Emerging in the 1980s with his idiosyncratic historical novel Red Sorghum (红高粱家族), the Chinese Nobel Laureate Mo Yan has long been hailed by Chinese literary critics as a leading player of the literary trend called “new historical fiction” (新历史主义小说) (Q. Zhang 35). Any neologism beginning with “new” would inevitably raise such questions as “new to what,” and this question is further complicated in the current case by the rise of “new historical fiction” in China which corresponded with the import of the school of literary criticism called new historicism from the West, so sometimes it is confusing what “new” people are talking about when they label certain contemporary novels as new historical – is
there a newer kind of historical fiction, or is there historical fiction influenced by the literary theory of new historicism (Shi 78)? It should be clarified that when the term “new historical fiction” was first employed by Chinese scholars to categorize a type of contemporary historical fiction, it is the anti-revolutionary rhetoric, anti-authoritative, and personal perspective in these historical novels that were emphasized and selected as “new.” In other words, Chinese new historical fiction in the beginning is camped against “old historical fiction” – the kind of historical fiction complying with the dominant historical ideology of the state popular during the Cultural Revolution. However, it does not mean that literary theories from the West that reconsiders not only history but also historiography and historical knowledge per se could not be employed to offer some light on the innovations of Mo Yan’s new historical fiction (whatever it is new to). Indeed, as Zhang Qinghua argues, the kind of deconstruction of the professed objectivity of history underlying Western new historicism is never a wholly new or Western concept for a Chinese audience, as such ideas can already be traced in traditional Chinese literature (“Mo Yan” 36). While Mo Yan’s “new historical fiction” is nourished by and informs the particular historical and contemporary conditions in China, it is my contention in this article to further explicate the newness in Mo Yan’s new historical novel 生死疲劳 (“Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out”) in a global context in the light of Linda Hutcheon’s notion of historiographic metafiction.

Historiographic metafiction in Hutcheon’s formulation is the kind of fiction that not only foregrounds historical context but also self-consciously signals the textuality and discursive nature of both fiction and history:

Historiographic metafiction refutes the natural or common-sense methods of distinguishing between historical fact and fiction. It refuses the view that only history has a truth claim, both by questioning the ground of that claim in historiography and by asserting that both history and fiction are discourses, human constructs, signifying systems, and both derive their major claim to truth from that identity. (93)

For Hutcheon, historiographic metafiction characterizes the quintessentially postmodern paradox: “it reinstalls historical contexts as significant and even determining, but in so doing, it problematizes the entire notion of historical knowledge” (89). The postmodern historiographic metafiction in Hutcheon’s formulation is therefore not a depthless simulacrum of images that “can no longer gaze directly on some putative real world” as Fredric Jameson suggests (25), but a self-reflective exposition of the discursive nature of historiography. Indeed, for Mo Yan and any Chinese writer of the new historical school, whatever innovative narrative strategies and new conceptualization of history they engage, intervention in history and a pursuit for historical justice is always their primary concern, as the millennia-long Confucian ideal of social criticism has been internalized by Chinese intellectuals as an ethical obligation. It is precisely this ideal of literature’s moral function essential in Chinese culture that prompts contemporary writers like Mo Yan to deal with the concept of history in their novels not as a purely textual play but as a way to intervene in social reconstruction. In this way, the novel departs from the kind of depthless pastiche of history in postmodern culture that Fredrick Jameson laments. Mo Yan’s Life and Death as historiographic metafiction is both deconstructionist and a reconstruction, penetrated with a kind of
social protest particularly through the novel’s ingenious questioning and reformulation of historical justice.

A quest for historical justice is the initial drive that prompts Mo Yan’s protagonist Ximen Nao to embark on his fantastic transmigration through six lives. Executed as an evil landlord during the Land Reform (1947-1952) shortly before the establishment of the People’s Republic of China, the soul of the indignant Ximen Nao experiences the rural history of China in the second half of the twentieth century consecutively in the body of a donkey, an ox, a pig, a dog, a monkey, and finally, a deformed baby born on the eve of the new millennium. What Ximen Nao experiences is a fantastic time enacted by the narrative framework of reincarnation, referential yet fundamentally heterogeneous to the reality of time outside of the fictional world.

With the ingenious narrative framework of Buddhist reincarnation, the fictional fantastic time in the novel is constructed to be multidimensional: while the history of the human world that the soul of Ximen Nao is repeatedly thrown in proceeds linearly from 1950 to 2000, encompassing every major political event in rural China, the inner journey of the soul proceeds cyclically, with each reincarnation starting and ending in Yama’s hell. Thus, the lineal progression of secular human history (which echoes the larger history of China outside of the book) when juxtaposed with the soul’s cyclical journey, offers a sense of déjà vu. This two-dimensional fantastic time makes the normal lineal history a palimpsest where a cyclical pattern constantly surfaces. Moreover, this highly self-conscious fictional fantastic time serves as a para-history, offering a metacritique of the history construction outside of the text and the ethical and philosophical assumptions of that mode of history. It is through the fantastic journey itself that the issue of historical justice is complicated, delayed, and finally accounted for, though in a truly postmodern, anti-foundationalist fashion.

A fantastic time enacted by the framework of Buddhist reincarnation certainly is a brilliant narrative innovation that Mo Yan excavated from traditional Chinese literature. Yet far more than a narrative strategy, it is my intention to demonstrate in this article that the fantastic, cyclical time enacted through reincarnation is both a deconstruction and a construction: it recognizes the textuality of all historical knowledge and the inaccessibility of a unitary and comprehensible past, yet at the same time it still attempts to excavate a past that is full of trauma, violence, and injustice. In other words, the cyclical time pattern in Mo Yan’s novel offers a new historical conscience. This historical justice is no longer a simple shift of power between the oppressor and the oppressed, as the cyclical pattern of the whole narrative has effectively called into question any notion of extremes and binaries. Instead, the notion of repetition, as embodied in the protagonists’ consecutive reincarnations and his spectral presence that contaminates the present with an ever-present trace of the past, will be the key to a postmodernist concept of historical justice that by accepting a hauntology instead of ontology of history, indefinitely opens the present for re-examination.

In the following, I will analyze how a traditional notion of ghostly justice is evoked and then problematized in Mo Yan’s new mode of fantastic history, examine the various stances toward the past exemplified in this cyclical time pattern, and finally point out the key role that spectrality plays in Mo Yan’s new conceptualization of historical justice. In the end, through a cross-cultural comparison with another postmodern historiographic metafiction, Toni Morrison’s Beloved, I show the significance of
a global poetics of spectrality in raising historical consciousness as well as destabilizing dominant historical narratives.

As a novel pursuing the question of historical justice, *Life and Death* begins with a return to the traditional logic of justice closely associated with the returning ghosts in classical Chinese literature. Entitled “Torture and Proclaimed Innocence in Yama’s Hell, Reincarnation Trickery for a White-hoofed Donkey” (*Mo 3*), the first chapter depicts Ximen Nao’s torture in the court of Lord Yama and is endowed with a strong sense of the protagonist’s grievance and indignation. Refusing to accept defeat, Ximen Nao endures all the unspeakable tortures of Lord Yama with the wish to go back to the living world to confront his persecutors. In compliance with traditional Chinese literature, Lord Yama is depicted as corrupt and treacherous, a stereotypical villain oppressing the justice-seeking protagonist. A wronged soul’s torture and protest in the court of the underworld is a familiar scene in the tradition of Chinese *zhiguai* (“tales of the strange”) and is strongly reminiscent of a famous *zhiguai* story by Pu Songling, the master of *zhiguai* stories and Mo Yan’s predecessor in fantastic story-telling in Shandong province. In the story “Xi Fangping” of Pu’s *Liaozhai zhiyi* 聊斋志异 (*Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio*), the protagonist Xi Fangping willingly goes to hell to confront Lord Yama who has been bribed by the Xi family’s enemy and has wrongly taken the life of Xi’s father. Xi endures all the torture inflicted by Lord Yama and even runs back to the court of underworld judges from his assigned reincarnation to continue his protest. Xi’s persistence and filial piety finally catch the attention of a powerful immortal. Complying with the convention of stories of ghosts seeking justice after death, justice is restored in Pu’s story: the evil Lord Yama and the briber are severely punished while Xi and his father are amply compensated for their sufferings and integrity (*Pu 1341–8*).

The corruption of Lord Yama and his underworld attendants, the sensational scenes of torture, the indignant and stubborn protagonist – all these familiar ingredients in the beginning of Mo Yan’s novel remind his Chinese readers of the logic of posthumous justice associated with the returning ghost. Since the inception of the genre *zhiguai* in the Six Dynasties period (c. 220–259), ghosts have been conceptualized in Chinese folklore as not only the lingering souls of the dead but also very often as a restorer of justice unobtainable in the world of the living. Death does not have the final verdict on a man’s personal history. Instead, ghosts remember and return, and when they do wreak havoc in the underworld and the world of the living, they become a destabilizing force for the existing social structure and very often result in a power shift between the former persecutor and the persecuted. For those who are traditionally marginalized in society (the economically disadvantaged, women, peasants, etc.), this temporary structural shift brought about by the intrusion of the ghost promises a hope for justice.³

If Mo Yan’s homage to traditional Chinese *zhiguai* stories on ghost justice in the beginning of the novel sets up the expectation for a story of ghost revenge, the protagonist’s ensuing journey through six reincarnations deviates dramatically from that traditional logic and destabilizes our understanding of historical justice and the authenticity of historical knowledge gained from narrative construction. Ximen Nao does not experience twentieth-century Chinese history from the stable position of a human being but from the shifting vantage points of various farm animals, and the shifting points of view of these fragmented narratives make a unifying view of history
constituted of the conflicts between adversaries no longer sustainable. Moreover, the moral position of an animal perspective is fundamentally different from that of a human one, and as I will analyze in detail later, gradually the animal consciousness merges and clouds Ximen Nao’s initial indignant human consciousness, so that the quest for justice loses its urgency and is repeatedly delayed in his transmigration, with a surprising reformulation of justice revealed at the end of the novel through its opening to ceaseless story-telling.

The first lesson, indeed a cultural shock that Ximen Nao learns from his reincarnation journey, is inversion. A strong sense of inversion characterizes Ximen Nao’s first two incarnations as a donkey and an ox, and such an inversion returns to the protagonist in different forms in his later incarnations. It is this inversion that makes a simple logic of persecution and revenge questionable — logic that highlights both traditional literature on ghost revenge and the revolution logic of the Democratic Dictatorship of the Proletariat promoted by the new government. Reborn as his former farmhand Lanlian’s (Blue Face) donkey, Ximen Nao is thrown into a world where social and moral relations are quite the opposite of the world he was familiar with. Indeed, the legitimacy of the People’s Republic of China is founded on its liberation of the proletariat, and the Land Reform during which Ximen Nao lost his life and fortune is a vital process of that liberation. Reincarnated into this post-liberation world, Ximen Nao finds himself alienated from all his former social relations: his former farmhand and adopted son Lanlian now becomes his master, taking over his property, women, and children (his concubine Yingchun marries Lanlian and his son and daughter become the adopted children of Lanlian). Indeed, now as a donkey, Ximen Nao becomes a piece of property of his former servant and as an animal his livelihood depends on his human master, a relationship not unlike son and father. This reversal of relationship between Ximen Nao and Lanlian epitomizes the profound social restructuring that happens with Land Reform: the previous father–son and master–servant relationship — one that is hierarchical yet friendly (at least as perceived from the perspective of the landlord) — is reinterpreted by revolution logic as an oppressor–oppressed relationship and violently turned upside down, hence Ximen Nao’s dramatic death and reincarnation.

However, Ximen Nao’s reincarnation as a farm animal not only exposes how utterly the new revolution ideology has alienated family and antagonized former friends but also reveals that the new truth — the new moral and social order established by the revolution logic — is equally easily reversible. Historically defined as coming from two antagonistic classes, Ximen Nao and his former farmhand Lanlian develop a touching mutual dependence in the new roles of farm animal and farmer (not unlike a new pair of son/father–servant/master relationship), and Ximen Donkey’s loyalty toward his human master Lanlian is brought to a whole new level in his next incarnation as an ox when he dies defending Lanlian’s right to retain his own private land. Conversely, it is Ximen Nao’s own son, Ximen Jinlong, in his eagerness to prove his loyalty to the People’s Communes, who publicly shames his adoptive father Lanlian and burns his biological father Ximen Nao as Ximen Ox alive. After the Land Reform turns the adoptive father and son into enemies, the People’s Communes turns that pair of enemies into friends and real father and son into enemies. If the hope for historical justice in traditional ghost–revenge stories
like “XI Fangping” is predicated on the assumption of a unitary and coherent view of history in which the adversaries are defined by their innate nature, then the reincarnations of Ximen Nao offer a view of history in which no unifying logic is possible, hence no sustainable moral grounds for Ximen Nao the avenger to simply confront his persecutor and reclaim his position as an innocent victim. Borrowing Linda Hutcheon’s words, what the novel is interested in here is not “falseness per se” or the one “Truth” in history, but “truths in the plural” (109). The de-centered fantastic time experienced through Ximen Nao’s transmigration suggests an idea of history as never coherent, but multidimensional and paradoxical in nature.

Does that mean that the violent and untimely death met by Ximen Nao in the beginning of the novel (and in a larger sense, the historical violence against a group of people as the founding legitimacy of the new state) is justified? The novel certainly refuses to offer such a simplistic answer, as the repeated reversals mentioned above have already made questionable any ideologically entrenched binary in the name of justice. Moreover, the extravagant and wild narrative that often commingles animal and human points of view unleashes a Dionysian spirit, which strengthens the absurdity and grotesqueness of the history it is referring to and commenting upon. The most irrational period of modern Chinese history – the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) – coincides with Ximen Nao’s incarnations as the ox and the pig, so the narratives surrounding these two incarnations stand out as extremely idiosyncratic and hallucinatory. Here, Mo Yan’s fantastic para-history performs another critical function: to remember and to expose.

Largely narrated from the point of view of Lan Jiefang as an unsophisticated boy, the fantastic elements of metamorphosis and animal perspectives make the exposé of the Cultural Revolution extremely poignant. An example is the carnivalesque market parade happening at the height of the Cultural Revolution, where seemingly grotesque animal behaviors lay bare the brutality and cannibalistic nature of the revolution logic. In this chaotic world, a former-county-magistrate-denounced-as-counter-revolutionary dances in a donkey costume and metamorphoses into a lustful donkey, a flock of wild geese flying overhead is stricken down by the disastrous noise of revolutionary slogans in the loudspeaker, which in turn causes mass trampling among a hungry audience in the market who swiftly tear the birds and each other apart, and finally, a red flag incidentally falling over the head of Ximen Ox causes his panicking and impaling of a butcher. Beneath the seemingly festive and naïve narrative tone of a boy is an apocryphal scene of absurdity and violence in which men turn bestial and revolution rhetoric (both audio and visual apparatus of the Cultural Revolution) drive both animals and humans into madness. The market parade popular in the Cultural Revolution is supposed to be a political rally performing a rhetoric of triumph of the righteousness and humiliation of the evil, yet in Mo Yan’s fantastic commingling of humans and beasts, a Bakhtinian carnivalesque takes the place of the monotonous political discourse of the revolution. Significantly, the principal symbol of the revolution – the color red – is subverted and desecrated in this scene, as it is consecutively associated with blood, madness (red flag that drives the ox crazy), and blindness (red paint that nearly damages Lanlian’s eyes).

The exposition of historical violence shows Mo Yan’s commitment to literature’s ethical function of social criticism, yet the historical justice that he examines in this
novel is more complex than exposé, for remembering and exposition are coupled with forgetting. While the animal realm gives a unique ledger for the novelist to voice his historical comment and to speak the unspeakable and irrational, the animal status is both a blessing and a curse for Ximen Nao as it puts into motion his gradual forgetting and distancing from human history. Indeed, the whole mechanism of transmigration is designed by Lord Yama as a schooling of forgetting, so that while Ximen Nao’s vivid narration of his transmigratory journey is a conjuring of the past, it is also a practiced art of forgetting. Ironically in this fantastic time, repetition means to remember, yet remembering too much leads to forgetting. In his first two incarnations as donkey and ox, Ximen Nao retains a close relationship with his former farmhand Lanlian and with the earth; since the incarnation of pig, that connection is gradually loosened as he moves farther away from the earth and memory of his tragic past. A sense of disorientation and confusion characterizes Ximen Pig’s first heroic act within human society, which also marks the exit of Ximen Nao and his generation’s historical conflicts from the arena of post-Mao China. After the Cultural Revolution, all the communist rhetoric and policies give way to the new rule of money, and those defined as reactionary in the revolution time regain their social status. This cyclical movement of national history nullifies its own former logic and causes great disorientation, and those who are reluctant to let go of the past pay dearly for it. So symbolically, Ximen Nao’s final involvement with human society as a former landlord is marked with blood. Upon seeing Hong Taiyue (a similar nostalgic figure who clings to his own past as a communist party leader) humiliating his widow Ximen Bai even as he makes love to her, Ximen Pig renews his long-repressed memory as Ximen Nao and with indignation bites off Hong’s testicles. This severs the pig’s last connection with the human world and from then on, the pig’s narration turns totally to the animal kingdom.

The narration goes on and so do the lives of those survivors of historical violence, and the past of Ximen Nao’s tragic ending seems to be finally the past now as the post-Mao society focuses on the accumulation of material wealth and satisfaction of lust. If Ximen Nao begins his transmigration as an indignant soul seeking justice, that mission is gradually forgotten as he is repeatedly thrown back into the fantastic para-history and experiences the ebb and flow of contradicting ideological tides. After the incarnation of dog, Ximen Nao tells Lord Yama that “My hatred is all gone” (Mo 510). The cleansing of hatred is finally achieved in the incarnation of monkey, as Ximen Nao totally loses his human consciousness along with his narrating voice. The fantastic para-history of Ximen Nao’s six reincarnations therefore runs parallel to the real history of which he is once a part, performing the art of forgetting through remembering, exposition through distortion. This is a far cry from the literary convention of ghost justice that the novel has started with, yet it has not solved the most urgent ethical question the novel opens with. What is one to make of Ximen Nao’s strenuous justice-seeking mission? Does it have no meaning at all? And what is the attitude toward historical justice and historical violence implicated in this cyclical rendering of history?

The novel’s title and its overall framework of Buddhist reincarnation become for some critics the proof of Buddhism as the final verdict on historical justice offered by the author. Chen Sihe regards the Buddhist admonition alluded to in the title “Life, Death, Weariness, Labor” as the utmost ethical standard endorsed by the novel (162). The various characters’ life, death, weariness, and futile labor are all results of their
desires, and only those devoid of greedy desire – in Chen’s analysis, marginal characters like Ma Gaige – can be blessed with an uneventful yet peaceful life (159). Likewise, Li Tonglu believes that the Buddhist teaching of forgetting and forgiving offers the final solution to make peace with the past (Li Tonglu). Quoting Hannah Arendt, Li extracts forgiveness as the utmost moral teaching of Ximen Nao’s journey through history – “Forgiveness is the key to action and freedom. Without forgiveness life is governed by the repetition compulsion by an endless cycle of resentment and retaliation” (Arendt, qtd. in Li 253) and forgetting as the way to forgiveness: “Only forgetting permits a full embrace of the past as the past, not as the object of obsession” (253). However, this interpretation’s emphasis on Buddhist ethics seems to be attaching too much importance to the novel’s formal connection with Buddhism, which serves at best as a narrative device for the author to build his fantastic and multidimensional narrative world. Apart from Buddhist connotations, Chi-ying Alice Wang offers another reading of the novel’s religious connotation from the perspective of the traditional Chinese way of nature espoused by Taoism. While both a Christian redemption and a Buddhist nirvana are inaccessible to the various suffering characters of the novel, Wang reads Lanlian’s epitaph, “everything that comes from the earth shall return to it” (Mo 511) as resorting to the Chinese tradition of “following the way of Earth”: “In the light of Dao de jing, Lan Lian is in turn following the way of Heaven and The Way (Dao) itself. In the end, he is blessed with the perfect union with nature or self-so (自然)” (C. Wang 136).

However, singling out Lanlian as the figure representing the novel’s final historical moral seems to be underestimating the significance of the overall cyclical structure of the novel. Indeed, the death of Lanlian and the close of the Ximen Dog chapters do not mean the end of Ximen Nao’s reincarnation journey. If we understand the journey that Ximen Nao embarks on in the beginning of the novel as not only a journey seeking justice for himself but also one seeking ways to make sense of twentieth-century Chinese history and to reconcile with that violent history, then the meaning of that journey only surfaces when the six reincarnations are completed with the deformed baby Lan Qiansui, the principal narrator of the whole story. Indeed, the completion of six reincarnations is not only significant in the sense of narrative structure but also and most importantly, in the sense of establishing a cyclical time structure autonomous to the lineal progression of time outside of the text, so that the fictional history can serve as a permanent critique of the official historical narrative. To create that original and monumental construction of time, Mo Yan does not hesitate to use all building materials – whether it is Buddhism, Christianity, or traditional Taoism – to serve his purpose, yet these religious building materials should not overshadow the novel’s original explication of historical knowledge and complication of historical justice, which I argue is truly postmodern.

Here again, we return to our initial question: what kind of historical justice is offered (or is it at all) in this novel? Regarding this, Li Tonglu answers: “Although injustice is ultimately deferred, and lost life cannot be regained, it is still meaningful to allow the opportunities for the silenced voices to speak repeatedly” (256). Li’s Buddhist interpretation of the novel paints a touch of pessimism over the novel’s historical view, and I do not agree that injustice is ultimately deferred, but I do think she points out the most crucial attitude toward history that Mo Yan offers in this
novel – “to speak repeatedly.” The cyclical pattern of history stitched together through Ximen Nao’s reincarnations is predicated on the sense of repetition: not only is life renewed repeatedly but also the whole economical and ideological structures of the country (as reflected in the larger cycle of ownership of the land mentioned earlier) are reshuffled several times, and most ironically, the novel ends with the millennium boy’s announcement: “My story begins on January 1, 1950…” (Mo 540), which is precisely the first sentence of the whole book. The fantastic history in the novel thus becomes a closed cycle, repeating and retelling itself ceaselessly. This repetition, I argue, is not only a formal feature of the novel but also a form that informs a postmodernist deconstruction of any ontological truth of history and a reconstruction of historical justice – a compromised justice indeed, but the only possible justice one can wish for in a decentered postmodern temporality.

The aforementioned critics believe either justice in this novel is deferred (Li) or made an insignificant issue through recourse to various religious teachings (Chen and Alice Chi-ying Wang), for Ximen Nao’s fantastic journey through history never offers an answer to his initial question. This interpretation assumes that the fantastic history (including both its lineal and cyclical dimensions) narrated by Ximen Nao competes with the official state history for its truth claim and that itself should provide some unitary, coherent moral. However, the intricately built fantastic history through a relay of various narrations already signals the textuality and artificiality of itself. A postmodernist understanding of historical knowledge as always already textualized and sifted through the subjective values of a certain vantage point is evidenced here. As Linda Hutcheon’s theorizing of postmodern fiction suggests: “Postmodern novels […] openly assert that there are only truths in the plural, and never one Truth; and there is rarely falseness per se, just others’ truths” (109). Life and Death never claims a unitary value of truth for the fantastic history narrated by Ximen Nao; contrarily, a lot of signposts are scattered in that narration to deconstruct the sole authenticity of any narrating voice therein. The two narrators Lan Qiansui (Ximen Nao’s last reincarnation) and Lan Jiefang sometimes will compete for authenticity in their narrations and contradict each other in the interpretation of one incident, and the garrulous fictional character “Mo Yan” constantly dismissed by Lan Qiansui as a trickster may serve as the author’s self-mocking reference to the artificiality of his own history-building as a novelist. In this sense, the retelling of Ximen Nao’s fantastic journey itself is a textual performance, which exposes the instability and emplotment of the official state history it parodies, or any historical constructions including itself. This is the kind of historiographic metafiction that Hutcheon believes is quintessentially postmodern for its exposition that both history and fiction are textualizations of the past as well as the only way we can make sense of the past.

What Ximen Nao’s fantastic para-history uncovers is that although the past is an ontological fact, our knowledge of it – history – is never unifiable and stable. History is plural for each of its participants and each vantage point in it, therefore to locate a riveting point in history upon which all the rights and wrongs of its participants and periods can be decided once and for all is impossible, and that is why Ximen Nao never gets what he asks for in his repeated incarnations, and that is where Mo Yan’s story of ghost-seeking-justice differs fundamentally from its traditional predecessors. History is not composed of antagonistic binaries and no shift of power can set all wrongs to right.
Is historical justice still possible in this plural, decentered, postmodern worldview? Jameson would argue that a weakening of historicity and a severing with the past are the primary characteristics of postmodern culture (6). I would rather argue that a certain kind of historical justice is still offered in this novel, and it is realized precisely through the repetition of the cyclical historical pattern. The ceaseless repetition of Ximen Nao’s story at the end of the novel signals a permanent opening in the present toward the past. The reincarnated Ximen Nao therefore serves as a specter of the past; though he can change nothing of the past, his repeated reincarnation and retelling of his stories start a perpetual haunting of the past, opening the present for the inspection and reinterpretation from the perspective of the past. In other words, the present is never sealed; it must learn to live forever with its own past. In this sense, there is a historical justice for those injured and cast aside in the relentless progression and rewriting of history.

A text haunted by a sense of spectrality of the history, then, is what Mo Yan’s historiographic metafiction contributes to our understanding of historiography and historical justice. In the context of Mo Yan’s novel, a haunted view of history means that the present can never sever its ties with the past. It certainly means that there will be no salvation for the historical participant, no absolved sins and guilt-free moving forward (thus the lack of religious redemption in the novel), but it is also a conscientious way to deal with the past, especially a chaotic and violent past as that faced by China. The calling for hauntology to replace ontology in the “spectral turn” in cultural studies spurned by Jacques Derrida’s Specters of Marx underlines this obligation toward the past: to accept an unfixable, destabilized interpretation of history and the specter of the past as a permanent intruder (occasionally, law-breaker) in the present may be the most conscientious way to deal with history.

To argue that Mo Yan is a deconstructionist may be going too far, but apart from this deconstructionist configuration of the ghost, a historical justice offered by a lingering spectrality has long been evidenced in traditional zhiguai stories, from which Mo Yan’s novels have gained much nurture. Yuan-ju Liu in his study of Six Dynasties zhiguai stories finds that the appearance of ghosts and other anomalies in the text often signals the existence of certain past injustice, and the ghost then functions as the catalyst to set into motion a chain of actions that rights the past wrongs. In his words, it is a model “guiding the deviant towards the norm (chang)” (Liu “Allegorical Narratives” 269). Through the narrative dynamic of “anomaly – exposition – mediation – punishment – return to order,” the ghost is appeased, the deviant elements removed, and the social structure returned to the norm (Liu “Xingxian yu mingbao” 32). Such ghost stories therefore are stories about the disappearance of the ghost, for ghosts as a dangerous element are always eliminated at the end of the story, and no real harm is done to the existing ideological structure. One could discern a similar pattern in the story “Xi Fangping,” the prototype ghost-seeking-justice story that Life and Death starts with yet departs from. But as a postmodern ghost story, Life and Death retains its ghost in the end through the anachronistic boy Lan Qiansui, and through opening itself up as a haunted text that ceaselessly retells itself, revealing to the present not only a multidimensional past but also how that past is construed and rewritten. Repetition builds up spectrality, and spectrality offers us a way to deal conscientiously with the past.
For writers concerned with exposing historical trauma and injustices in their fictional universe, ghosts function as an appropriate metaphor for the unspeakable past. Yet the different historical and cultural circumstances involved in fictional history construction mean that authors of different cultures often come up with somehow different renderings of spectrality. Here, I use the American writer Toni Morrison’s 1987 novel Beloved as a cross-cultural reference to show the use of spectrality in contemporary historiographic metafiction, which may better illuminate the originality of Mo Yan’s construction of time and history. First published in the 1980s when black literature had just begun to contest for a place in the American literary canon, Beloved was intended by Morrison to be a fictional history of black slaves’ interior world. Morrison acknowledges the importance of slave narratives (i.e., autobiography, recollections, and memoirs written and published by former black slaves) in establishing a black history, yet she laments the fact that such expositions, in their efforts to solicit sympathy from a white audience, often keep silent on the slaves’ emotional sufferings (Morrison “Site of Memory” 109-10). Beloved in Morrison’s words is intended to fill this void, to rip the veil over the things “too terrible to relate” (“Site of Memory” 110). If Beloved constitutes part of Morrison’s career in the 1980s to reclaim in the fictional world a black presence in American national history, the other part of the cause is made clear in Morrison’s literary criticism which is also framed in spectral terms – in her lecture entitled “Unspeakable Things Unspoken,” Morrison calls upon literary critics to “find the ghost in the machine,” i.e., to acknowledge and analyze how the absent-presentation of Afro-American history has helped to shape the American literary canon (36). Like Mo Yan’s reconstruction of China’s rural history, black history in Morrison’s mind is marked by marginalization, distortion, and violence too horrible to relate, yet in novels of fantasy it is precisely this spectral quality of history that gives it the power to haunt and deconstruct.

Kimberly Chabot Davis argues that Beloved is situated somewhere between the modernist obligation to history and the postmodernist understanding of the plurality and textuality of history in its brilliant combination of social protest and deconstruction: “She deconstructs while she reconstructs, tapping the well of African American ‘presence’” (245). And it is precisely the ghost that performs this role of deconstruction and reconstruction in Beloved. The ghost’s haunting of 124 Bluestone Road signals both a spectral history of slavery that asks to be recognized and a questioning of the reliability of any totalizing truth about the past. The specter in the novel in a sense alleviates the tension between postmodernism and Afro-American social protest – the dilemma between a recognition of no cognitively accessible “real” past but only textualized ones and the moral obligation to reach closer and revealing the “truth” of black history. The novel recognizes the textuality of notions like “truth,” “history,” and “past,” and never claims a unified view of the slave experience. While not claiming any authenticity and ontology, the specter is planted right in the center, thus disturbing the peaceful present and demanding people to notice that there is always some ex-centrics in the center, some past traces in the present. Just like Mo Yan’s Life and Death, spectrality in Morrison’s Beloved – both as a ghost that comes back to haunt and a ghostly effect that destabilizes the narration – reconciles the socially conscientious need to excavate a repressed past and the acknowledgement of the instability of historical knowledge.
Yet, there is another dilemma to be solved in *Beloved*: to remember or to leave behind the past. On one hand, the specter of slavery must be conjured, and sufferings of the silenced must be made known, thus the necessity of a fantastic history mobilized by the specter; on the other hand, for the living to go on, the specter must be left behind lest it becomes too suffocating. To choose either one is to do less justice to the past or the present, and the novelist’s impossible task is how to do both. Morrison certainly recognizes this dilemma, therefore the sentence “it was not a story to pass on” (*Beloved* 323-4) – suggesting, as Davis points out, an ambiguity of “pass on” as handing down the ghost’s story or to ignore it (*Davis* 250) – appears thrice in the last section of the novel. Morrison’s solution to this dilemma is postmodernist. The narrative voices in the novel are plural, and the omniscient third-person narrator focusing on the specter Beloved as authorial comment and the focalized narrations on the major characters complement each other to weave a history that has multiple readings and possibilities. Thus, in the plot, the main characters move on after exorcizing the ghost, choosing to look to tomorrow instead of yesterday (“We got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow.” *Morrison Beloved* 322), while on the narrative level, the omniscient third-person narrator focuses on Beloved, issuing a metafictional admonishment that such a story should not be forgotten (324). In this multiplicity of narrative levels, spectrality lingers on.

Compared with Morrison’s technical solution of the dilemma of forgetting and remembering, Mo Yan’s fantastic time structure combining forgetting and remembering seems to be a more organic solution and one more in tune with Chinese cultural traditions. The cyclical pattern of Ximen Nao’s transmigration journey does away with the question of “either-or” and achieves a “both-and”: as analyzed above, it is a forgetting through remembering, and remembering through repetition. No past is forgotten and buried in this ceaseless fantastic repetition; instead, as a fantastic para-history it is always autonomous and a critique of the historical construction we make of the past. The religious notion of reincarnation coupled with a postmodernist understanding of history offers in Mo Yan’s case a deconstruction as well as a reconstruction of history. In a sense, Mo Yan’s novel also belongs to what Davis calls the social-protesting historiographic metafiction.

In this article, I have analyzed the fantastic para-history in Mo Yan’s *Life and Death* as a postmodernist answer to the question of historical trauma and injustice. More specifically, a spectrality of the text effected by a cyclical repetition in a fantastic time bridges the gap between the textualization and fictionality of history and a real engagement with the past that can affect the present. For as Derrida notes, a specter is an oxymoron in nature: “it is both visible and invisible, both phenomenal and non-phenomenal; a trace that marks the present with its absence in advance.” (39) This ability of the specter to transgress boundaries, to be “both-and” (both present and absent, both visible and invisible) makes it possible to serve as a catalyst that mobilizes an excavation of the repressed history, while at the same time questioning the construction of historical knowledge. However, if for Derrida and other poststructuralists, the spectral logic is “de facto a deconstructive logic” (39), a metatrope that tends to deconstruct all, I hope my analysis of Mo Yan’s and Morrison’s texts shows the constructive potential of a poetic of spectrality in fiction – through evoking the repressed specter of history and instilling in the narrative an instability through the specter’s transgression, the poetic of spectrality
combines the postmodernist deconstruction of history and truth and literature’s ethical function as social critique.

Notes

1. On the close connection between social criticism and literature in Chinese literary tradition established since the Book of Songs and its influence on contemporary Chinese writers, see Chi-ying Alice Wang (128–9).

2. All page numbers of the novel refer to Howard Goldblatt’s translation Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out unless otherwise indicated.

3. On the power of the ghost as appropriated by those socially marginalized in China, see Kang Xiaofei’s anthropological study The Cult of the Fox. Although Kang’s object of study is the Chinese fox cult evinced in Chinese folklore and literature, the ghost functions similarly as an empowering agent for the disenfranchised in many zhiguai narratives; see, for instance, Yuan-ju Liu (“Liuchao zhiguai” 128–30).

4. Not incidentally, the other chief narrator of the novel is named “Liberation” (Lan Jiefang), Lanlian’s son born on the same day of Ximen Donkey. If the returning soul of Ximen Nao signifies the lingering grievances of those who died so that the country may be “liberated,” then the conflicting narratives of Ximen Nao and Liberation that constitute the main part of the novel calls into question any unitary logic of “liberation” after the establishment of the New China.

5. On the visual metaphors of the Cultural Revolution in Life and Death, see Huang (109).

6. As Zhang Xudong notes, the ownership of the land rotating from private (Land Reform) to cooperative (Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution) and back to private (post-Mao era) is the larger cyclical pattern underlying the smaller cyclical pattern of reincarnations in the novel (5).

7. The English title “Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out” as the translator Howard Goldblatt admits is more of an interpretation rather than a translation of the Chinese original (33), which according to Chinese syntax would be rendered as “life, death, weariness, labor,” a phrase derived from the second awakening of the Buddhist classic Fo shuo ba daren juejing (佛说八大人觉经), printed as the epigraph of the novel: “The Buddha said: transmigration wearies owing to mundane desire, few desires and inaction bring peace to the mind” (佛说: 多欲为苦, 生死疲劳, 从贪欲起。少欲无为, 身心自在).

8. On Mo Yan’s departure from Buddhist doctrines in Life and Death, see Jinghui Wang (141–3).

9. Fredric Jameson particularly differentiates pastiche in postmodernism and parody in modernism: the former is “a speech in a dead language,” a “blank parody” for which no original exists (17). However, in the Chinese context, the standard historical narrative issued from the state is still the “norm” from which writers like Mo Yan try to depart from and parody in their fictional history.

10. Esther Peeren formulates Derrida’s specter as “a deconstructive force that disturbs the traditional notions of temporality and history – by collapsing the borders between past, present, and future: ‘time is out of joint’ – and that transforms ontology into hauntology” (11).

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