her neck, opened her mouth, and threw up. A bowlful of still dry beans gushed out." She caught a breath, and "her neck thrust out and her shoulders hunched down, as her body reacted to the spasms deep down inside. Once the retching had been spotted, she reached into the water and scooped up the dried beans" (Mo, *Big Breasts* 439). In the years of starvation, Mother has to "steal" beans from the working mill to save her hungry children. Like birds who employ regurgitation to feed their young, Mother swallows the beans, hides them in her stomach, rushes back home, and expulses the food to feed the famished toddlers. "Now I'm used to it, and all I have to do is lower my head…your mother's stomach has turned into a grain sack" (Mo, *Big Breasts* 440). In becoming-animal, Mother saves her ravenous children from death.

The becoming-animal of Mother enables the survival of the family, and the becoming-animal of Third Sister expands her life into a larger realm than human beings. After Birdman Han was seized away, Third Sister became Bird Fairy. She "got up off the *kang*, barefoot, [and] shamelessly tore open her blouse." After getting rid of the thin clothes of civilization, she became a bird. First, she moved like a bird: "She jumped up into the pomegranate tree," and then "she leaped acrobatically

from the pomegranate tree onto a parasol tree, and from there to a tall catalpa tree. From high up in the catalpa tree she jumped down onto the ridge of our thatched roof" (Mo, *Big Breasts* 147). This series of flying movements was so "amazingly nimble" that the narrator of the story thought "she had sprouted wings" (Mo, *Big Breasts* 147). Apart from her movements, she even takes on birds' habits. "She began pecking at her shoulder, as if preening feathers. Her head kept turning, as if on a swivel; not only could she peck her own shoulder, but she could even reach down and nibble at her tiny nipples" (Mo, *Big Breasts* 147). Furthermore, her physical appearance resembles that of a feathered vertebrate. For the narrator, "she'd transformed almost completely into the Bird Fairy: her nose had hooked into a beak, her eyes had turned yellow, her neck had retreated into her torso, her hair had changed into feathers, and her arms were now wings" (Mo, *Big Breasts* 223). The becoming-animal of Third Sister breaks down the symbolic order and deterritorializes her human subjectivity. When language and law no longer define the human subject, Third Sister opens herself to embrace new possibilities of being in the dynamic world. She learns to speak in "a twitter voice" and no longer relies on linguistic signifiers. "My third sister opened her mouth in a wide yawn, her eyes still closed, and replied in a twittering voice somewhere between bird and human speech, making her words nearly impossible to understand" (Mo, *Big Breasts* 149). Therefore, "Third Sister had already entered the avian realm: she thought like a bird, behaved like a bird, and wore the expression of a bird" (Mo, *Big Breasts* 148). In this avian realm, Third Sister learns to communicate with birds and think like birds. The new mode of cross-species becoming enables her to go beyond the enfolded human subjectivity and build up a rapport with avian animals in a symbiotic coexistence. Thus her sense of self is enlarged and enhanced.

Becoming-animal for Third Sister means departing from the realm of human beings and following the animal. Birdman Han also consolidates this transition. Captured and forced to labor in a Japanese coal mine, Birdman Han decides to escape. He runs away from the camp and into the Japanese woods. Ridding himself of all the traces of civilization, Birdman Han lives completely alone in the wild forests in Hokkaido for thirteen years and merges himself with nature. Isolated completely from human society, Birdman gradually sheds the decency of a human being. His hair becomes over one meter long, and continues to grow wildly. His "clothes" of haulms are tied by a long soft cane around his waist. He has learned to compete and live with animals in the wild habitat. "Like a wild animal, he has declared his own territory in the woods. A pack of wolves in the neighborhood were in dread of him,

and neither did he have the guts to provoke them" (Mo, *Big Breasts* 176).[2]

After some time, Birdman decides to climb out of his cave and confront the wolves with primitive force. He becomes another animal for those wolves. The whole scenery is purposefully presented from the male wolf's perspective. "The wolf has never seen such an animal as the one who had just crawled out of the cave. He was a tall animal. His body was covered with rustling yellow squama, his head was surrounded with black hair, his eyes were shooting rays of green light. He howled toward the wolf." Birdman departs from human subjectivity and becomes an animal. At first, they just gaze at each other at a far distance, contemplating the possible methods of outwitting the other. Gradually, the wolf takes aggressive actions to demonstrate its dominion over the area. Mo Yan's portrayal of the wolf is very significant. In the anthropocentric model, the wolf has two complementary functions. For the Japanese government and villagers, the wolf is a threat to the domesticated animals (public property) and represents economic destruction, so it must be destroyed. As an escaped refugee in a completely different country, Birdman is like an animal in a natural wilderness. Such animals are often rendered as compassionate companions who both suffer from and are mistreated at the hands of civilized or social citizens. However, in *Big Breasts*, the animal is neither an economic sabotage nor a sentimental mirror to Birdman; it goes beyond anthropocentrism and gains its own independent agency.

The wolf, instead of being the other in anthropocentric codes, becomes the agent of its will. "Moving just a few steps toward the wolf, he had a closer view of the animal: inside its broad and firm mouth, its saw-like white teeth were glittering with terror, its long narrow lips were like gleaming rubber gaskets." The detailed description of the wolf's physical appearance accentuates its subjectivity. "He hesitated and paused. Moving neither forward nor backward, he was conscious of the consequences." Very different from the anthropocentric assumption of animals as creatures short of rational thinking, the wolf in this context is intelligently calculating "the consequences" of its alternative actions and predicting the possible reactions of its opponents. In this natural wilderness, anthropocentrism fades away, and nonhuman agents become co-constitutive. Humans and their wild counterparts "work through the interactions of a complex and widely dispersed network of ac-

2 The section of Birdman Han's experiences in Japanese woods is omitted by Howard Goldblatt, which is supposed to appear between section 2 and 3 of Chapter Six in the English version of *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*. Therefore, the quotations of Birdman are from the original Chinese work and translated by the author of this article. For more information, see Mo Yan, *Big Breasts and Wide Hips* (Shanghai: Shanghai Wenyi Chubanshe, 2012).

tants, both human and other-than-human" (Armstrong 196). Stripped of his human subjectivity, Birdman copies the behavior of his animal counterpart. "In the stalemate, the wolf howled; he followed it and howled, only longer and harsher. The wolf bared its teeth; he also bared his teeth, drumming his knife on his stick. The wolf performed a mysterious ritual dance under the moonlight; he also shook his 'clothes' of haulm, and leaped back and forth in a happy way, and found more joy in it." From these primitive communications, each learns about the other and comes to respect the other. "From the eyes of the wolf, he found a trace of compromise and then friendship" (Mo, *Big Breasts* 177). After that, he becomes "the neighbor of the wolf." During his thirteen years of living alone in the forest, he has learned to coexist with his wild partners in a respectable way but loses the faculty of language. "He felt some alien stuff filling in his throat. To speak a word, he had to stretch his neck like a bird. Between the broken words, he uttered some weird non-human noise" (Mo, *Big Breasts* 173). His tongue seemed petrified and could not utter a human sound, instead "what cried out from his mouth was wolf howls" (Mo, *Big Breasts* 178). The loss of language, the most typical indicator of human intelligence, suggests Birdman's departure from human beings. Mo Yan is very subtle in handling this significant issue. He implies Birdman's nonconformity with the anthropocentric concept of human beings, but he saliently demonstrates that Birdman, in his process of "becoming-animal," learns a new way to coexist with animals. On the one hand, Birdman retains human wisdom in his smarter imitation of the wolf. He duplicates the wolf's howling "only longer and harsher," and he repeats the wolf's threatening gesture but adds some more intimidating detail of "drumming his knife on his stick." On the other hand, Birdman strips civilization away and actually becomes an animal, and then he is able to foster "friendship" and become "the neighbor of the wolf." In short, Birdman goes beyond the narrow scope of anthropocentrism, opens himself to the prospect of "becoming-animal," and embraces cross-species communications. Therefore, Birdman, along with Mother, Third Sister, becomes a new prototype of human beings in Mo Yan's novel. A question naturally emerges: Why does Mo Yan replace the traditionally idealized human beings with the protagonists featured with "becoming-animal"?

Historical context provides a potential answer to the question. After the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), the major literature trend in mainland China in the late 1970s and early 1980s was Scar Literature or Literature of the Wounded. One of its primary goals was to reflect on the Red Classics. The heroes in those "model theatrical works" are always selfless, noble, virtuous concretizations of exemplary humans. In contrast to the "moral superiority of 'I' characters" in "Maoist literary

works," Mo Yan represents mediocre characters with "petty and strange qualities. Thus Mo Yan has redefined the value of being human and recalled his own ability to imagine desire" (Wang D. 493). For Wang, Mo Yan's redefinition of human value lies in the shift from "the repressed desire" to the assertion of "the spectacle of desire" (Wang D. 493). His argument is partially justified. In fact, Mo Yan is more interested in testing human beings in their surrounding environs: *Red Sorghum*, *White Cotton*, and *Red Woods* are about how things have defined human subjectivity, *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* and *Frogs* investigate the tentative relationship between human beings and animals.

Apart from historical context, the influence of literature on Mo Yan also deepens our understanding of his portrayal of "becoming-animal." In interviews, Mo Yan constantly mentions two great sources of influence upon his writing: Wu Cheng'en and Pu Songling. Wu's masterpiece of *Journey to the West* is fundamentally a human-animal story. For Mo Yan, "Monkey King is half about humanity and half about animality; so is Pigsy" (Mo, *New conversations* 370). The free traversal between human beings and animals enables characters to go beyond anthropocentrism and view the world from a nonhuman perspective.

The concept of "animal-becoming" is further reinforced in *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio*, the masterpiece of Pu Songling. In the fictional world of Pu, it is much easier for a human being to start an emotionally intimate and intellectually profound conversation with an animal than with another human being. Both Pu and Mo Yan live in Shandong Province, the middle part of China, and Mo Yan regards Pu not only as his townsfolk but also as his mentor. The similar climate and living conditions in rural areas provide the authors with a similar intellectual environment. During long and cold winters in Shandong Province, telling stories became a major pastime for villagers. When other writers "were reading books with eyes" during their childhood, Mo Yan says, "I was also reading; but I was reading with ears" (Mo, *Reading with ears* 55). Mo Yan's lonely teenage years nourish his close relationship with animals. After his dismissal from primary school at the age of eleven, he worked as a farmhand until he was seventeen. During these sensitive and romantic years, he "has spent much more time with cattle and sheep than with human beings" (Mo, *New conversations* 375). To drive away his sense of frustrations and failure, he develops the habit of "talking to the animals, who listen to him very patiently and respectfully" (Mo, *New conversations* 480) and of "singing to birds in the sky, to the frogs in the ditches and lakes" (Mo, *New conversations* 375). Thus, Pu's colloquial style of "supernatural talk" immediately fascinates him very much. In a dream, Mo Yan asks for advice about literary creations. "Master Pu fished out

a Chinese brush from his clothes, and threw it to me, 'scribble whatever you like.'" Pen in hand, Mo Yan "bent down on his knees and kowtowed thrice" (Mo, "Learning from Pu Songling"). This ritualistic ceremony between master and apprentice in Chinese tradition underscores the fact that Mo Yan identifies himself as a literary descendant of Pu, and his writing is a nodding or salutation to his master. His *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* is about a man's constant reincarnations into different animals: a dog, a horse, a monkey, a cow. It is a rewriting of Pu's story, a direct tribute to Master Pu.

Beneath the literary influence of becoming-animal is the philosophical idea of *ren* (仁). *Ren* primarily refers to the concept of connection, or the circulation of liquid-like energy, such as love, sympathy, etc. According to Zhu Xi, plants, animals, and human beings all originate from the same material (air), and all are initially connected (Zhu 299). Because of this Primordial Cord, human beings can feel the sufferings of animals and can perceive the bliss of flowers. For Confucius, the circulation of *ren* is only confined to human beings, which is called "benevolence." Chuang Chou has expanded the circulation of human empathy to animals and the surrounding myriad things. The self for Chuang Chou is not an enclosed entity but a dynamic process with constantly self-changing things (Chuang 36-39). *Ren* first enables a human being to overcome isolation and disconnection with others and establishes "a relational human 'becoming'" (Ames 121). Soon a radiating personality follows, ready to absorb the changing environment of human beings and myriad things. In other words, humans, animals, and things are interconnecting with each other on an equal footing, and each becomes a key element in defining others' dynamic and relational identities. This is fundamentally different from the Western concept of animal studies.

Mo Yan's cosmology of myriad things provides an Asian perspective to the current debates in animal studies in the Western academic world. "Animals become human friends," Mo Yan informs an interviewer, and "everything in nature has its will and life, and coexists with each other on the same earth. Like forever green mountains, the human-animal friendship will be eternal" (Mo, *New conversations* 371). In addition to animals, he points out emphatically that "plants also have their psychological activities and wills" (Mo, *New conversations* 370). Behind Mo Yan's concept of animals and plants is Chuang Chou's philosophy of "the equality of things," another metamorphosis of *ren*. To arrive at the status of equality between plants, animals and humans, Chuang Chou proposes an indispensable step: "I lose myself/me" (Chuang 36). The "me" refers to the "social I," the anthropocentric I constructed by human knowledge and values. In other words, "I" must unlearn and

de-culturize myself and forget the accumulated human knowledge, at least temporarily, so that "I" can gain a fresh understanding of human relationships with the surrounding things. This vantage point becomes the measure and defining key of one's selfhood.[3]

This concept of *ren* becomes an antidote to the paradox of animal studies in the Western academic world. There are two major conflicting camps. The first group is animal studies. Opposing the use of "metaphoric animals" to assert human subjectivity, Susan McHugh advocates animals as "companion-species" of an independent agency (McHugh 491). Likewise, when Marianne Dekoven makes eye contact with animals, he finds they "return the gaze of the knowing looker" (Dekoven 366). David Herman also argues for the animal autonomy of "Umwelt Exploration" in the narrative representation of nonhuman experiences (Herman 174). In their unreserved advocation of animals' autonomous agency, these scholars cut off animals' relationship with human beings. If animals did have radically independent agency from their civilized counterparts, human beings would have little or no concern with animals and therefore cease to pay attention to animals. Michael Lundblad has a very convincing counterexample. Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* was first published in 1859 but was not pervasive in the United States until 1909, when Sigmund Freud translated "Darwinist constructions of 'real' animals to 'animal instincts' within the human psyche" (Lundblad 498). Thus, Lundblad appeals to the shift "from animal to animality studies" to emphasize "the history of animality in relation to human cultural studies" (Lundblad 500). Cary Wolfe also acknowledges the inevitable anthropocentric transition from "'out there,' among the birds and beasts" to "'in here' at the heart of this thing we call human" (Wolfe 572). Jeffrey M. Peck defines in explicit terms the purpose of animality studies to reveal "the epistemological structures that organize how we know, how our knowledge gets transmitted and accepted" (Peck 51). This returns us to the starting point of the controversy: animals, deprived of their own subjectivity, become the other to define humanity in our epistemological hierarchy. This is the very target of animal studies. Also, to understand animals, we have to condescend from human hubris, and that implicitly denies that animals are the agents of their own will.

Mo Yan's large cosmology provides a possible solution to this self-contradictory

3 Quan Wang makes a detailed analysis of this transforming process of "I lose myself/me." Wang argues that the process of forgetting is a progress of going beyond anthropocentrism and into a posthumanism world of "the equality of things." For more information, please refer to "A Comparative Study of the Subject in Jacques Lacan and Zhuangzi," especially pp. 256-58.

status. On the one hand, it acknowledges the difficulty of getting rid of the ingrained influence of anthropocentrism. The "I" has to constantly practice "I lose myself/me," so that "I" can forget the socially constructed "me" to have a fresh understanding of human relationship with the surrounding things. It also admits the differences among individuals. Some people might occasionally lose the social I (me), others might frequently forget anthropocentrism, and very few others can permanently stay in touch with things. And the purpose of "I lose myself/me" is to arrive at the status of equality between things. When we finally quarantine ourselves from anthropocentrism, we will have a new understanding of ourselves and surrounding things: both things and humans are on an equal footing, and they mutually define each other's identity. This is also the moment of the circulation of ren, the liquid-like energy among humans, animals, and plants. When this primary cord is reestablished, all becomes equal. In other words, animals, plants and humans all have their equal and independent will and agency in their coexistence. Human identity, instead of being an enclosed entity, becomes open and engaged in dynamic relationships with things. This vantage point of being equal with things becomes the yardstick of fashioning the self for the Chinese. This philosophy of *ren* finds its full articulation in Mo Yan's major works. *Red Sorghum* is not only the fictional background of the story but also concretizes the activating protagonist of red sorghum in the story. *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* merges human and animal identities into an inseparable entity. *Frogs* blurs the boundary between tadpoles and infants, and contrasts the abundant fertilized eggs of amphibious creatures with the rigidly rationed ovum of human beings. In short, rather than arriving fully developed, human identity is formed during a process of interacting with the changing surrounding things, while the self unfolds itself into its symbiotic relationships. The sense of self is enhanced and intensified as it extends beyond the cocoon of the social I and connects with myriad nonhuman species.

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