NUML Journal of Critical Inquiry
Vol. 24 (I) June 2026

e ISSN 2789-4665; p ISSN 2222-570
https://doi.org/10.52015/numljci.v24iI.337

Governing Life and Beyond: The Politics of Survival in Mo Yan's *Shifu, You'll Do Anything for a Laugh*

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ABSTRACT

Article History:

Received:
April 263, 2026
Accepted:
June 26, 2026

Funding:
This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Conflict of interest:
The authors have declared no potential conflicts of interest and falsification/fabrication of data with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

This paper examines selected short stories from *Shifu, You'll Do Anything for a Laugh* written by Mo Yan and critically explores governance, survival, death, and the instability of human subjectivity set in post-socialist China. Mo Yan's fiction highlights a system in which power operates through life, as well as the instrumentalization of death. Using theoretical frameworks of Michel Foucault's concept of biopolitics and Achille Mbembe's theory of necropolitics, the paper demonstrates how governance extends from the management of populations to the production of the living dead subjects whose bodies remain economically and politically valuable beyond death. A close textual analysis of four selected short stories is conducted to explore how biopolitical regimes initially produce surplus life, which gets abandoned later, and subsequently, the necropolitical structures transform death into an opportunity for extraction. Mo Yan also destabilizes the boundaries between human and nonhuman as a result of biopolitics, foregrounding human subjectivity as mutable under conditions of extreme deprivation and war-time trauma. The short stories critique modern governance as a system that exploits life, abandons life, cures life, and alters life, making the human body an unstable and negotiable category under the heavy surveillance.

Keywords: *Biopolitics, Necropolitics, economies of death, survival regimes*

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The fictional work *Shifu, You'll Do Anything for a Laugh* is a 2001 collection of eight short stories by Mo Yan, a Chinese writer, in which he explores the intersection of power and survival in a world where human beings are heavily surveilled to the point that even death is exploited. The book highlights the ethical and the grotesque, simultaneously exploring the human and the inhuman. In *Shifu, You'll Do Anything for a Laugh*, the characters emerge from the socio-political aftermath of a collectivism regime and the following transition to post-socialist market reforms in the Chinese society where a system of governance regulates life and also reconfigures the conditions under which life and death are experienced. The Short stories in *Shifu, You'll Do Anything for a Laugh* are the representation of lives on the margins of intersectionality that are under economic and ideological transformation where they are constantly neglected by the government.

This exposes a particular governmental structure generating forms of existence that escape humanist ethical frameworks of human rights. This paper examines selected short stories from *Shifu, You'll Do Anything for a Laugh*, particularly "Abandonment", "Iron Child", "The Cure" and "Man and Beast." Through the theoretical frameworks of biopolitics and continual control over life and necropolitical parameter of control over death, this paper emphasizes how human and nonhuman subjectivities operate in times of social upheavals. "Abandonment" and "Iron Child" highlight how the boundaries between life and death and human and non-human are not stable and how the panopticon society in Michel Foucault's *Birth of Prison* (1977) and *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France* (1979) show the biopolitical governance operating through extreme regulation of people where their every move is heavily surveilled from neonatal to death.

Furthermore, through Achille Mbembe's concept of necropolitics, the paper explores how Mo Yan's book moves beyond the governance of life to the instrumentalization of death. For instance, in short story "The Cure," death is an endpoint where life ends and control of government ends too, but again, the body is a resource for the government as human bodies continue to circulate within a survival economy that collapses the distinction between the living and the dead. This phenomenon is a manifestation of Mbembe's argument: "To be sovereign is to exert one's control over mortality and to define life as the deployment and manifestation of power" (2019, p. 66). In "The Cure", the dead bodies are used for illegal organ harvesting to save lives of the exploiters' loved ones making death productive and then transforming the corpse into an area of extraction and utility. It is, what critics refer as: "Dead bodies are material things that bear a referential relationship to an absent subject. They are a kind of medium that connects the living to the memory of a deceased" (Schwartz, 2015, p. 1). This also links to the logic of biopolitics where the value of life is no longer intrinsic but dependent upon how much a dead body can be useful even beyond death.

Simultaneously, the book also explores the limits of biopolitical and necropolitical frameworks by imagining forms of subjectivity that exceed the human altogether. The posthuman lens of Donna Haraway in the short story "Iron Child" explores the ontological crisis in which survival is of utmost priority

concurrently where humanist identity is also at risk. When the children are deprived of food, they start eating and consuming metal, which takes away the fundamental qualities of being a human of consuming food. The iron child has a mutable body whereby his mode of existence challenges the boundaries between human and nonhuman. This implies that under conditions of extreme pressure the human body itself becomes an unstable category. Lastly, "Man and Beast" explores the human ontologies of war trauma within the frameworks of biopolitics and how coerced drafting in war blurs the line between human and nonhuman, because of them being tortured to such an extent. Mo Yan uses suggestive and evocative images with scintillating nuances of emotion and words that show a malevolent world in which morality collapses, and where human subjectivity is unstable.

Infants and their abandonment

In "Abandoned Child" Mo Yan narrates to the readers a man story, who discovers an abandoned infant girl, and how he attempts to take care of her, after saving her from abandonment. The story starts with an act of compassion where the narrator saves an abandoned child but it gradually unfolds into an exposition on biopolitical governance that critiques how modern power regulates the production of life but fails to claim responsibility for it. The abandoned infant is an unwanted child that evaluates the system that discards life according to political and patriarchal necessity. The story follows a narrative thread where power operates the administration of biological fertility, where reproduction is constantly monitored through birth quotas and registration systems, that facilitates the social expectation of families to produce a son. The Township Head openly explains that families with additional children are fined "two thousand for the second child, four thousand for the third, and eight thousand for the fourth," while admitting that hundreds of "unregistered kids" (Yan, 2001, p. 117) continue to exist that are not a part of the official statistics. These quantifications uncover the State's obsession with counting populations while revealing unwillingness to take care for the lives it so carefully regulates.

The abandoned infant becomes a biopolitical excess where a life, when produced within the mechanisms of governmental regulation, cannot be incorporated into the welfare programs of the government. She is wrapped in luxurious red satin but is discarded in a sunflower field with only twenty-one yuan tucked into her swaddling cloth. While the red color signifies fertility and bloom, the color signifies abandonment and blood in this story. The twenty-one yuan left besides her is a concomitant result of an economic decoding of human life where it reduces the ethical responsibility of raising a child to a monetary transaction with a sum which gets exhausted immediately through the purchase of powdered milk. Furthermore, this short story explores meditation on power as well as the limits of an ethical action to adopt the infant girl under conditions of systemic constraint of only wanting boys. This story is situated within a socio-political context in which reproduction is tightly regulated and surveilled by the government, most notably through policies designed to control population growth. These governmental institutions are "working to incite, reinforce, control, monitor, optimize, and organize the forces under it: a power bent on generating forces, making them grow,

and ordering them" (Foucault 2008, p. 34) to carry out frameworks of a panopticon society.

This paper draws upon a feminist lens coupled with the framework of Michel Foucault's concept of biopolitics that visibly operate in the short story. Foucault argues that modern power operates through repression of people and micro-management of the lives of people where the governments regulate populations through mechanisms that govern birth as well as reproduction. Mo Yan's short story exposes a gap within this system whereby the state exercises control over the production of life but it does not assume responsibility for sustaining that life once it becomes inconvenient or excessive. It "is the appearance in this new art of government of mechanisms with the function of producing, breathing life into, and increasing freedom, of introducing additional freedom through additional control and intervention" (Foucault, 2008, p. 67). The abandoned infant girl thus emerges as a figure of biopolitical excess where a life that is produced within the surveilled and controlling system cannot be accommodated by it. This excess is also structural in its nature, revealing the limits of a system that facilitates regulation over equal infant care. The government does not step up to save the infant, nor do the locals. The narrator's attempt to intervene by rescuing the child only serves to highlight the displacement of responsibility from the State to the narrator, so that when he seeks assistance from local authorities, he only encounters prompt refusal which is a response that effectively privatizes the burden of care to an unknown person as opposed to the government taking on the responsibility to save and nurture the abandoned infant.

The story dramatizes a form of governance in which the state retains control over bodies, while at the same time, also withdraws from the ethical obligation to sustain life. This results in a profound disjunction between power and responsibility that actively leaves people to navigate impossible moral dilemmas on their own. It is akin to Albert Camus' absurd world where the Sisyphean myths are self-created, denying meaning to human existence. In Mo Yan's story, this absurdity can be traced through the narrator's ethical dilemma of saving the child on the one hand, and to invite suffering upon himself and his family on the other. Abandoning the child is to become responsible if she dies. Neither choice offers moral resolution nor any answer. The narrator, therefore, decides to revolt against the odds of meaninglessness. This structure therefore produces a collapse of moral causality which is a condition in which ethical actions no longer guarantee positive outcomes. The narrator's reflection that "good deeds are seldom repaid" (Yan, 2001, p. 106) encapsulates this collapse signaling a world in which morality persists as an imperative but loses its coherence as a system of meaning, making it an absurd existence.

The significance of this collapse extends beyond the human, as it reflects a broader crisis in which traditional moral frameworks are completely inadequate by the conditions of modern governance and economic pressure. One of the important aspects of this short story is the instability of the narrator's consciousness. For instance, his thoughts oscillate between compassion, resentment, responsibility, and hatred. At the same time, he reveals a subjectivity that is deeply fractured by

the ignorance of people. This fragmentation of postmodern subjectivity is replaced by a multiplicity of conflicting impulses where the narrator is structurally divided by the forces acting upon him. Economic constraints, misogyny, and state policies all converge to produce a consciousness that cannot stabilize around a single ethical position, hence the splitting of thought. His reflections often take on a hallucinatory quality making his mind overwhelmed by the contradictions he must navigate in an unforgiving society.

This psychological fragmentation also reflects to the story's critique of modernity whereby it reveals how systems of power operate at the level of institutions, and also, within the very structure of subjectivity of human beings. The narrative's repeated emphasis on the thin boundary between humans and animal shows how this boundary is questioned and actively dismantled, owing to the behaviors depicted in the story of abandoning infants and prioritizing survival over care. This blurs the distinction between human and animal conduct. This collapse of human exceptionalism dehumanizes the characters as the government "focused on the species body, the body imbued with the mechanics of life and serving as the basis of the biological processes: propagation, births and mortality, the level of health, life expectancy and longevity, with all the conditions that can cause these to vary" (Dillon et al., 2008, p. 271). Within the capitalist order, the abandoned child is treated as a disposable being because within a patriarchal setting, she cannot be integrated into productive labor as effectively. Her abandonment critiques a system in which governance regulates the production of life while withdrawing responsibility for its care and survival. Hence, a child's presence in the world is valued according to its perceived contribution to society.

Necropolitical modes of cure

The short story "The Cure" from *Shifu, You'll Do Anything for a Laugh* explores the domain of death through the framework of Achille Mbembe's necropolitics. Mbembe's concept of necropolitics shifts the focus from the management of life to the power, in order to dictate death and its uses after the body has lost life. In necropolitical regimes, death is an endpoint and later a condition that can be administered into a resource that benefits people as depicted in "The Cure." The four characters in the story, Ma Kuisan, Luan Fengshan, and their respective wives, are executed. However, they do not cease to possess value after execution because their bodies enter another economy in which organs become a means of medicinal importance. The corpses become a competition to humans like scavenging dogs. The opening execution sequence establishes this necropolitical order through the normalization of frequent public executions that are mandatory for everyone to attend with Chief Zhang's remark: "Everybody has to die sometime" (Yan, 2001, p. 83). The stoic remark foregrounds political theorist Hannah Arendt's concept of banality of evil, a philosophical concept coined in her 1963 book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. It describes "how monstrous, large-scale atrocities are often committed not by sadistic sociopaths, but by ordinary, unthinking bureaucrats who simply comply with the system and follow orders" (White, 2018, p. 3).

Necropolitical sovereignty also deciphers what the authority determines as to how the dead will continue to do after death. The dogs in the story want the flesh for biological survival but narrator's father is in search of gall bladders for medicinal survival. Before opening Ma Kuisan's body, he kneels and profusely apologizes "loyalty and filiality have their limits. I hate to do this to you" (Yan, 2001, p. 85). This apology shows that he is guilty of the ethical violation he is about to commit to another human being. As the story progresses, the executed man continues to breathe and, in that moment, the distinction between corpse and living body becomes blurred. The father of the narrator is not harvesting an organ from the dead, but is cutting open a dying human being whose biological life has not yet ended. This liminal state explores the necropolitical regimes that create populations who occupy the condition of the "living dead" (Mbembe, 2019, p. 40). This is an interstitial space between life and death.

The grotesque materiality of this scene shows how the father of narrator's knife penetrates the abdomen where the ideological categories disappear beneath the body's flesh, blood, fat, intestines, and organs as life departs from it, leaving the body radically open where it will be further institutionalized within the necropolitical economy. The symbolic centrality of the gall bladder shows how the gall bladder, that is the symbol of courage and bravery in medicine, functions as an economic resource. It becomes a mere material when death enters and having consumed the gall bladders for the narrator's grandmother, the intended patient, is cured, but she dies instantly because of an ethical horror after learning how her life was saved. The medicine succeeds biologically only to fail morally, because, rather than restoring life, it extends the chain of deaths caused by execution from the government, making necropolitics infiltrate memory. The grandmother becomes an indirect casualty of the execution, demonstrating how sovereign violence radiates far beyond its immediate victims.

Mo Yan further complicates the narrative through the child's perspective. Because the story is filtered through youthful innocence. The narrator does not initially understand why his father hopes the condemned are young, why he hides beneath the bridge, or why the adults become silent after the executions. This limited perspective prevents ideological explanation from overwhelming ethical perception. The child's innocent disclosure of the medicine's origin, ultimately destroys the carefully constructed illusion sustaining the family. Truth here becomes neither liberatory nor redemptive, but is another mechanism through which death circulates. Innocence, like the body itself, becomes incorporated into the necropolitical order. The story shows a world in which human bodies retain value even after death by serving as sources of medicine and economic utility. This transformation of the corpse into resource represents a radical redefinition of human value. When the body is no longer alive and sacred, it becomes a source of extraction of a material that is to be used in the struggle for survival, mainly by the political elites from the poor, as a normalized practice, whereby the grotesque becomes almost a routine. As, "[a]mong the most disturbing historical trends is the tendency within the medical marketplace to exploit the bodies of the poor and

disenfranchised, where paupers frequently emerge as being of greater worth dead than alive" (2000, p. 296), as Sharp would argue.

Mbembe provides the conceptual idea for understanding the instrumentalization of death, Bakhtin enables the readers of the book to see how this transformation is mediated through the body as grotesque degradation. The human body is basically simultaneously degraded and re-functionalized, and then stripped of transcendence, yet reabsorbed into circuits of survival. Mbembe's necropolitics seems to be linked as a critical extension of biopolitics in this story. In his theoretical concept of necropolitics Mbembe argues, that modern forms of sovereignty are increasingly defined by the capacity to expose populations to death and to organize the conditions under which life becomes unlivable. In such regimes, people "are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of living dead" (Mbembe, 2019, p 40)—people, whose existence is stripped of political and ethical recognition. The dead remain active within the economy of the living as their bodies circulate while their substance is consumed and their presence lingers as a material necessity for people to consume and benefit from. In *Rabelais and His World* (1984), Bakhtin describes the grotesque body as the one that is open and becomes "a two-bodied whole in the state of becoming" (Bakhtin 448). In "The Cure", the body is similarly opened in a deeply unsettling way instead of giving it the dignity of even a dead body. The body is porous and helpless in the face of exploitation. "The population is nothing more than what the State takes care of for its own sake" (Zimmer, 2025, p. 4), as some critics point out.

In "The Cure", the consumption of the dead sustains the life of an old woman, suggesting a form of cyclical continuity but that woman soon loses her life when it is revealed to her that her life came about through illegal organ extraction. In this carnivalesque space, there seems to be no return to restoration of moral or social equilibrium, where the grotesque is institutionalized. In a highly capitalist environment, survival becomes the primary organizing principle sometimes overlooking the ethical considerations. The reduction of the human to utility is linked to Mbembe's analysis of late modernity whereby people are divided according to their economic and political worth and those who cannot be integrated into productive systems are considered disposable, and are replaced. The disposability extends to death whereby the body must justify its existence through use after the life is gone and the characters do not choose to participate in the necropolitical economy, but they are compelled by it. Foucault describes such a phenomenon in these words:

> With the emergence of political economy, with the introduction of the restrictive principle into governmental practice itself, an important substitution, or doubling rather, is carried out, since the subjects of right on which political sovereignty is exercised appear as a population that a government must manage. This is the point of departure for the organizational line of "biopolitics." But who does not see that this is only part of something much larger, which [is] this new governmental reason? Studying liberalism as the general framework of biopolitics. (2008, p. 328)

The reader of this short story is able to judge it from a moral distance as the reader is drawn into a world where the unthinkable becomes necessary forcing the readers to confront the fragility of the consequences.

Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque explores a carnival where hierarchies are inverted, norms are suspended, and the body becomes an area of excess. The consumption of the body and the suspension of norms all resonate with the carnival of capitalism as "the ever expanding markets for human tissue, where the body is reduced to a source of raw material for salable products" (Sharp, 2000, p. 297). This transformation of the carnivalesque is a darker sense of modernity, where a certain space promises of progress, but ends up with forms of inequality and exploitation. The short story does not offer solutions or any alternatives. It presents a world in which the human is reduced to its most basic function, which is the capacity to sustain life even when it is at the expense of other lives. The reader is left with a sense of unease and a recognition that the boundaries between life and death and human and non-human are far more fragile than one might assume. The human is no longer a stable category but a site of ongoing negotiation of which organ is best suited to harvest and which human body to target first.

Great leap forward?

The short story "Iron Child" by Mo Yan is written in the backdrop of the Great Leap Forward which is a period marked by utopian industrial ambition which also resulted in a devastating famine. The government mobilizes "200,000 laborers" (Yan, 2001, p. 71) to construct a railway in two and a half months to match the speed and output of the Modern era where works are "like ants" and the station is like a dragon (p. 72). This metaphor shows how the dragon evokes traditional Chinese symbolism associated with national strength and grandeur, but the antlike laborers disappear into anonymous groups with no agency. People are "crushed while carrying steel rails" (p. 72) suggesting that modernization feeds upon the bodies responsible for constructing it, and progress becomes inseparable from sacrifice. This is a manifestation of Mbembe's necropolitics as to who must die in order for national development to proceed. The children of the workers are in a nursery itself which operates as an explicitly biopolitical enclosure where the children are controlled within enclosed walls under the supervision of three skeletal old women who appear as indistinguishable as "clones" (p. 71). Their identical appearances like clones erase their individuality in the same manner that the State erases the individuality of workers outside the fence, and are seen as ants.

Iron Child whose body is rather rusty and has no identity as he says: "My name is whatever you want it to be" (Yan, 2001, p. 74), making his identity fluid. "Consciousness of exclusion through naming is acute. Identities seem contradictory" (Haraway, 1991, p. 16), because the state controls the use of language. He consumes rusted iron, pieces of railway tracks, pistols, woks, screws etc., without injury. This dissolves the boundary separating organism from industrial material. In this story, starvation becomes so severe that industrial material replaces food and after the Iron Child, the other children also consume steel rather than "meaty dumplings and sweet potatoes (Yan, 2001, p. 75). This is rather a preference

of the government and its ideological power. Steel has a "sweet aroma" (p. 77) and burned iron filings appear to be delicious which makes the children posthuman in nature. Their bodies emit a stench "worse than dog" (p. 77), and to these children, dumplings and eggs provoke disgust rather than comfort of a healthy diet and comfort food. This story further foregrounds how "[t]he disciplinary/biopower and biopolitics/necropolitics analytical divide is never wholly separate, and that necropolitics is never just about death, but an entire gamut of slow and fast depravations, woundings, degradations, poisonings" (Dunlap, 2026, p. 264). The story's narrator is a child narrator through whom a grotesque allegory of ideological violence is highlighted. The boundaries between human and metal collapse. A child's body consumes poisonous metal due to "fast depravations" (Dunlap, 2026, p. 264) of food.

The story reveals how State-driven rapid modernization can produce a cannibalistic system that consumes its own subjects. "Iron Child" is a historical allegory of the Great Leap Forward's disastrous steel production campaigns in China. The mobilization of "200,000 laborers" (Yan, 2001, p. 71) to construct a railway line in a mere two and a half months reflects the Maoist obsession with speed and result. The railway is an infrastructure, but it is a monstrous "earthen dragon" (Yan, 2001, p. 72), feeding on human bodies reduced to robotic labor. The landscape transforms into machinery and the transformation of people into instruments of production leads to the Marxist alienation, whereby labor estranges workers from their own community and surroundings. The workers are producing steel and are also being consumed by it by getting crushed under rails, or more grotesquely, absorbed into the machinery literally and figuratively.

The metaphor of the "earthen dragon" suggests a mythic and a supernatural force within a human-made structure. This slippage between myth and material reality underscores how ideology mystifies exploitation, rendering it both invisible and inevitable. The nursery school is enclosed by a fence "too tall for us to climb" (Yan, 2001, p. 72), gives the readers a hint of biopolitical control. The State regulates life and bodies by organizing and containing populations within designated spheres. The State "embraces everything, regulates everything, concentrates and controls everything with the single certain result of exercising on society an even more centralized action of proletarianization and state control that destroys the middle class" (Foucault, 2008, p. 189). The children are separated from their families and are confined under the watch of three indistinguishable old women. The identity of children dissolves into a managed collective existence as a whole. The necropolitics of the power to dictate who may live and who must die, and what happens to the body after one die, is described in a very casual revelation that parents have been "crushed while carrying steel rails" (Yan, 2001, 72). This exemplifies a regime in which death is a structural necessity in the name of progress. The railway is built on corpses due to the State's project of modernization which thrives on disposable bodies.

In this story, an egg containing a live chick shows how the children are forced to eat something that is both life and death at the same time. This grotesque act symbolizes the internalization of necropolitical violence where the subjects of

the State are compelled to consume life in its most vulnerable form. The child narrator does not fully comprehend the events unfolding around him as trauma appears again and again through repetition to the point of normalcy. The recurring images of blood dripping from a door, the snake devouring the toad, the chick bleeding in the child's mouth etc., all function as traumatic events for children. The motif of the consumption of iron is presented as absurd at the beginning of the story but it gradually becomes normalized as the story progresses, and the strange becomes familiar. Eating iron acts as a metaphor for ideological ingestion, meaning, that the children internalize the State's priorities of steel production to the point where they literally consume them or are being consumed by them. Moreover, the children are forcefully separated from their families and confined in a controlled nursery space, while adults are working tirelessly. The people are divided into two rigid dichotomies, the ones who smelted iron and those who consumed. These dichotomies operate in power structures where

> such power defines itself in relation to the biological field—of which it takes control and in which it invests itself. This control presupposes a distribution of human species into groups, a subdivision of the population into subgroups, and the establishment of a biological caesura between these subgroups (Mbembe, 2019, p. 71).

Eating iron becomes a form of ideological incorporation where the children become subjects of the State by internalizing dominant ideologies. Moreover, the preference for rusty iron over "meaty dumplings and sweet potatoes" (Yan, 2001, p. 76) signals a complete inversion of natural desire of craving food whereby the child rejects organic nourishment in favor of industrial material, suggesting that consumption or being consumed by metal, has breached the boundary between human and machine.

The workers smash woks (Yan, 2001, p. 74) which are tools of domestic life. They destroy these woks to get more raw material to produce steel. This is the destruction of the means of sustenance in pursuit of abstract industrial goals. It is, as if, the government wants where the society consumes itself by devouring its own foundations in the name of progress. The grotesque mode of narrative and the grotesque body in "Iron Child" is porous where the children eat metal and where iron tastes like flesh. The old women, described as identical "clones," embody a dehumanized authority. When the children, who are used to eating metal are made to consume fried chicks, they cry, which suggests a perverse fusion of pleasure and suffering. This ambiguity between human and metal exposes the moral categories making it impossible to distinguish between victim and perpetrator as the figure of Iron Child himself is the grotesque hybrid who is neither fully human nor entirely machine. He has the ability to eat iron without hesitation which makes him adapted and corrupted entity who is a survivor and the one who has lost his humanity.

The author repeatedly uses diminutives like "little mushrooms" and "little chicks" (Yan, 2001, p. 74), that contrast sharply with the violence of the events thereby reflecting ideological distortion. The Iron Child names the protagonist as "Woody" which illustrates the instability of identity where names are arbitrary and

imposed showing the broader erasure of individuality under collectivist ideology. One of the most haunting moments in the story occurs when the child encounters his parents but fails to recognize them as sources of comfort. They appear "horrifying" (p. 76) instead, as their bodies emit a stench worse than decay. The inversion of these familial bonds where distance overrides closeness, shows the destruction of social structures under extreme conditions of industrialization. The child's rejection of its parents shows a significant collapse of social cohesion and the family institution. The final capture of the children which is then followed by the painful scraping of their bodies shows the ultimate futility of resistance within such a system where the government is so powerful. The Iron Child show how "the ultimate expression of sovereignty largely resides in the power and capacity to dictate who is able to live and who must die" (Mbembe, 2019, p. 66). It is an ethical reminder to remember the human cost of historical transformations and rapid industrialization.

Ethics of Survival in the "Man and Beast"

"Man and Beast" is another short story that explores modern China. The story is set within the imaginative and historical universe associated with *Red Sorghum* (1985), (another work of Mo Yan) where the story shows the dismantling of the boundary between the human and the animal through the figure of the grandfather, Yu Zhan'ao, also called Granddad in the story. He is a Chinese war veteran who escapes Japanese captivity and survives in the mountains of Hokkaido for fourteen years. The story is a tale on war memory, trauma, national history, revenge, masculinity and the unstable ethics of survival. The story shows the radical transformation of subjectivity under conditions of war and displacement producing a liminal figure who exists at the threshold of humanity and beastliness. Granddad was forced to become a soldier against his will during wartime where "the need for more-than-human ontologies of war that incorporate the entanglements of humans and non-humans" (Hälterlein, 2025), was crucial. The character of Granddad shows how extreme violence dismantles the coherence of human identity and recasts the body as a site of trauma fighting for survival. Granddad's prolonged existence in the mountains of Hokkaido is where he survives for fourteen years after escaping Japanese forced labor. This extended isolation transforms him into a being who is neither fully social man nor fully animal. Derrida argues that "the gaze called 'animal' offers to my sight the abyssal limit of the human" (2008, p. 23). This indicates that the animal shows the instability of human identity itself, as Granddad's prolonged coexistence with foxes, bears, wolves and birds places him where the forest becomes the space, while his own humanity is reflected back through the eyes of the nonhuman.

The title "Man and Beast" hints towards a binary opposition and is trying to mix civilization with savagery and the readers can see how Granddad gradually becomes a beast-like in his habits and bodily comportment while he is out in the wild. His sleep posture, sharp hearing, instincts, and his violent territorial struggles with foxes and bears, all show that the distinction between human and nonhuman life is collapsing within the space around Granddad. Cathy Caruth argues that trauma is not fully experienced in the moment of catastrophe but it returns later

through involuntary and fragmented repetition of a certain event which shows how Granddad's recurring hallucinations of his homeland and Japanese landscape causes trauma remembrance. The sea becomes sorghum (a grain used for animal feed), the fog becomes battlefield, smoke and the sounds of waves merge with the sounds of trucks and gunfire, as if he was fighting a war. These memories make a traumatic return in which the past violently erupts into the present and disrupts it, making time in the story non-linear.

The narrative structure of the story also shows trauma's temporality as it is moving through flashbacks and sensory triggers whereby Granddad does not remember war as something that has ended but is still ongoing in his mind. Moreover, Mo Yan's descriptions in the short story foreground the animalization of the human body as Granddad's fingers are described as metallic and claw-like and his movements are controlled through instinct and environmental adaptation in the wild. In *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (2008), Jacques Derrida argues that Western philosophy has historically constructed the human by opposing it to the animal, thereby creating a false metaphysical hierarchy of the human being superior, and that of the animal being inferior. Granddad's body becomes a liminal site, where human and animal modes of being intersect, and are not locked in binary oppositions, revealing the fragility of the category of human itself. The forest becomes an alternative social world in which Granddad is trying to exist among other living beings. In the story, the foxes are antagonistic animals but they also function as doubles of Granddad himself because, like him, they defend territory and kill to survive.

Donna Haraway's posthuman emphasis on interspecies relationality is especially useful here. In *When Species Meet* (2007), Haraway rejects the notion of human exceptionalism and argues that entangled forms of life exist in a rhizomatic manner. Granddad's fights with the foxes show them as worthy adversaries, an entanglement of the species, showing how the human is no longer sovereign over nature but is reabsorbed into an ecological world. Moreover, Granddad's encounter with the Japanese woman in the cornfield extends to how Granddad projects onto her body the entire history of wartime atrocity wherein she ceases to exist as her own person and becomes a metonym for Japan itself. His language is full of vengeance until Granddad sees the black patch sewn into her undergarment. This visual detail triggers an involuntary memory of narrator's Grandma's violated body. The Japanese woman suddenly becomes a mirror rather than an enemy. Her violated body recalls the body of Granddad's own beloved wife which interrupts the thought of revenge and replacing it with traumatic memory.

Julia Kristeva's Abjection refers to something that destabilizes boundaries and threatens the coherence of identity. In this scene, the boundaries between victim and perpetrator and revenge and remorse all collapse as Granddad's violent desire is suddenly replaced by grief and paralysis. The body of the enemy woman becomes a site onto which his own unresolved mourning is projected, leading to psychic episodes under the pressure of traumatic memory. Giorgio Agamben's *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1998), explores the concept of 'bare life' and 'homo sacer' where bare life refers to a form of existence that is stripped of any

political recognition, and is just biological survival in a body such as Granddad's solitary survival in the mountains. He exists outside the structures of nation, community, law and social belonging as he is politically dead but at the same time biologically alive. While the nation celebrates rebirth and economic advancement, Granddad remains excluded from this symbolic order as his body still has not recovered from the scars of painful historic events. In the end, he becomes the forgotten body of the nation's traumatic past.

The tension between national triumph and personal exile shows the readers how the State narratives of liberation and nationhood often depend upon the erasure of those bodies that are gravely affected by the traumas of war. Granddad also survives history as a war veteran because he was drafted in the war by the Chinese government against his will. Due to profound war time trauma, his subjectivity remains fractured and also suspended between human and animal. War has the tendency to morph humans into beasts, and it

> strips away the veneer of civilization, leaving only our most primal survival instincts. This forces individuals into a raw, animalistic state where morality fades and actions are driven by basic needs for self-preservation and dominance, revealing the dark intersection between human nature and raw animal behavior. (Wilson, 2015)

The Sino-Japanese war violence and Granddad's memory is haunted by the Japanese occupation, battlefield massacre, forced labor, and displacement. The transformation of Granddad shows how biopolitics and necropolitics show sovereign power. It produces and abandons life as biopolitics operates through the regulation and preservation of populations. He was a soldier during wartime so his displacement into the mountains of Hokkaido radically shifts from the discipline of the military institution to disorder, as post-traumatic stress disorder starts to settle after his escape. The wilderness and the enduring effects of violence, bloodshed, gore, and war trauma blur the boundaries of human identity, transforming him into a figure that oscillates between the human and the beast. His integration into the ecological and a beast-like world thus signifies a nonhuman slippage due to war trauma.

Shifu, You'll Do Anything for a Laugh explores a modern world where governance also extends into the production of life and later, control over death. In "Abandoned Child," "The Cure," "Iron Child," and "Man and Beast" sovereign power decides which lives deserve protection and how can death itself be transformed into a productive resource that benefits the government and the capitalist society. The abandoned infant becomes a surplus life that the State refuses to look after; the executed body in "The Cure" is converted into medicinal value through organ extraction; the starving child internalizes industrial ideology by consuming iron itself; and the man turns into a nonhuman beast under State trauma. These stories delineate that modern power operates through extreme surveillance, abandonment, deprivation, and also the normalization of conditions in which survival itself becomes ethically compromised, such as eating iron. Biopolitics and

necropolitics are used for optimizing and regulating life, which comes at an acceptable cost of political and economic progress. The human body loses its status as an inviolable entity and is reconfigured as political capitalist instrument used by the State. This paper has argued that *Shifu, You'll Do Anything for a Laugh* critiques modern power by writing about the unstable boundaries between life and death. Michel Foucault's biopolitics and Achille Mbembe's necropolitics helped in exploring how Mo Yan's fictional world is structured by the calculated production and instrumentalization of death. The text also shows how the government controls its subjects and reorganizes human existence within their planned society where humans lose their autonomy and human body is no longer sacred. Death is supposed to be the endpoint to human life but in the book's necropolitic society, it becomes an instrument of extraction and value production. These narratives talk about the modern governance system in a modern society as a system that operates through abandonment from infant to child, and later, to the dead body. Mo Yan's fiction presents the fragmented subjectivity, which is reconfigured by the forces that seek to manage it, whether through iron or organ harvesting. The human becomes an unsettled category where they lack agency and are at the risk of being abandoned from the very onset of life to after the person has died. Humans might have an illusion of freedom but the estrangement makes them tied to chains where they have enough freedom to move around but not enough power to break free from those shackles.

Conflict of Interest: The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest related to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article, and that the data presented have not been fabricated or falsified.

Funding: This research did not receive any specific grant or financial support from public, commercial, or not-for profit funding agencies.

Participant Consent: The authors confirm that Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and confidentiality was duly maintained.

Data Fabrication/Falsification Statement: The authors declare that no data have been fabricated, falsified, or manipulated in this study.

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