

# Unreliable Narration Against a Reliable Historical Backdrop: On the Anti-Authoritarian Literary Reconfiguration of History in Mo Yan's Fiction

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## Abstract

Overseas scholarship on Mo Yan has often proceeded from narratology and postmodern theory, while domestic scholarship has tended to foreground his representations of local history. Yet few studies systematically integrate these two strands. Against this background, the present article examines how, upon "reliable historical anchors," Mo Yan deploys multi-dimensional strategies of unreliable narration to construct a literary reconfiguration of history and thereby achieve cultural critique. Through close reading, the paper analyzes three representative works—*Red Sorghum*, *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*, and *Frog*—from the perspectives of narratology, historiographic metafiction, and historical-cultural studies. The paper shows how China's modern and contemporary social transformations and local memories are absorbed and rewritten in Mo Yan's fiction, and the paper clarifies the cultural-critical intents embedded therein. The study identifies how this "literary reconfiguration of history" is built and articulates three anti-authoritarian implications: challenging orthodox historical discourse, resisting the unification of collective memory, and reflecting on the violence and alienation within modernization.

**Keywords:** Mo Yan, reliable historical anchors, literary reconfiguration of history

## 1. Introduction

History has long occupied a central place in modern and contemporary Chinese literature. From the May Fourth era, when historical writing carried the tasks of enlightenment and national narration, through the early PRC period, when literature served state narration and congealed into a standardized grand narrative, and finally to the post-1978 decades, when literary attention shifted toward individual experience and local memory amid cultural pluralization, history ceased to be a single, unassailable "sum of facts" and instead became a cultural arena open to reconstruction, questioning, and rewriting.

Within a postmodern horizon, concepts such as historiographic metafiction [1], unreliable narration [2,3], and magical realism entered the purview of Chinese literary studies. Mo Yan's writing is bound to rural memory and local archives. However, exaggeration, metamorphosis, and polyphonic narration persistently question orthodox historical discourse [4], placing personal and local experience outside the state-centered narrative and thereby fostering a multi-centric and contestable mode of history writing [5].

Methodologically, existing scholarship on Mo Yan exhibits a certain bifurcation. Overseas studies—often grounded in Western narratology and postmodern criticism, as in Shelley Wing Chan's *A Subversive Voice in China: The Fictional World of Mo Yan*—spotlight textual narrative features and argue that Mo Yan challenges mainstream discourse and orthodox history through language, narrative structure, and characterization, projecting a "subversive voice" [6]. By contrast, Chinese-language scholarship is rooted in specific socio-historical contexts, attending to how Mo Yan reimagines local experience and rural history and probing the tensions between his texts and state narratives or collective memory. Zhang Qinghua, for example, shows that in works such as *Red Sorghum*, *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, and *Sandalwood Death*, Mo Yan adopts neo-historicist strategies to reinterpret and fictionalize grand history, foregrounding folk memory and individual experience [7]; Chen Xiaoming emphasizes that Mo Yan's fiction is deeply grounded in the locality of Gaomi Northeast Township while simultaneously exhibiting "border-crossing" tendencies, generating complex tensions between local/global and realist/fantastical modes [8]. In short, overseas scholarship tends to emphasize form and theory, whereas domestic scholarship emphasizes the representation of historical experience. Drawing on both, this article proceeds along a chain of

"narrative strategy → historical discourse → cultural critique," integrating the workings of unreliable narration with the cultural meanings of historical rewritings.

Accordingly, this study combines literary-theoretical and cultural-historical approaches to analyze how Mo Yan rewrites history through narrative strategies and enacts cultural critique within texts anchored in actual history. Three questions guide the analysis: In the specific texts (*Red Sorghum*, *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*, *Frog*), which strategies generate unreliable narration, and with what features? While retaining historical referents, how do these strategies undermine or reconfigure the authority of orthodox historical discourse? What forms of cultural critique does Mo Yan's "literary reconfiguration of history" assert? Answering these questions, the article aims to offer a new entry point into the dialogue between contemporary Chinese literature and postmodern narratology. The exposition proceeds as follows: close readings → identification and typology of unreliable strategies, contextualized interpretation of interventions in official historical discourse → synthesis of cultural-critical implications.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 *Studies of Mo Yan's Narrative Techniques*

Existing narratological research primarily centers on formal features in Mo Yan's fiction: multiple narrators and shifting focalizations, non-linear temporality, questions of narrator reliability, and stylistic hybridity (dialect, slang, and poeticization) [4,9-11]. Much of this work remains at formal description and aesthetic reading; while it often notes a grotesque or "ugly" aesthetic [12], it seldom connects these narrative forms and features systematically to the problem of how literature reconstructs history.

### 2.2 *Studies of Mo Yan and History*

Chinese-language scholarship on Mo Yan and history is abundant, including praise for his rural epic and satirical readings of his engagement with state narratives. Two lines generally run in parallel: one treats Mo Yan as a bearer of local/folk memory, analyzing how his texts preserve local histories marginalized by official historiography [7]; the other, from political-cultural angles, explores his ethical reflections on violence and state policies within modernization [13]. However, most of these studies remain at the level of thematic or ideological criticism and seldom take narrative techniques as a key tool for intervening in and reconstructing history for systematic argumentation.

### 2.3 *Studies of Mo Yan and Magical Realism*

There has long been a debate about the classification of "magical realism". Some studies place Mo Yan within the global tradition of magical realism (Latin American magical realism), highlighting how his surreal elements and fantastical narratives disrupt the stability of reality [14]; others emphasize his roots in Chinese folk narratives, arguing that the so-called "magic" is more a recreation of local culture [15]. The "magical" elements placed in different contexts all lead to the disruption of narrative reliability, but discussions on the relationship between "magicalness" and "unreliability" are relatively rare.

The above literature review indicates that existing research has laid a foundation for understanding the form and theme of Mo Yan's narrative, but there is a significant gap - the lack of a systematic analysis that directly links narrative form (especially unreliable narrative) with historical discourse power and cultural criticism. This study aims to fill this gap by following the chain of "strategy → function → cultural implications".

## 3. The Multi-dimensional Construction of Unreliable Narration

### 3.1 *Constructing Historical Reality: The Referential Frame of Unreliability*

In unreliable narration, historical reality is not negated; rather, it operates as a referential frame that allows readers to register the tension between narration and fact. Embedding real-historical elements furnishes the fiction with anchors—place-names, events, social-historical coordinates, and cultural details—producing a palpable sense of cultural verisimilitude [16]. These "anchors" ensure that when narration departs from the real, readers can perceive its contrast with "real history."

For example: "In the sorghum field, blood splashed onto the leaves like raindrops [17]." (*Red Sorghum*)

The surrounding war-scene imagery provides a clear historical referent, yet the poetic exaggeration ("like raindrops") makes reality and symbolism coexist: concrete battlefield images cohabit with metaphorical affect. This points to a recurrent practice in Mo Yan's fiction—treating "truth" as a point of reference rather than a single truth. While readers accept the anchor, they are simultaneously guided to perceive the artistry of narration and to question the supposed objectivity and neutrality of historical presentation.

### 3.2 *The Unreliability of Narrative Perspective*

The unreliability of narrative perspective manifests itself in the narrator's limitations and subjectivity, especially in cases of multiple retellings and indirect narration, where information inevitably becomes distorted in transmission and the narrative chain generates deviations [4,9]. In *Frog*, the "I" is not a direct witness but reconstructs events through the aunt's letters, memories, and rumors; such indirectness produces distance and uncertainty between fact and narration [10]. In *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*, the landlord Ximen Nao, executed at the outset, continues to observe human affairs through successive animal reincarnations; his voice thus oscillates between that of an insider and an outsider. In *Red Sorghum*, the narrative shifts constantly between "I", the grandparents, and local legends, forming a polyphonic structure that undermines the authority of any single perspective.

For example: "In her letter, my aunt wrote that she could no longer remember many things clearly, but that cry she would never forget [18]." (*Frog*)

This sentence juxtaposes ruptured memory and affective intensity: the explicit admission that memory is not absolute truth renders the information indirect and incomplete [4], whereas "that cry I will never forget" functions as an affective anchor. As a result, history is assembled from subjective fragments, and the upshot is a narrative with multiple possibilities—one that includes undeniable experiential elements but abandons the objective representation associated with orthodox historiography.

With such multiple and indirect perspectives, readers remain in a state of verification and doubt, and history appears as an open, contestable structure.

### 3.3 *The Unreliability of Language*

The unreliability of language is manifested in exaggeration, fantasy, and the mixture of multiple styles. This is not only an aesthetic strategy but also a resistance to the official monolithic narrative language. Mo Yan often employs such language strategies to resist official discourse [11]. In "Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out", the narration of the landlord's six reincarnations is presented through animalized language, revealing satire and absurdity. For instance, when depicting the scene of collective labor from the perspective of a cow, the exaggerated physical sensations and emotional judgments undermine the objectivity of realism; in "Red Sorghum Clan", the descriptions of the sorghum fields and bloody battles are both concrete and exaggerated, and the language blends dialects, colloquialisms and poetic expressions, making the narrative emotional rather than neutral [11].

For example: "From among the sorghum stalks there seemed to come moans of pain; among the heap of corpses something seemed to writhe. My father wanted to call out to my grandfather to look at those villagers who hadn't quite died. He raised his face and saw my grandfather's verdigris-stained bronze mask of a face, stripped of human expression, and he pushed the words back down his throat [17]." (*Red Sorghum*)

This passage of text is marked by a notable unreliability in its language. Firstly, the use of vague terms like "seems" and "as if" throws the narrative into an uncertain state, leaving readers unable to determine whether the moaning and squirming are real occurrences or merely the narrator's subjective perception. The metaphor of the grandfather's face as a cold and hard object and the amplification of psychological details, such as "pressing the words down into the throat," into visible emotional symbols, enhance the visual impact and make the language tend towards symbolism and exaggeration.

Such vague, exaggerated, and symbolic language weakens objectivity and achieves the construction of instability and unreliability within a highly emotional narrative.

### 3.4 *The Unreliability of Temporal Structure*

Nonlinear temporality is a crucial device in literature for undermining narrative certainty. Mo Yan frequently employs nonlinear narration, using temporal leaps, flashbacks, and blurring to disrupt chronological sequence and render history as the intertwined product of narration and memory [4]. In *Red Sorghum*, wartime and postwar episodes alternate continuously, with the same event at times recalled by different characters at different moments, their conflicting details further destabilizing reliability. "Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out" disrupts the chronological progression with a cyclical structure, allowing half a century of history to repeat itself in multiple "reincarnations".

For example: "Naturally, I know: I am Lan Jiefang. Blue-face was my father, Yingchun my mother. Hence, you were once a donkey in our family? Yes, I was once a donkey in your family. I was born on the morning of January 1, 1950, while you, Lan Jiefang, were born that evening. We are both children of a new era [19]." (*Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*)

The contradiction created by this passage lies in the dual confusion of identity and temporal structure. Lan Jiefang's life as a "normal person" followed a linear timeline: born in 1950, he gradually experienced the changes of the times and lived on to the present, his life journey aligning with the grand historical narrative. While Lan Qianshui, as a reincarnated being, has been reborn repeatedly in past eras, now he has been reborn as a newborn baby while carrying the memories of his previous lives. His existence makes historical time present the characteristics of recurrence, superposition, and dislocation.

The two have completely different temporal logics: one is a linear historical process moving forward, and the other is a cyclical narrative that repeats itself. The text demonstrates a strategy of overlapping the certainty of linear history with the cyclical nature of time, and placing narrative time in a state of confusion and fragmentation.

The complex and interwoven temporal structure reflects the narrator's perception that history cannot be revisited, making history a product of subjective reconstruction. Through such a temporal structure, it questions and reconstructs history.

#### **4. The Cultural-critical Intents of the Literary Reconfiguration of History**

##### *4.1 Resisting the Unification of Collective Memory*

By "unification of collective memory," I refer to the production, under specific power structures, of a single interpretive frame and value system for historical events through official narration, education, and mass media [20]. Such memory stresses national subjectivity and legitimacy and tends toward narratives of linear progress and collective sacrifice, compressing or erasing individual experience, local difference, and historical multiplicity [20]. Through polyphony and multiple perspectives, Mo Yan breaks this unitary frame. In *Red Sorghum*, the War of Resistance is represented as entwined love, private vendettas, and violence; in *Frog*, state policy appears riven with contradictions when refracted through personal memory. History thus becomes a multi-centered, open structure, as local experience and private memory are inserted into the micronarrative [5]. In literary form, this resists the unification of collective memory and weakens the power's monopoly over historical interpretation, thereby realizing an anti-authoritarian intent.

##### *4.2 Questioning the Authority of Orthodox Historical Discourse*

By "authority of orthodox historical discourse," I mean the power to interpret history and to establish a single path of understanding in mainstream historiography and public discourse—a power that claims "truthfulness" and "neutrality," and is typically controlled by the state, elite historians, or institutionalized scholarly discourse. Mo Yan often deliberately exposes narrative acts themselves; through meta-narrative techniques, he makes narration an object of discussion, foregrounding the fact that the "real" is an effect of selection and construction [10]. This aligns with Hutcheon's theory of historiographic metafiction: in literature, history is not an absolute fact but a constructive discourse shaped by narrative structures, linguistic strategies, and ideology [1]. In *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*, the story unfolds in first person from a landlord executed and then reincarnated as a cow, and the narrator—human or animal—recounts history in an emotive, value-laden tone. Readers are led to question the provenance and credibility of the "facts." The narrator's direct addresses to readers and moments of self-doubt further undermine the authority of historical narration, deflating the myth of objectivity and opening a plural, contestable space. Literature thus intervenes in and reconstructs historical discourse, challenging power-laden narratives.

##### *4.3 Reflecting on the Narrative of Modernization*

In the Chinese context, the "process of modernization" is usually depicted as a linear narrative of development, moving from backwardness to advancement and from chaos to order. However, this grand narrative often obscures the deprivation of individual lives, the violent reshaping of social structures, and the rupture of cultural traditions during the process of modernization [16]. Mo Yan reveals the other side of the modernization process. In *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*, the six reincarnations of the landlord symbolize the discipline and alienation of individuals in the process of institutional change; in *Frog*, the aunt is both a policy executor and a victim of ethical and psychological trauma. These narratives satirize the simplistic value of "modernization = progress". Jiang Chun's proposition of the concept of "square narrative discourse" indicates that the confessions of the lower-class characters in Mo Yan's narratives are not merely the outpouring of personal emotions, but also a collective expression of disappointment and doubt towards social reform [21]. Through the literary rewriting of history, Mo Yan supplements the modernization narrative with neglected memories of suffering and resistance, embodying profound reflective and critical qualities.

However, Mo Yan's cultural criticism is not entirely beyond reproach. In deconstructing the delusions and power dynamics inherent in grand narratives, his textual approach consistently employs radicalized narrative strategies—

including magical realist plot constructions, hyperbolic linguistic devices, and disorientingly complex temporal structures. This literary treatment, while highlighting the challenge to authoritative discourse, may also weaken the realistic orientation of the criticism, causing readers to be more immersed in the visual impact brought by the words and neglect the depth of its social criticism. Meanwhile, Mo Yan's works, while possessing profound critical undertones, seldom propose constructive alternatives. Consequently, alongside their rebellious spirit lies a certain nihilistic quality, which constitutes an inevitable limitation of their cultural critique.

## 5. Conclusion

Employing unreliable narration within authentic historical contexts, Mo Yan transforms grand narratives into individualized, localized, and richly symbolic "literated history" through multi-perspective storytelling, hybridized language, and non-linear temporality. It not only reveals its unique construction at the level of historical narration, but also demonstrates its profound intention of cultural criticism. Theoretically, Mo Yan's narrative practice has verified the feasibility and critical power of unreliable narration and metafiction of history in contemporary Chinese literature. Culturally, this anti-authoritative history provides readers with a diverse space for historical imagination, making history an open rather than a closed text.

This study, by taking "unreliable narration" as the analytical entry point, not only deepens the understanding of the narrative strategies in Mo Yan's works but also provides a path for integrating narratological theoretical research with historical and cultural studies in the research of contemporary Chinese literature. Simultaneously, this study contributes theoretically to incorporating Chinese texts into the global discourse on narrative theory by elucidating the localized manifestations of postmodern narrative techniques across diverse cultural contexts. Culturally, it facilitates the exploration of how literary forms intervene in public memory and historical discourse, thereby offering novel pathways for interpreting the "personal experiences" and "local narratives" of contemporary Chinese authors.

Limitations remain. The corpus here focuses on three novels and does not cover Mo Yan's short fiction, novellas, or drama; moreover, the theoretical framework could be expanded. Future research should enlarge the corpus and draw on a broader spectrum of narratological approaches—including indigenous narrative theory—so as to present more fully the complexity of Mo Yan's narration and its critical engagement with cultural history.

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