

## Homophonic Followings

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### Keywords

China, population, reproduction, feminist methods, one child policy

In my opinion, no book captures the stories of Chinese pursuits of population better than Chinese author Mo Yan's (莫言) novel *Frog* (蛙 *wa*).<sup>1</sup> *Frog* details the shifting reproductive landscape of contemporary China, and its entanglement with national transformations in political and economic governance. The story begins in 1960, during the Great Chinese Famine, where reproductive capacities have “dried” up.<sup>2</sup> The book then slowly shifts—first to reproductive abundance that follows an excellent yield of sweet potato in the local county in 1962; then to the introduction of the one-child policy in 1979—including the actors of reproductive control and its violence; and finally to contemporary “consumptive parenting” and new forms of reproduction such as surrogacy.

What is perhaps unique about the novel is that simultaneous to providing a historical account, it also takes us on a phonological journey. Specifically, Mo tells an entangled story that brings together “*wa*” (娃)—a term for babies and little children (娃 *wa*)—with its reproductive homophones: the Chinese creator goddess (女娲 *nüwa*), the crying call of babies (哇哇 *wawa*), and frogs (蛙 *wa*), the very title of the book.

This phonological tracing does something to how contemporary Chinese reproductive history is understood and told. It provides a contrast to the forms of state-driven reproductive control that are central in the novel—policies that sought to intervene in, and make predictable, the formation and characteristic of the Chinese populace at the aggregate level (Greenhalgh 2009; Woronov 2003)<sup>3</sup>—

with an alternative version of reproduction that is centered on unknowability, unpredictability, and randomness, which are also forces central to the biological process of reproduction. In the novel, this wonderful unpredictability plays out through Mo's attention to what we might think of as the Chinese language's (re)productive capacity to spawn associative homophonic connections.

While the absurdist connections and unpredictability this strategy generates reflects Mo's hallucinatory realist style, I argue that it also holds potential as a method of researching and narrativizing reproductive history. As I show, tracing reproductive homophones can bring us to surprising moments in reproductive history, moments that are often marginal or forgotten, but in fact can point to alternative possibilities of how, in this case, Chinese reproductive history might have unfolded. My use of homophonic following as a method for feminist thinking on population also operates as a reminder that our methods are linguistically situated practices, "interfer[ing] with the dream that English might provide authors with neutral analytics" (Mol 2024, 2).

Here are two generative examples of homophonic followings from Mo's work, both which follow "frogs" to tell a refracted story of Chinese reproduction. First, as Mo writes (2020), *frog (wa)*, the title of the book, emerged from a 1958 newspaper article that described how the live swallowing of fourteen tadpoles could be used as contraception. As I came to learn, this method was in fact used among some traditional Chinese medicine practitioners in China. Indeed, in 1957, as oral contraception in China came to receive attention, the use of this method was raised by Shao Lizhi, a deputy to the National People's Congress, as a potential ingredient for oral conception that China could use.<sup>4</sup> This method was then experimentally tested in the late 1950s, to poor results (Tien 1965). This marginal moment in scientific history—which was reported on by the foreign press as exemplar of the comical backwardness of China (Suyin 1957)—might in fact reflect broader crossroads that the Chinese state was at when it comes to reproduction (Mellors 2019). On one level, the state is still, at this stage, publicly pronatalist; population control, because of its association with Malthusianism, was criticized (Mellors 2019). On another level still, as contraceptive access was slowly expanding, there was also the question about what role and status traditional Chinese medicine should—or could—play in cultivating the reproduction capacities or restrictions on the *national body*, given that, for much of its history, it did not have a conception of a normative, universal, or "Chinese" body (Swislocki 2011).

Second, Mo's homophonic followings also shed light on lesser-known practices that took place in the era of the one-child policy, revealing that these policies were not solely or deterministically centered around women and girls. Specifically, Mo's attention to frogs, then tadpoles, and then, through their visual association with sperm, brings him to explore the more marginal history of

vasectomies in China; in the novel, he details how county-level reproductive workers tried to facilitate mass vasectomies and the widespread male resistance to surgical interventions on their bodies. Again, much of this history is true. Vasectomies were available and facilitated by the state during this period (Kohama 2011). Furthermore, the province of Sichuan, which accounted for almost half of the thirty million vasectomies performed nationwide between 1970s and 1990s, was in fact also the birthplace of the pioneering no-scalpel vasectomy (Liu and Li 1993; Li et al. 1991). Yet, in many areas, uptake of vasectomies was often limited as many husbands were reluctant to undergo sterilization (*jueyu* 绝育), resulting in most procedures being performed on wives instead (Kohama 2011, 197). This history suggests that the *feminized* consequences of the one-child policy—the stories of non-consensual IUDs, the forced abortions performed on women, the selective abortion of female fetuses, and the stories of baby girls given away—are not purely the consequence of top-down state directives but also shaped by the gendered politics of the family as an institution. While homophonic followings as a method does not inherently yield this insight, the unpredictable juxtapositions that are created through its practice—in this case between babies and frogs—push us to examine moments in reproductive history that are outside of dominant discourses and processes, which for feminist scholars can also help to reveal how reproductive policies were negotiated, resisted, and reshaped on the ground.

In recognition of Mo's generative method, I wonder then, what other marginal histories and connections might we find through homophonic followings? What might we find if we traced another reproductive term—like *dai*, as in the next generation (下一代 *xiayidai*)—across its homophones? What surprising routes might be open up in tracing reproduction through associations with surrogacy (代孕 *daiyun*), debt (贷 *dai*), seaweed (海带 *haidai*), and even stupidity (呆 *dai*)? Such juxtapositions might reveal untold or new histories of nutrition and maternal consumption (seaweed), the political economy of reproduction (debt), Chinese families' entanglements with global reproductive regimes (surrogacy), and the eugenic regulation of Chinese bodies (stupidity). Or they may not. But this is an invitation to feminist scholars of reproduction to be attentive to the language of our materials and methods and to play with homophonic followings and other creative methods that allow us to follow surprising, unpredictable, random connections to see what emerges.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> A note for readers that Chinese names are typically written as last name first. I have followed this convention here.

<sup>2</sup> Approximately thirty million people—some estimate much more—died during the Great Famine. Evidence does show that the birth rate rapidly declined in this period (1958–1961) (Zhao and Reimondos 2012).

<sup>3</sup> By policies that sought to reshape the characteristics of the population at the aggregate level, I mean, as Woronov (2003) and Greenhalgh (2009) have pointed out, that the one-child policy was driven not just by a desire to reduce population size (i.e. quantity) but by the desire to reshape the Chinese population from “high quantity” to “high quality” to cultivate an educated workforce that would be in service of China’s shifting position in the global economy. That is, such policies were concurrently introduced with China’s economic reform that sought to move China away from economic self-sufficiency to active participation in the global market.

<sup>4</sup> I note that, through processes of translation, there are different iterations of Shao’s name: Shao Litze, Shao Litzu, and Shaolizi. I have chosen Shao Lizi as it is consistent with the Mandarin Pinyin that runs throughout the rest of the text.

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## Author Bio

**Jessie Liu** is a sociologist of race, gender, and migration working across Asian studies and Asian diaspora studies. Her doctoral dissertation, *Formulas of Chineseness: Tracing Daigou Between China and Australia*, was awarded the 2024 ANU Gender Institute Prize for Excellence in Gender and Sexuality Research and shortlisted for the Inter-Asia Cultural Studies Dissertation prize.