

Depictions of Pestilence in Literature, Media, and Art

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Edited by

Kübra Baysal

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	vii
Kübra Baysal	
Chapter One.....	1
Harbingers, Pestilence, and Metaphors: China’s Evolving Perspectives on Locusts	
Vivienne Tailor	
Chapter Two	28
Plagues, Pestilences, and Empires: Outbreaks and Altered Histories in Antiquity	
Sakti Sekhar Dash	
Chapter Three	46
Pandemic Villains: Insects as Miasmatic Monsters in Early Modern Texts	
Lorenz A. Hindrichsen	
Chapter Four.....	65
Shelley(an) Flood and Danse Macabre: Plague as a Rebirth and Equ(co)alizer for the Sick Earth in <i>The Last Man</i>	
Nazan Yıldız	
Chapter Five	83
Reimagining Pandemic in Western Literature and Hollywood Cinema	
Azadeh Mehrpouyan	
Chapter Six.....	101
Human Vulnerability in Jack London’s <i>The Scarlet Plague</i>	
Ercan Gürova	
Chapter Seven.....	116
“A Feast in Time of Plague”: Pushkin’s Idea of Life	
Victoria Bilge Yılmaz	

Chapter Eight.....	136
‘Rituals of Sickness:’ Disease in Graham Swift’s Short Stories Anastasia Logotheti	
Chapter Nine.....	153
From Faith to Healing: Quarantine, “The Cunning Woman,” and Early Modern English Plague Culture in Geraldine Brooks’ <i>Year of Wonders</i> Eszter Ureczky	
Chapter Ten	173
Marked! Roma Madan Soni	
Contributors.....	190

INTRODUCTION

KÜBRA BAYSAL

Coupled with the recent outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the gradual increase in the recurrence of (un)natural disasters worldwide, there has been a growing awareness regarding humanity's interconnection with nature. The negative repercussions of this disrupted natural balance on health are clearly manifested in the emergence of new contagious diseases. Indulging in humankind's struggle with calamities throughout history, this book aims to dwell on the varying depiction(s) of pestilence in the literature, media, and art, as mediums reflecting the real life or imagined future(s) based on past and present facts. In this regard, human coexistence with the viruses, bacteria, and fungi, among other disease factors, brings out meaningful narratives underscoring the "trans-corporeality"¹ of bodies, and reminds humanity of the extent of their existence in the vast universe and their responsibility to decrease human impact on nature for future generations and the continuation of life, per se, on Earth. In the twenty-first-century world, which has been stricken with global warming and calamities, these narratives, which are named plague literature, hold a crucial position to guide humanity towards a personal and environmental awareness more potently than ever. In this spirit, this book aims to fill in the gap in literature, culture, and art studies by presenting descriptions of contagious diseases and the concept of disease in different genres since the dawn of humanity and create a history of the representations of pestilence from a myriad of perspectives.

Pestilence has been a part of human life since creation, which finds its early reflections primarily in mythology and ancient rituals. Discovered to be older than literature itself, this theme displays "a strange uniformity to the various treatments of the plague, not only literary and mythical, but also scientific and non-scientific, of both past and present."² As a universal

¹ Stacy Alaimo. (2010). *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment and the Material Self*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2.

² Rene Girard, "The Plague in Literature and Myth" *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, Vol. 15 No. 5 (1974): 833.

phenomenon, plague holds a significant place in both eastern and western civilizations. Finding the examples of plague in the *Gilgamesh* as one of the earliest works of literature in eastern culture, and then in the *Iliad* from the western culture attests that as a species, *homo sapiens* have long been acquainted with the concept of disease and show similar reactions to it, regardless of the differences in ethnic origin, geography, or religion. As such, the theme of pestilence is foregrounded in the works of literature, media, art, and other productions displaying the human condition through realistic as well as imaginary depictions. Apocalyptic pandemic literature, contagion stories, non-romantic vampire and zombie narratives, comics, films, and the whole zombie apocalypse franchise exhibit the grand human fear from the unknown pathogens and infection throughout human history. Especially zombies are represented as an “allegory of infectious disease epidemiology”³ reflecting a gruesome image of the contagion as in the form of a cannibalized flesh-eating monster.

Considering the universality of the fear of diseases, it would be apt to depict the theme of pestilence as a collective experience of all humanity, bringing out similarities rather than differences in their struggle against death, forcing them to present a unified front in dire circumstances causing dramatic changes in their life routines and personalities. The most recent example of pestilence, the COVID-19 pandemic, which is still strong in 2022, has tested human resilience and intelligence in more ways than one. Changing altogether life as we know it, this post-postmodern pestilence seems to have stirred a solid feeling of sympathy and solidarity among people in their fight against this common adversary.⁴ In parallel, calling attention to the inherent bond humans share with the nonhuman environment, and with germs as part of it, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic similarly affirms the destructive anthropogenic impact on nature with the emergence of novel viruses and bacteria due to climate change and all environmental alterations that the Anthropocene entails. In other words,

There is already an official narrative of the Anthropocene: ‘we’, the human species, unconsciously destroyed nature to the point of hijacking the Earth system into a new geological epoch. In the late twentieth century, a handful

³ Joanna Verran and Xavier Aldana Reyes. “Emerging Infectious Literatures and the Zombie Condition” *Emerging Infectious Diseases*, Vol. 24, No. 9 (2018): 1775.

⁴ Floris Tomasini. “Solidarity in the Time of COVID-19?” *Cambridge Quarterly of Healthcare Ethics*, 30 (2021): 234.

of Earth system scientists finally opened our eyes. So now we know; now we are aware of the global consequences of human action.⁵

Always laden with new diseases, the Anthropocene is an age of pestilence. Becoming a stage for several outbreaks, such as the Spanish flu, Ebola, severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus (SARS), human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), bird flu, and swine flu, aside from COVID-19 and the novel monkey-pox, the age of humans can aptly be defined as “Pandemicene”⁶ and “Virocene.”⁷ Mostly *zoonosis* in nature and vice versa due to the trans-corporeal relations of humankind with the nonhuman, the new disease pathogens that have been emerging due to anthropogenic climate change and other environmental imbalances similarly cause the suffering and death of nonhuman animal species. To name one, with the molecular spike protein similarities between severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus (SARS COV-2) and feline coronavirus (FCOV), which mutates into feline infectious peritonitis (FIPV),⁸ it can be argued that the recent outbreaks of FIPV and the increase in the number of infected cats may be associated with the current pandemic.⁹ Therefore, it can be safely discussed that, despite being considered the culprit for pestilences, the Anthropocene likewise brings about an awareness in humans during their quest for survival with regard to their connection to the nonhuman animals, and their common suffering. It stirs solidarity among humans themselves, and sympathy towards their nonhuman companions, which is expected to be even more vital in near future for survival as *earthlings*,¹⁰ with the ongoing and upcoming diseases.

⁵ Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz. 2016. *The Shock of the Anthropocene: The Earth, History and Us* (London: Verso), 12.

⁶ Ed Yong, “We Created the ‘Pandemicene’” *The Atlantic*. 2022. <https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2022/04/how-climate-change-impacts-pandemics/629699/>

⁷ Jude L. Fernando, “The Virocene Epoch: the Vulnerability Nexus of Viruses, Capitalism and Racism” *Journal of Political Ecology*, Vol 27 (2020): 636.

⁸ Arjun N. Sweet, et al. “Clinical and Molecular Relationships between COVID-19 and Feline Infectious Peritonitis (FIP)” *Viruses* 14, 481 (2022): 9.

⁹ During the lab research for the COVID-19, antiviral cures for the previously fatal FIPV have been discovered and used for treatment, which has been effectively saving a great number of infected cats (Daniela Krentz, et al. “Curing Cats with Feline Infectious Peritonitis with an Oral Multi-Component Drug Containing GS-441524” *Viruses*. Vol. 13 No. 11 (2021): 2228).

¹⁰ Bruno Latour’s term for humans and the nonhuman of the Earth (2007. “A Plea for Earthly Sciences.” Keynote lecture for the annual meeting of the British Sociological Association, London).

In this regard, this book not only brings disease and contagion into light but also affirms a history of pestilence, extending from the Bronze Age to the twenty-first century. Displaying universal viewpoints on disease and pestilence, this edited collection voices concerns for the future of the Earth and the human condition amidst negative environmental phenomena manifest as contagion. Comprising ten chapters, contributed by prominent academics from around the world, the book touches on ancient, medieval, romantic, modern, and contemporary perspectives on infectious diseases through analyses of the literature, media and artworks from Chinese, Greek, Roman, European, British, American, Australian, and Indian cultures. Putting forth a wholesome picture of contagion in several representations, this book appeals to a wide array of readers, including students, scholars, organisations, and individuals from humanities, environmental humanities, film/media studies, and arts, among countless others. Written during the ongoing pandemic by fellow authors, edited and introduced by myself, this collection aims to make a scholarly contribution to academia with its discussion of the emergence of the pathogenesis since the dawn of humanity and more significantly, through the unified portrayal of parallel human experiences and the nonhuman conditions in different accounts from diverse angles.

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CHAPTER ONE

HARBINGERS, PESTILENCE, AND METAPHORS: CHINA'S EVOLVING PERSPECTIVES ON LOCUSTS

VIVIENNE TAILOR

Abstract

Over the past three millennia, how have Chinese cultural attitudes towards the locust evolved? This interdisciplinary survey applies New Materialism theory to contemplate China's dramatically changing attitudes toward this pest. Within a Confucian-Buddhist-Daoist view, perspectives on the locust intersect with the ancient anthropocosmic concept of a harmonious symbiosis among humans, nature, and the cosmos. This symbiotic perspective is codified in the term *Tianrenheyi*, which literally translates as "Heaven-humanity-harmony-one." This research explores Shang, Tang, Ming, and Qing Dynasties and then Mao and post-Mao eras' interactions with locusts by examining the insect's presence in sacred rituals, political parables, agricultural records, dynamic murals, and sociopolitical literature. This research compares iterations of *Tianrenheyi* where anthropocosmic worldviews are contrasted to later posthuman, non-speciest views. Overall, these millennia of interactions among Chinese cultural eras and locusts indicate evolutions in the Chinese worldview on humanity's relations with each other as individuals, communities, nations, species, and global ecosystems.

Keywords: Locusts, pestilence, anthropocosmic, posthumanism, China.

Introduction

Quick, consult the oracle bones about the sacred locusts! No, now consult the prime minister—the emperor’s reign is at stake. Ready the pig heads to honor the god Liu Meng—he will drive away the locusts! Blacklist Mo Yan’s filthy novella *The Plagues of Red Locusts*¹—scatological satire is NOT funny!

How are all these reactions to locusts part of the Chinese historical continuum?

From the ancient past, locust plagues have been described as darkening the sky like evil omens and leaving starving communities in states of violence and confusion. The Food and Agriculture Organization² (FAO) details the dire impacts of locust outbreaks. Just one locust can consume its own weight of 2g of food per day. A one sq km swarm of these relentless pests can devour the equivalent grain nutrition of 35,000 people. Over the past three thousand years, what has been the Chinese cultural attitude towards the locust? This interdisciplinary survey applies New Materialism theory to investigate China’s dramatically changing attitudes toward this pest by exploring the locust’s presence in sacred rituals, political parables, agricultural records, dynamic murals, and sociopolitical literature.

Each era represents a New Materialist intra-action “qualitatively shifting any atomists metaphysics, intra-action conceptualizes that it is the action *between* (and not *in-between*) that matters.”³ These reactive manifestations of the locust indicate this grain pest’s impacts on Chinese history and intersect with the ancient East Asian concept of a symbiosis among humans and nature that is extended to a harmony with the cosmos. This symbiotic perspective is codified in the term *Tianrenheyi*,⁴ which literally translates as “Heaven-humanity-harmony-one.” Records of this anthropocosmic concept that envisions a sacred oneness of mundane and spiritual spheres can be traced back to its early formulations penned in the Eastern Zhou era.⁵

¹ *The Plagues of Red Locusts* (Hong Huang, 蝗, 1987)

² See <https://www.fao.org/resilience/resources/resources-detail/en/c/278608/>

³ Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin, *New Materialism: Interviews & cartographies* (version 1st ed.). 1st ed. (Open Humanities Press, 2012), 14.

⁴ *Tianrenheyi*, 天人合一 (Pronounced: “Tee-an-run-huh-ee”)

⁵ Eastern Zhou Dynasty 东周朝 (770-221 BCE). For consistency, this research uses dates sourced from:

http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/timelines/china_timeline.htm

Tianrenheyi differs from common Western ecological outlooks centered on Christian-based land stewardship, scarcity-based resource competition, or species loss due to human encroachment. Instead, this East Asian philosophy with ecological connections links humanity and nature in a mutually beneficial and interdependent relationship. From a Rujia view,⁶ Heaven exists as its own objective existence separate from human consciousness, with Heaven being nature and humans being part of nature. This chapter considers how the attitudes towards locusts intersect with tensions in Chinese culture regarding individualistic versus collective value systems in an eco-socio-holistic worldview that has been religiously and politically evolving over thousands of harvest seasons.

Shang Dynasty: Oracle Bone Divinations Regarding Sacrosanct Locusts

Three-thousand-year-old archeological evidence from the Shang Dynasty⁷ provides the first insight into China's battles against locusts when the northeast and southeast suffered repeated waves of this devastating pestilence. Religious artifacts from this premodern society demonstrate that they fearfully viewed these creatures as indicators of the gods' displeasure and harbingers of impending punishments. Temple remnants indicate that the people worshipped wax locust idols used in sacrificial rituals performed to assuage the gods' anger. These rituals likely paralleled the practice of paying respects to unwanted entities in the hopes of encouraging them on their way. These entities might include the lingering departed, haunting ghosts, or, in this case, voracious locusts.

In the later Song Dynasty,⁸ a coterie of scholars compiled the empire's first multivolume *Book of Agriculture*.⁹ These foundational farmer's almanacs provided invaluable agricultural, climate, and husbandry information on such topics as soil health, seed fertilization, farming tools, and buffalo and silkworm care. Linking to locusts, the almanac's Chapter

⁶ Rujia (儒家) refers to the collective Chinese-based religious and spiritual thought system that includes Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism. The ideas of *Tianrenheyi* derive elements from all three world views, which can be seen in the Confucian emphasis on attaining grace through ritual practice and in the Daoist spiritual views on nature as being Heaven.

⁷ Shang Dynasty, 商朝, (ca. 1554-1045/40 BCE)

⁸ Song Dynasty, 宋代, (960-1279 CE)

⁹ Nongshu, 農書. See

<http://www.chinaknowledge.de/Literature/Science/chenfunongshu.html>

Thirteen is entitled “Offerings and Reports to the Spirits,¹⁰ which relates to the “Spring Prayers for the Autumn News.”¹¹ Although compiled in the Song Dynasty, these annals included records and rituals dating to the Shang Dynasty.

These annals detail the Shang-era rituals stipulating that communities pray to the gods for a bountiful harvest, with the humans promising to repay the gods with future sacrificial rituals and moral behavior. This record mentions that pestilence, famines, droughts, and displacement were considered punishment for human “negligence in praying and repaying God through worship services.”¹² Locusts served as ill omens for peasants and leaders alike. The ravenous pests were viewed as Heaven’s warning to the emperor and high leaders to rectify social ills through benevolent and compassionate leadership. However, neither the leaders nor the people could exterminate the locusts, as their appearance and disappearance were Heaven’s purview. Inevitably, this ancient worldview allowed the proliferation of locust plagues.

The Shang Dynasty religious leaders applied their only accepted method to prevent, comprehend, and alleviate locust plagues—oracle bone divination (OBD). David N. Keightley explains that OBD “was one of the core institutions of the Shang elite, being one of the methods used to obtain consensus at the royal court.”¹³ OBD, which predates the Shang Dynasty, was performed by carving sets of contrasting statements on a turtle shell or bovine scapula. The carved items were placed on a small flaming altar. Then, the diviner intoned the prepared questions to the gods while simultaneously using a rod lightly to strike each etched question. After this ritual step, the diviners studied the cracks across the etchings to interpret Heaven’s will. Rubbings and tracings of the OBD remains reveal the array of questions asked of the gods. These included inquiries about the royals, astrology, hunting, agriculture, and auspicious days for calendar events and sacrificial rituals.

Among the oracle bone remains, archeologists have catalogued a fragment they titled “Calming the Locust Deity at Sün.”¹⁴ This large OBD

¹⁰ Qibaozhiyi, 祈報之宜

¹¹ Chunqiquiubao, 春祈秋報

¹² Yongsoo Lee, “The Perception of Pests in the Ancient China and Locust Control Strategies,” *Yōksa minsokhak* 39, no. 39 (2012): 215.

¹³ David N. Keightley, *These Bones Shall Rise Again: Selected Writings on Early China*, (State University of New York Press, 2013), 124.

¹⁴ The Sün information is from: Guangyu Chen, Zhenhao Song, Yuan Liu, and Matthew Anderson. *Reading of Shāng Inscriptions* (Singapore: Springer Singapore, 2020), 369-371.

fragment includes nine sentence-questions related to sacrificial rituals for ancestors, plentiful harvests, and prayers to Sūn,¹⁵ an agriculture deity. The pictograph “𧈧”¹⁶ on the OBD visualizes the pest’s form combined with the Chinese characters asking the deity Sūn to intervene against the migratory locust plague.¹⁷ These almanac records and the OBD archeological evidence demonstrate this era’s tenuous relationship with the locust and exemplify the Shang Dynasty’s fear-based iteration of *Tianrenheyi* in linking Heaven, nature, and humanity.

Tang Dynasty: Sociopolitical Shifts Facilitate the Reversal of Views on Locusts

While the Song people continued to practice seasonal harvest rituals and prayed to nature-related deities, they wholly altered their view of locusts from the Shang spiritual anxiety towards this pest. During the Song era, the insects were no longer feared as inviolable messengers. Instead, they were to be destroyed at all costs. What happened between the Shang and Song Dynasties to facilitate such a dramatic change? In fact, significant changes occurred in China during the eighth century’s Golden Age of the famed Tang Dynasty,¹⁸ changes which were accelerated under the reign of Emperor Tang Taizong.¹⁹ Historian Mark Edward Lewis describes this dynamic era when Chinese culture produced revered poems, improved medical treatments, perfected woodblock printing, and invented the waterwheel-based clock. These advances represent just a handful of the works accomplished during this rational, cosmopolitan era, which ripened the conditions to alter the superstitious views towards the inimical locust.

What specific events precipitated this stunning paradigm shift? Chronicles of the Tang Dynasty were recorded in the 1086 CE encyclopedia

¹⁵ “Sūn” presents on the OBD as the pictograph: 𧈧. The traditional/simplified Chinese character is: 詢/ 粵.

¹⁶ Rendered in simplified Chinese as either: qiu 𧈧 or zhong 𧈧, meaning either “grasshopper” or “locust.”

¹⁷ This OBD uses the characters “ning qiu” (𧈧), meaning “to abate or prevent” migratory locust plagues.

¹⁸ Tang Dynasty, 唐朝, (618-906 CE)

¹⁹ Tang Taizong, 唐太宗, (r. 626-649 CE)

titled the *Zizhi Tongjian*,²⁰ directly translates as *A Mirror for the Wise Ruler* or *Comprehensive Mirror to Rule the Government*. Although these Singlish translations feel awkward, they convey the encyclopedia's purpose as a foundational guide for political rule. One chapter chronicles a watershed moment in China's history with the locust—"The Narrative of Emperor Tang Taizong Eating the Locust."²¹ In this story, which oscillates between history and anecdote, truth and propaganda, the emperor and his ministers walk in a palace garden as they discuss a current locust plague.

Frustrated by the religious taboo surrounding the locust, the emperor snatched a squirming locust and contemplated it in his pinched fingers. As he inspected the pest, he intoned, "Evil things may become disease." With that, the emperor swallowed the locust, probably much to the ministers' disgust. As the emperor's continued health contradicted the locust religious taboo, his statement and action held profound implications. Because the emperor did not become diseased, the locust was not evil. Thus, this insect was not an untouchable, Heaven-sent harbinger. It was a biological pest that should not only be destroyed but should be consumed by humans. This digestive act conveys complete domination over this scourge. Moreover, consuming locusts indeed became one method to battle the pests and likely contributed volumes of nutrition to the Chinese populace.

Tang Taizong's groundbreaking act regarding locusts was reinforced by actions taken by a prime minister a few decades later during an era of political instability. After the ending of the controversial Zhou Interregnum²² of Empress Wu Zetian,²³ the Tang Dynasty's reassertion of rule under

²⁰ The *Zizhi Tongjian* (资治通鉴) was completed by Sima Guang and his academic collective. The 294 volumes detail China's history from 403 BCE to 959 BC, covering sixteen dynasties and 1362 years of history.

²¹ "The Narrative of Tang Taizong Eating the Locust Vol. 192, Chapter 106," *A Mirror for the Wise Ruler*, accessed May 1, 2022, <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=688634>.

²² The Zhou Interregnum references the short reassertion of the Zhou Dynasty lineage during the Tang Dynasty. The interregnum when Wu Zetian (武则天, r. 690-705), the only formally declared empress ever to rule China, reigned is known by several terms, including the "Wu Zhou" (武周) or the "Southern Zhou Dynasty" (南周).

²³ For information regarding the conflicting historical representations of Wu Zetian, from an effective Buddhist leader to a mass murdering dictator, see N. Harry Rothschild, *Emperor Wu Zhao and her Pantheon of Devis, Divinities, and Dynastic Mothers*. (New York: Columbia University Press), 2015.

Emperor Xuanzong²⁴ was threatened by devastating locust plagues. The new emperor's prime minister Yao Chong²⁵ intervened against the battling Tang Confucian politicians and the Zhou-era's Buddhist spiritual leaders. During this time of turmoil and uncertainty, Yao Chong spoke against the widely accepted theory of the Daoist "Sense of Heaven."²⁶ Echoing the Shang Dynasty era perspective, this theory asserts that any changes in the world indicate a change in Heaven's attitude toward the nation's ruler. As N. Harry Rothschild notes, with "emperor" (*huáng*, 皇) and "locust" (*huáng*, 蝗) being homophones, this sociopolitical consternation grew into a potential revolution.²⁷

Prime Minister Yao engaged in rounds of debates where he used historical examples and scientific evidence to dissuade the politicians and commoners from the "Sense of Heaven" fear of locusts. He successfully intervened against viewing the locusts as indications of Heaven's displeasure with the newly crowned Emperor Xuanzong. Thus, Yao protected the new government's legitimacy, stabilized the nation, and prevented untold famine. This formidable thinker and politician's pivotal actions were codified in the *New Tang Chronicles*²⁸ and are still considered an example of patriotism and love of the people.

Ming Dynasty: Shaanxi Jiyi Temple Murals Show Battles with Razor-teethed Locusts

From the Tang era forward, Chinese culture adhered to this reversal from the ancient fearful and politicized view of locust plagues as sacrosanct messengers of Heaven's will. The Chinese government, agroscientists, and peasants actively began exterminating any signs of this pestilence. Before the Tang era's dramatic and nationalized reversal of opinions regarding locusts, the Han Dynasty²⁹ likely laid the foundations for this massive cultural shift. The researcher Jing Zhang explains this dynasty's macro- and micro-level control measures employed to quell

²⁴ 唐玄宗, (r. 712-56 CE)

²⁵ Yao Chong (姚崇, 651-721 CE)

²⁶ *Tianren ganying*, 天人感應

²⁷ N. Harry Rothschild, "Sovereignty, Virtue, and Disaster Management: Chief Minister Yao Chong's Proactive Handling of the Locust Plague of 715-16," *Environmental History* 17, no. 4 (2012): 783.

²⁸ "Historical biography Volume 137 Yao Cong," *New Book of Tang*, accessed June 16, 2022, <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&res=182378>.

²⁹ Han Dynasty, 汉朝, (206 BCE-220 CE)

locust plagues. Top-down measures included punishing corrupt officials who skirted locust-eradication policies. And bottom-up measures included tax reductions and exemptions to subjects who engaged in locust countermeasures.

In 1766, the Qing Dynasty faced a potentially devastating locust plague, which the government proactively addressed using a combined religious and political strategy. Maintaining the era's perspective on the locusts as pests, national and local religious officials led prayers and rituals imploring Heaven's assistance in eradicating the pestilence, where the locusts were viewed as negative but natural events. Simultaneously, nationwide campaigns organized peasants to kill the locusts while the government shifted food supplies from neighboring regions to prevent local starvation and rebellion.

From the Qing and Ming eras, the bureaucratic, centralized governments maintained highly developed agrosience records. Li Ming and Wang Yun detail the statistical records of the fertile Huaihe River Basin, which was prone to cyclical locust plagues in summer and autumn. The researchers cite that "In the Ming Dynasty, there were about 36 locust plagues in the Huaihe River Basin, which occurred once every 7.67 years on average; in the Qing Dynasty, there were about 35 locust plagues in the Huaihe River Basin, which occurred once every 7.65 years on average."³⁰

It is critical to note that the Ming-era agroscientist Xu Guangqi³¹ conducted scientific observations and experiments confirming that locusts developed from eggs, which furthered the biological perspective on locusts and supported their extermination. He also formally recognized the long-building theory that drought conditions perpetuated locust plagues. Ming's and Yun's article details the effectiveness of the Qing and Ming dynasties' nationalization policies to use government officials, extensive programs, and local citizens in the collective drive to prevent locust eggs from hatching and to eradicate any signs of a burgeoning plague.

During this era, the national perspective regarding locusts as biological scourges became accepted just as the central government became increasingly bureaucratic. Yongsoo Lee chronicles how each dynasty formalized laws that elevated locust extermination to a national priority and personal responsibility. The Song Dynasty established formal laws

³⁰ Li Ming and Wang Yun, "Research on the control measures of locust plague in the Huaihe River Basin during the Ming and Qing Dynasties," *Wanxi Xueyuanxuebao* 37, no. 4 (2021): 141.

³¹ Xu Guangqi (徐光启, 1562-1633 CE) was a mathematician, astronomer, agronomist, politician, and writer.

requiring locust hunting. In the Jin Dynasty,³² the government distributed illustrations throughout the kingdom's agricultural centers that detailed locust countermeasures. These science-based countermeasures included burying and burning the locusts, fertilizer application methods, soil turning, burning paddy levees, weeding methods, and planting wormwood.³³ Also, citizens were advised to use birds, frogs, and other insect-eating animals from their local food chains to manage the locusts and other pests. Many of these countermeasures still apply today and represent eco-friendly systems that emulate the *Tianrenheyi* worldview of humanity, nature, and the cosmos in an eco-socio-holistic system.

As noted above, the Ming Dynasty suffered repeated locust plagues, but they held a unified stance against the insects as pests to be intensely eradicated. Evidence of this attitude can be seen in the stunning murals in the Jiyi Temple, located in the abundant Shaanxi region, considered the birthplace of Chinese agriculture. Art historian Honglei Shi applied an agro-technical and folk culture approach to analyze the vibrant, three-dimensional murals in Jiyi Temple—the only one in China exclusively focused on farming and crops. The master painter Cheng Ru,³⁴ his sons, and his disciples completed the works in autumn 1507, with the vivid murals covering 130 square meters and depicting over four hundred gods, humans, and animals.

The murals emulate the Song and Yuan Dynasty³⁵ style of outlining the characters in strong black ink lines that are then painted with cinnabar, azurite, and other pigments to create a color palette focused on red, green, yellow, turquoise, white, and gold. The central frescoes of this temple concentrate on an image of Houji,³⁶ the main Chinese god of agriculture, who is surrounded by five other high-level deities. The meticulously designed murals display society from a hierarchical perspective, with images of civil and military officials, warrior maids, and pilgrimage groups. The murals extend beyond images of the temple world to depict quotidian views of market life, farm work, and forest hunts.

Directly related to this pestilence research, one mural includes a stunning image of two peasants struggling to carry a human-size, fearsome

³² Jin Dynasty, 金朝, (265-420 CE)

³³ Because locusts dislike the taste of wormwood, this plant serves as a natural deterrent.

³⁴ Cheng Ru, 城籍 (Ming Dynasty painter)

³⁵ Song Dynasty, 宋朝, (960-1279 CE); Yuan Dynasty, 元朝, (1279-1368 CE)

³⁶ The central agriculture deity Houji (后稷) has an extensive mythology associated with his identity and is most noted for teaching people crop cultivation. See <http://www.qulishi.com/renwu/houji/>

locust bound in knotted white rope.³⁷ In the mural, bystanders view the visceral drama as the two muscular peasants scowl at the locust that screeches from its fang-filled mouth. This imaginative rendition figures the monstrous locust's eyes dilated in fury with its long legs tapering into razor-sharp talons. In this mural of a crowd of pilgrimaging peasants, one pilgrim holds a small, bulbous container holding his catch of pests brought as a temple offering and demonstrating his participation in pest eradication. Behind him is another man holding a small mole cricket.³⁸ Another curious peasant holds a swatting, fan-like object and peers at the mole cricket pinched in the other man's fingers.

These pilgrims all bring their pest offerings to the temple gods to show their reverence and participation in the eradication campaigns. This subsection's research demonstrates the impacts of the Tang Dynasty's reversal of the Chinese perspective on locusts. Locusts were no longer revered or feared, as the successive dynasty leaders, officials, and subjects all worked to eliminate any hints of pestilence. This attitude is seen in the combined strategies to steer and educate the people through legal codes, agrosience, and religious art.

Qing Dynasty: 180,000 Pig Heads Honor Deity Liu MengJiang to Expel any Locusts

The visceral warrior perspective conveyed in the Jiyi Temple murals continues in the worship of the mythological General Liu Meng,³⁹ who represents one of the main locust-battling deities in Chinese culture. This celestial being has a bird's beak, wings, and claws; his lower body is fashioned in a bell shape. As an avian-warrior hybrid, he carries a banner to lure the locusts along with weapons, such as a mallet or sword, to thrash them. Viewed as an active helper of the people, this legendary general possesses a divine pesticide to exterminate the swarms. Connecting back to *Tianrenheyi*, this deity's attributes intersect with a sense of the sacred ecological harmony fostered through healthy bird populations balancing out insect ones.

³⁷ See the link for a high-quality color image of the entire mural with the locust image in the bottom right area:

<https://www.yuncheng.gov.cn/doc/2021/07/22/132880.shtml>

³⁸ Mole cricket (lougu, 蝼蛄), a devastating agricultural pest

³⁹ The Expelling Locust Deity Liu Mengjian (Quhuang Shen Liu Mengjian, 驱蝗神刘猛将)

Records indicate that worship of Liu Meng reached its height during the turn-of-the-century shift between the end of the Qing Dynasty and the incipient years of the Republic of China.⁴⁰ Festival and worship practices included religious ceremonies, agricultural trade, and social events focused on competitive horse parades and fierce boat races. *The Dianshizhai Pictorial*⁴¹ reported on the 1927 massive activities held at the border between Jiangsu and Zhejiang. In honor of Liu Meng, the Liansidang water competition drew in four to five thousand flat boats, eight hundred mast ships, and twenty-four steamships. Furthermore, the *Book Collection Town Chronicle*⁴² detailed the stunning 1947 Liu Meng festival, which cost 20,000 silver dollars. People sacrificed a reported 183,000 pig heads to implore Liu Meng to prevent any locust plagues from harming their upcoming harvests.

The April 1948 report cites that 500,000 people participated in the devout portion of the rituals and that the headdress of the central statue of Liu Meng cost six taels of gold.⁴³ Statues of the mythological Liu Meng portray him in his human form, often adorned with a gold crown, draped in a crimson cloak, and seated in front of a banner emblazoned with a swirling dragon. Since his statue is paraded through the crowds, his fêted icon is mounted on a palanquin. During the Mao Zedong era, the festival was halted. However, the festival was reinstated in the 1990s when it was declared an intangible cultural heritage. At present, many people in this region have returned to creating small red wooden altars dedicated to Liu Meng. They place these altars in their homes or on their boats and burn joss sticks and light candles as they request his interventions.

An ethnographic Sohu article chronicles the most recent major 2018 festival⁴⁴ held in honor of Liu Meng. The high festival includes intricate ritual steps to consecrate the Liu idol and hundreds of other ceremonies, performances, and sacrifices spread across many days and involving multiple villages. The Liu Meng festival has evolved into a significant religious, business, agricultural, and social event where the people pay respects to Liu Meng as a Bodhisattva figure and perform a play entitled

⁴⁰ This transition period includes the dissolution of the Qing Dynasty in 1912, rise of the Kuomintang government led by President Sun Yat-sen, rule under Mao Zedong, and continues into the present day.

⁴¹ *Dianshizhai huabao*, 點石齋畫報, (1884-1898 CE)

⁴² *Cangshu Zhen zhi*, 藏書鎮志

⁴³ The Chinese “tael” was standardized in 1959 at 50 grams. In 2022, six taels of gold would equal around \$60, which would be a proportionately large amount in 1948 China.

⁴⁴ This large-scale Liu Meng festival is held every seven years.

“Invite the old Bodhisattva to Watch the Play.”⁴⁵ The ethnographic study contends that the modern festival reminds people to be vigilant against locusts at all times, take preventative measures, be aware of natural disasters, and actively support the government’s agricultural actions. These values of a humanistic ecology demonstrate how the rituals dedicated to Liu Meng serve as a spiritual vehicle to disseminate practical agricultural messages among the people. Moreover, they indicate a cultural continuum from previous dynastic eras.

The 1958 “Great Sparrow Campaign” Causes Widespread Locust Plagues and Famine

While some might consider the Liu Meng festival merely a superstitious and social event, the 1950s and 60s disruption of its celebration served as a harbinger of disaster for the Chinese people. Let us take a step back to the turn of the century to understand the intersections among the interruption of the Liu Meng festival, the ensuing locust plagues, and China’s annihilating 1958-60 famines. With the 1911 collapse of the Qing Dynasty, China initiated a major shift in its sociopolitical terrain. In 1912, the nation declared itself a republic, with the first president Sun Yat-sen leading the Nationalist Kuomintang Party (KMT). During this political instability, the KMT leadership changed hands, warlords vied for power, and Mao Zedong gathered loyal supporters to establish his base in Yan’an. Globally, the following decades witnessed extreme violence, which China experienced in its first and second Sino-Japanese Wars, Japanese colonial occupation, and the post-liberation civil war between the KMT versus the Maoists. In 1949, Mao gained control of what he renamed the People’s Republic of China. Tragically, his leadership inducted one of the most turbulent industrialization processes in world history—a process where the ensuing sociopolitical tyranny and myopic hysteria links to this research on locust plagues.

Denoted in English as “The Great Famine,”⁴⁶ the human-made disaster that occurred in China from 1958 to 1960 is often euphemistically referred

⁴⁵ *Invite the Old Bodhisattva to Watch the Play* (*Qinglao Pusakanxi*, 请老菩萨看戏). It is culturally important to note that *pusa* (菩萨) means “Bodhisattva” as a Buddhist common deity term, which indicates a concept either retained during or reinstated after the Mao Communist era.

⁴⁶ Translated directly as: *dajihuang*, 大饥荒. Dates regarding the start and end of the famine vary between starting in 1958 and ending in 1960. Some estimate that the famine actually subsided in 1962.

to in China as the “Three Years of Great Difficulties.”⁴⁷ What is being elided in this euphemism? How does this mental block link to the social crisis that facilitated the famines? Mao’s political reign is noted for the rapid modernization of twentieth-century Chinese society via comprehensive cultural restructuring. As part of this deep restructuring, Mao promoted an initiative called the Great Leap Forward (GLF).⁴⁸ With an ecologically unsound focus on intense raw material resourcing and relentless factory production, the newly minted nation ravaged and poisoned the environment through rapid industrialization. This fast-tracked development included the production and use of highly toxic chemicals, such as phosphate fertilizers and DDT, among many others.

In conjunction with short-sighted agricultural practices, politicians announced another aspect of the GLF—the “Elimination of the Four Evils Movement.”⁴⁹ In the Ming Dynasty, this list might have featured locusts. However, the 1958 list targeted flies, mosquitoes, rats, and...sparrows. This devastating policy exemplifies the politicization of many Maoist programs. These initiatives often contradicted Chinese core values⁵⁰ to invest in the long-term over the short-term and to view actions from a holistic *Tianrenheyi* standpoint. During this era of extremes, sparrows were demonized for stealing grain from the proletariat, who reacted in a bird-eradicating frenzy to prove their dedication to Chairman Mao.⁵¹

Chinese Historian Frank Dikötter details the hysteria to kill the sparrows, with people “[b]anging on drums, clashing pots or beating gongs, [as] a giant din was raised to keep the sparrows flying till they were so exhausted that they simply dropped from the sky.”⁵² The people’s collective madness decimated the sparrow population, allowing the insect population—notably the locusts—to reproduce and feed unchecked. Many people likely engaged in these performative killings of sparrows to protect themselves and their families from political criticism, which could easily have deadly impacts during this volatile era.

Of course, the imbalance in China’s ecosystem caused by the sudden annihilation of the sparrow population and the unhindered procreation of the locusts presented as only one of the factors contributing to the stunning

⁴⁷ *Sannian kunanshiqi*, 三年困难时期

⁴⁸ *Dayuejin*, 大跃进

⁴⁹ *Chusihai yundong*, 除四害运动

⁵⁰ See <https://www.hofstede-insights.com/country/china/> for Chinese culture’s “long-term orientation” value system.

⁵¹ *Da maque yundong*, 打麻雀运动

⁵² Frank Dikötter, *Mao's Great Famine: The history of China's most devastating catastrophe, 1958-1962*, (Walker, 2010), 177.

perfect storm that facilitated the 1958-1960 famine. Thomas Bernstein details the four phases of the GLF that saw waves of violent radicalism, political infighting, large-scale farm mismanagement, insufficient focus on food production, and inaccurate harvest reports. These combined factors left the nation in a precarious state of food insecurity with constant barrages of unrealistic initiatives, making the lack of sparrows and the robust locust generation gasoline on a fire.

Dikötter details the agricultural reports available from this era, where the locust infestations contributed explicitly to a 15 percent reduction in Jingzhou's rice harvest, a 50 percent loss of the cotton yield in Yichang, and a severe decrease in Nanjing's vegetable production.⁵³ In Nanjing alone, the intense anti-sparrow campaign led to 60 percent of the fields being infested with locusts and other insects.⁵⁴ These statistics only offer a glimpse of the astounding tons of grain, produce, and essential agricultural products lost to this ecological nightmare. Although the closed nature of Mao's regime precludes accurate death tolls, Carl Riskin's comprehensive investigation offers a low, but generally accepted loss of over 30 million lives to this human-created catastrophe.⁵⁵

The Modern Writers Lao She and Mo Yan Use Locusts as Sociopolitical Criticism

Although Mao's political campaigns may have reformed classist, feudal norms, irrational programs such as the Great Sparrow Campaign abounded throughout this increasingly tyrannical era that culminated in the notorious Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). The Chinese author Lao She's⁵⁶ work and life history disturbingly intersect with this paper's research regarding the appearance of the locust in Chinese history and their politicized associations. Lao She, who held Marxist Maoist views, was highly respected in the early years of the twentieth century. His writings protested Japanese aggression, and he headed the All China League of Resistance Writers.⁵⁷ While previous subsections investigated oracle bones, agricultural records, and historical annals, Lao She's seminal use of

⁵³ Dikötter, *Mao's Great Famine*, 177.

⁵⁴ Dikötter, *Mao's Great Famine*, 177.

⁵⁵ See Carl Riskin, "Seven Questions About the Chinese Famine of 1959-61," *China Economic Review-Greenwich* 9, no. 2 (1998): 111-24.

⁵⁶ Lao She (1899-1966, 老舍) is the pen name of Shu Qingchun (舒庆春).

⁵⁷ Zhonghua quanguo wenyijie kangdi xiehui, 中华全国文艺界抗敌协会

“locusts” as a social metaphor presents for investigation a piece of modernist literature.

In his 1939 novel *Rickshaw Boy*,⁵⁸ Lao She uses a locust parable to criticize social hypocrisy and expresses anxieties regarding capitalism dehumanizing Chinese laborers into machines or beasts of burden. *Rickshaw Boy* offers deceptively nuanced perspectives on Chinese society in the tensions between the selfishness that can come with individualism, especially derived from capitalist and Western value systems. This negative is contrasted with the positive integrity that can come with individual self-awareness. The polysemous narrative also questions the mob mentality of collective cultures, especially in how groupthink can perpetuate both passive acceptance and frenzied violence. These negatives are contrasted with the positives of the unified strengths of group harmony.

In the novel, Beiping⁵⁹ brims with greedy masses of people who are correlated to swarming, mindless locusts. After the hapless, well-intentioned protagonist Xiangzi's dreams have been trampled by thieving warlord gangs, an extortionist police detective, and his manipulative wife, he reunites with one of the only redeeming characters he has encountered—the old man, who leaves him with the haunting locust parable. In exasperation at Xiangzi's naivete, the old man relates his disconcerting wisdom: “I now know that for poor, hardworking people there's nothing more difficult than making it on their own. How far can a man alone leap? You've seen grasshoppers, haven't you? Left alone, one of them can hop great distances. But if a child catches it and ties it with a string, it can't even move. Yet a swarm of them can consume an entire crop in no time and no one can do a thing about it.”⁶⁰

The destitute man describes the soul-crushing death of his grandson. The old man's virtuous life produced no karmic rewards; no one donated money to purchase life-saving medicines for the child; and the beloved grandson died in his arms. The devastated Xiangzi ruminates over the penetrating messages regarding the futility of kindness juxtaposed with the impossibility of independence. The grasshopper can leap far when alone,

⁵⁸ The novel *Rickshaw Boy* (*Luotuo Xiangzi*, 骆驼祥子) has also been translated under the title *Camel Xiangzi*, in reference to the title character.

⁵⁹ “Peking” (北京) was renamed “Beiping” (北平) to denote the capital from 1928-1949. Throughout the novel, Lao She intones this city's corrupt selfishness belies the false peace inferred in this renaming.

⁶⁰ Lao She. *Rickshaw Boy*. Trans. Evan King. (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1945), 214.

but its innate skills are easily overpowered. However, a surge of these free pests can decimate a harvest while the people helplessly stand by. Xiangzi contemplates every twisting interpretation of this old man's wisdom. He succumbs to this cynical, dog-eat-dog worldview and retracts from benevolent acts to descend into idolatry, theft, promiscuity, and gambling.

Concerning *Rickshaw Boy's* locust parable, Thomas Moran considers Chinese culture's difficulties in addressing "individuality." Moran writes about the collective culture's continuous struggle "to reconcile the need for individual liberation with the duty for patriotic self-sacrifice."⁶¹ This conundrum relates to the complicated reality of living out an enlightened *Tianrenheyi* philosophy in a society that swarms with selfishness and passivity. On the eve of the Cultural Revolution, the author Lao She was already suffering public recriminations and struggle sessions.⁶² In August 1966, he committed suicide by drowning himself. This tragedy superimposes this artist's unheeded social commentary with the demise of the innocent sparrows who were also extinguished by the senseless masses.

With the 1976 death of Chairman Mao, the cult of Mao subsided as the new government in 1979 initiated the socioeconomic path of "One Nation, Two Systems."⁶³ Under this autocratic capitalist system, the totalitarian horrors of the "ten-year disaster"⁶⁴ were given a controlled period for "limited public ventilation" and then silenced in "one of those noiseless bans done through internal control; investigation, discussion, and publication have been variously forbidden, discouraged, or marginalized. Over time, the topic...faded away as though it all happened quite naturally."⁶⁵ As China's economy skyrocketed under President Deng Xiaoping's slogan "to reform and open up,"⁶⁶ horrors such as the Great Famine and the Cultural Revolution became coded in euphemistic language that facilitated social amnesia and politicized silence.

⁶¹ Thomas Moran, "The Reluctant Nihilism of Lao She's *Rickshaw*". In *The Columbia Companion to Modern Chinese Literature*, edited by Kirk A. Denton (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 213.

⁶² "Struggle sessions" (pidou, 批斗) refer to public rallies of varying sizes and degrees of mob hysteria where targeted individuals were subjected to a de facto trial rife with public humiliation and physical violence that often devolved into coerced self-recriminations.

⁶³ Yiguo liangzhi, 一国两制

⁶⁴ Shinian zaihai, 十年灾害

⁶⁵ Jianying Zha, "Introduction". In *The Cowshed: Memories of the Chinese Cultural Revolution*, by Ji, Xianlin. Trans. by Chenxin Jiang. (New York Review Books, 2016), xiv.

⁶⁶ *Gaigekaiifang*, 改革开放

Of course, despite the dangers of government retribution, many citizens refused to remain silent about these human rights abuses and their ongoing incarnations. These dissenters express a New Materialism call for intergenerational justice. At the same time, freedom of expression opened in some ways. Lao She's censored novel *Rickshaw Boy* was finally republished in its original content, including its scatological sections, in 1982. This marker occurred one decade before the 1993 publication of Mo Yan's⁶⁷ divisive story collection entitled *The Herbivorous Family*⁶⁸ (1993), which includes the scatology-infused novella *The Plagues of Red Locusts* (*Locusts*). This chapter offers a final example of the Chinese interaction with locusts in this Nobel Prize-winning author's postmodernist novella.

The magically real novella *Locusts* intersects time and space, locust superstitions and modern science, and ecological harmony and dire pollution. It includes locust descriptions that visualize the Jiri temple murals, intergenerational relationships with the deity General Liu Meng, and sociopolitical allegories that shift away from a *Tianrenheiyi* humanist ecology to a parodic posthuman perspective. In *Locusts*, the polemical author designs a grotesque realist parody of *Tianrenheiyi* where he denies a harmonious anthropocosmic system. Mo Yan cynically and sacrilegiously presents existence as a primordial swamp filled with chaos and insanity that is only superficially moderated by hypocritical social decorum and delusional narratives of progress.

Who is the author Mo Yan? In his Nobel Lecture, Mo Yan detailed his childhood in rural Gaomi Northeast Township. Working as a cattle and sheep herder, he listened closely to native tales, which cultivated his skills as a "marketplace storyteller."⁶⁹ Mo Yan delightedly acknowledges P'u Sung-Ling's 1680 *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* as a major inspiration for his work.⁷⁰ From these supernatural tales, Mo Yan embraces the blurring of boundaries between reality and fiction, the quotidian and fantastic. He combines these ideas with folk tales and oral narratives of living animals and people, anthropomorphic and mythological

⁶⁷ Mo Yan, 莫言, (1955-). Note: Throughout this section, Mo Yan is referred to by his full name as it is not a first and last name, but a pen name with a holistic, interpretive meaning translated as "Don't speak."

⁶⁸ *The Herbivorous Family*, *Shicao jiazhu*, 食草家族. This title can also be translated as *The Grass-eating Clan*.

⁶⁹ Mo Yan, "Mo Yan Nobel Lecture". Accessed June 1, 2022. <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2012/yan/lecture/>.

⁷⁰ P'u Sung-Ling (蒲松齡, 1640-1715); *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* (*Liaozhai zhiyi*, 聊齋誌異)

creatures, and ghosts and deities. However, for all of Mo Yan's nostalgia for the peasant life, *Locusts* presents the narrator's alienation from his hometown of Gaomi. The fictional Gaomi is a place filled with peasant family members whom the narrator investigates for hypocrisy, embezzlement, and murder. In his writing, Mo Yan denies the Communist idealizations of the sublimely perfect peasant. He simultaneously uses his crude folk writing style to deny the intelligentsia's condescending attitude towards peasants and to expose their snobby views based on moral hierarchies.

In the novella, the locusts represent literally everything and everyone. The Great Leader, commoners, and the entire Chinese population are equated to locusts. When the narrator looks at a professor's son, he notes how the babbling child looks like a locust with his "big head and a small body, with a staring stare, and a turbulent mouth with green water."⁷¹ Mo Yan takes the locusts to a full allegorical level when he overlaps a massive train of locusts into a dragon bridge that represents the Chinese population. "The locusts don't seem to be crawling, but flowing, like a tide rushing to the beach, wow-a batch, tens of thousands... Wow—another batch, tens of thousands of tens of thousands of tens of thousands, my dear mother!... A long dragon of locusts rolled slowly towards the embankment." Noting the inevitable connection with the massive Chinese populace, Ngai states that "the mammoth and disorderly parade of the locusts could be an oblique allusion to the huge population of China."⁷²

Mo Yan employs locust symbols to degrade and combine the locusts, peasants, and city folk into a "grotesque realism" where nothing and no one is sacred.⁷³ For example, the hypersexualized Fourth Uncle salivates over a busty poster of the revered Communist opera heroine Li Tienmei. During a central locust-expelling ceremony, Mo Yan presents a ridiculous scene as all the villagers come together in the temple. They sweat and pray as they are horrifically covered head to toe in locusts that they are superstitiously afraid to swat away. In this uncanny world, military bugle blasts register as flatulence. Moreover, people invert the common Chinese salutation of "Eaten yet?" to "Shit yet?" Ngai notes Mo Yan's uses the same style as "folk culture, [where] the grotesque and lower parts of the body are not only exaggerated but extolled, thus upsetting the accepted association between somatic and tomography and the hierarchy of moral

⁷¹ Mo Yan, *The Plagues of Red Locusts*. In *The Herbivorous Family*. Shanghai Literature and Art Publishing House, 2012, 37.

⁷² Mo Yan, *The Plagues of Red Locusts*, 21.

⁷³ Ling Tun Ngai, "Anal Anarchy: A Reading of Mo Yan's 'The Plagues of Red Locusts'" *Modern Chinese Literature* no. 10.1-2 (1998): 10.