

# Rewriting History

A Comparative Analysis of Mo Yan's *Big Breasts and Wide Hips* and  
García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*

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S1688219

MASTER'S THESIS

COMPARATIVE LITERATURE AND LITERARY THEORY

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AUGUST 2016

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Table of Contents	1
<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>1. ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF HISTORY</b>	<b>9</b>
1.1 History, Progress and “Homogeneous Empty Time”	11
1.2 Challenging the Notion of “Progress”	12
1.3 Bringing the “Barbarism” to Light	17
<b>2. WRITING WOMEN INTO HISTORY</b>	<b>21</b>
2.1 Úrsula	21
2.2 Mother	25
2.2.1 The Oppressive History of Women	26
2.2.2 Foregrounding Women’s Historical Experience	30
<b>3. HISTORIOGRAPHIC METAFICTION: BLURRING THE LINE BETWEEN HISTORY AND FICTION</b>	<b>36</b>
3.1 History, Text, Producer	36
3.2 Problematizing the Inscription of Subjectivity into History	41
3.3 Replacing Official History (?)	48
<b>CONCLUSION</b>	<b>51</b>
<b>WORKS CITED</b>	<b>54</b>

## INTRODUCTION

My thesis concentrates on two novels, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) by the Colombian author Gabriel García Márquez and *Big Breasts and Wide Hips* (1996) by the Chinese author Mo Yan. I attempt to compare the ways in which García Márquez and Mo Yan rewrite history by a close examination of the two novels mentioned above. Moreover, I aim to explore the significance of their attempts to rewrite history.

*One Hundred Years of Solitude*, widely beloved and acclaimed throughout the world, tells a story of seven generations of the Buendía family in the town of Macondo established by the patriarch José Arcadio Buendía. Initially, Macondo is an isolated, autonomous and peaceful town. However, once the matriarch Úrsula finds a route to put it in contact with the outside world, an authority is sent by the central Conservative government to control the town. Then the Civil War between the Conservatives and the Liberals follows. After the War, Macondo is exploited and destroyed by the American banana company. This wave of destruction reaches a peak during a strike when three thousand workers are slaughtered by the army of the government. Afterwards, Macondo falls into decline and is ultimately swept away by a hurricane.

*Big Breasts and Wide Hips* tells the story of an ordinary Chinese peasant family, the Shangguan family, in Northeast Gaomi Township covering nearly the whole twentieth century. The protagonist, Mother, born in 1900, has nine children, eight daughters and a son, but none of them are fathered by her husband, who is sterile. The novel opens on the eve of the Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945), when Mother gives birth to her eighth daughter and her only son, Jintong, who functions as the first-person narrator, the main narrator of the novel. Jintong, who is spoiled and ineffectual, stands in stark contrast to his indestructible mother and forceful elder sisters. He recounts the history of his family during the Sino-Japanese War, the Civil War (1945-1949), the Great Leap Forward (1958-1960), the Great Famine (1959-1961), the Cultural Revolution

(1966-1976) and the new period (from 1978 onward) of China. Most of Mother's descendants perish in the wars or the political unrest, but Mother, an indestructible woman, dies in 1995 in the care of her only son.

Before continuing to present my strategy for my comparative analysis of these two novels which constitutes the body of this thesis, I want to introduce my topic. It is necessary to highlight the importance of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* in China. During the Cultural Revolution, many well-known writers were persecuted to death, and only a few writers of farmer or worker background could have had their works published and used as propaganda tools, which is tantamount to saying that Chinese literary creation ceased to exist. Later, thanks to the Chinese Economic Reform and the Opening-up policy (starting from 1978), young writers were endowed with more freedom. Although they were desperate to find their own paths of creation and innovation, their lack of imagination caused by the long-lasting political pressure was their biggest obstacle. Furthermore, since they came to realize the disparities in every aspect between China and the developed countries at the early stage of Reform and Opening-up, they could not get rid of their feelings of inferiority. Thus, at that moment, they were in a predicament striving for solutions.

Meanwhile, a highly diverse body of literary works from the outside world was introduced to China and got translated. The relations between China and Western developed countries were still very delicate, while China and Latin America were "brothers", in the words of Mao, both belonging to the Third World. (I am referring to Mao's Three Worlds Theory (1974). Mao included the US and the Soviet Union in the First World; Japan, Europe, and Canada composed the Second World; Africa, Latin America, and the whole of Asia except Japan formed the Third World). Hence, the particular political situation in China at the time facilitated the introduction and translation of Latin American literary works rather than those from the first and second Worlds, which contributed to the fact that Latin American literature could be spread on a large scale in China.

The works of García Márquez have also been gradually translated and published in China. Coincidentally, when fragments of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* were about to be published in *World Literature* magazine, the news that García Márquez won the Nobel Prize was announced and was disseminated instantly to China. García Márquez's achievement constituted an incentive and an encouragement for the anxious young Chinese writers because it first and foremost enabled them to see their own hopes for Third World literature acknowledged. A Chinese critic, Li Jiefei, describes the importance of García Márquez in this way: "as a matter of fact, there has never been a more influential Nobel Prize winner than García Márquez who could have drawn such enduring and extensive attention (from the Chinese literary circles)" (cul-studies.com).

The earliest edition of the complete translation of *One Hundred Years* was published by Shanghai Translation Publishing House in 1984. It is necessary to emphasize that among all the foreign literary works that have been introduced in China, this particular one had the greatest impact on Chinese literary activities during the 80s. Perhaps it can be said that García Márquez influenced Chinese writers mainly through this book. "At that time, copies of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* would be found on the desks of almost all Chinese writers" (cul-studies.com), according to Li Jiefei. Its influence is historically unique.

García Márquez's success acted as a catalyst for the development of Chinese literature in the new period (from 1978 onward), and *One Hundred Years* inspired the writers of the generation 80s to extricate themselves from the predicament. Nowadays, this group of writers has become the backbone force of Chinese literary circles. Without exaggeration, the development of Chinese literature would have been totally different without the idolized García Márquez.

*Big Breasts and Wide Hips* by Mo Yan, one of those emerging writers in the 80s, resonant with *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, attracts my attention particularly. It is important to note that Mo Yan himself acknowledges García Márquez's immense influence on his own writing. According to him, *One Hundred Years* encouraged him to throw off the shackles of convention and he even

says that he has been “struggling” with this master to get rid of his influence for twenty years (ifeng.com). The most notable correspondence between *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and *Big Breasts and Wide Hips* is that they both represent a history of one hundred years through a multi-generational story of a family, that of the Buendías and that of the Shangguan. In regard to *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, it is obvious that it is a representation of the history of the whole twentieth century of China. In the case of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, because of its references to historical events, for example the War of A Thousand Days, I regard it as a representation of Colombian history approximately from 1850s to 1950s (and I will further explain this in the first chapter). García Márquez himself, in one of a series of interviews published as *El Olor de la Guayaba (The Fragrance of Guava)*, says that the history of the Buendías could be viewed as a version of the history of Latin America as well.

More interestingly, García Márquez further mentions:

the history of Latin America is also a sum of excessive and worthless efforts and of dramas condemned to be forgotten beforehand. The plague of forgetting also exists among us. As time has passed, no one knows for sure about the massacre of the workers of the Banana Company...<sup>1</sup> (Mendoza and García Márquez 94)

This quote suggests that “the history of Latin America” that García Márquez talks about is not the conventional idea of history, the official history. Instead the “history” that he talks about is “a sum of excessive and worthless efforts and of dramas” that were doomed to be forgotten the moment that they happened and indeed have been forgotten in the present, as García Márquez emphasizes: “no one knows for sure about the massacre of the workers of the Banana Company”. And since he says that the history of the Buendías presented in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*

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<sup>1</sup> The original text is: “la historia de América Latina es también una suma de esfuerzos desmesurados e inútiles y de dramas condenados de antemano al olvido. La peste del olvido existe también entre nosotros. Pasado el tiempo, nadie reconoce por cierta la masacre de los trabajadores de la compañía bananera...” All translations of the texts from *El Olor de la Guayaba* by Plinio Apuleyo Mendoza and Gabriel García Márquez are made by me.

could be regarded as a version of the history of Latin America, it is implied that the “history” in the novel is the “history” of the “forgotten”. And thus his novel can be deemed an attempt “to restore history and memory in the face of the distortions of the ‘history of forgetting’ (Thiher, qtd. in Hutcheon 129)”. Meanwhile, the history of the forgotten is a history of the common people, the anonymous, the Buendías, instead of the victors or the famous. Therefore, it is a subversive rewriting of Latin American, or in my opinion, specifically Colombian history. Furthermore, this rewriting problematizes the conventional conception of history. History is supposedly used to enshrine the past. However, the rewriting which is used to restore history “in the face of the distortions of the ‘history of forgetting’” suggests that the received versions of history in fact silence or exclude the “efforts” and “dramas” and thus, from my point of view, the novel itself might be an attempt of García Márquez to challenge the conventional notion of history and I notice a critical stance on history in the novel.

While delivering the speech “*My Big Breasts and Wide Hips*” in Colombia University in 2000, Mo Yan talked about his view on “history”. “In *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*...through the narration of the fate of the family and the depiction of Northeast Gaomi Township, the fictional world, I express my view on history. I believe that the histories written by the novelists are histories recounted from a minjian (民间, roughly ‘local’ and ‘unofficial’)” point of view...This (the history recounted in *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*) is a history imbued with my personality but not the history from the textbooks...If a writer only pays attention to the political and economic history, [he or she] will inevitably slip off the right track. What the writers should be concerned with are the fates and experiences of human beings...<sup>2</sup>” These fragments of Mo Yan’s speech indicate that *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, written from a different point of view, is a subversive rewriting of Chinese history. Also, rather than paying attention to the “political and economic history”, Mo Yan rewrite a history

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<sup>2</sup> The translations of the fragments from the speech of Mo Yan, “*My Big Breasts and Wide Hips*” are my own.

about the fates of “human beings”, common people, the Shangguan family, just like García Márquez. Furthermore, it is implied that his attempt to rewrite history is a new conceptualization of history, his “view on history”, and thus the conventional conception may also be challenged in this novel.

Starting from the way how *One Hundred Years* resonates with Mo Yan’s novel, I aim at presenting a comparative analysis. In my opinion, by means of a comparison, I may be able to reflect on how a piece of literature, namely *One Hundred Years* takes on new meaning once it crosses the border from one country into another. Meanwhile, I may also discover how such new meaning, developed by Mo Yan through his novel is capable of shedding light on history in the context of China.

The similarities between these two novels, to be more precise, the fact that they could be regarded as subversive rewritings of official versions of Chinese and Colombian history of one hundred years and they may be intended to problematize the traditional conception of history constitutes the ground for my thesis. I aim to compare how these two novels rewrite history. I also hope to explore whether such rewritings could challenge the legitimation of received historical knowledge and even the conventional conception of history, in a word, to consider the significance of their attempts to rewrite history.

According to Walter Benjamin, the received historiographic conventions encourage historians to represent the story line of inevitable and incessant achievement of progress within “a homogeneous, empty time” (Benjamin, “On the Concept of History” 395). Continuous narrative and the progressive view of history indeed seem to be the observed characteristics of written history. However, in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, I notice certain attempts to negate the linear progressive narrative. Thus, in the first chapter, I intend to analyze such attempts and discuss what goals these two novels might achieve with the conception of history based on the scheme of progression within “a homogeneous, empty time” negated.



It is a well-received fact that women are absented from history while in these two novels, women are enabled to have a part in the represented histories. Thus, in the second chapter, I aim to discuss how these two novels write women into history.

In the final chapter, drawing on Linda Hutcheon's generic theory about historiographic metafiction, I aim to argue that both of the novels are examples of historiographic metafiction which underline the fact that both history and fiction are human and linguistic constructs and question the possibility of narrating historical actualities.

## CHAPTER I

### ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF HISTORY

With its references to historical events, I perceive García Márquez's novel as a representation of one hundred years of Colombian history (approximately from 1850s to 1950s). The central event in the novel is the Civil War between the Liberals and the Conservatives that Colonel Aureliano fanatically participates in. The novel mentions that this war ends with "the Treaty of Neerlandia" (García Márquez and Rabassa 104), which most powerfully indicates that the fictional War is in fact a rewriting of one of the most important historical events of Colombia, the War of a Thousand Days (1899-1902). This was one of the three treaties that put an end to the war, and was signed on October 24, 1902 by the Liberal General Uribe Uribe in a banana plantation called Neerlandia (Martin 15).

The novel not only rewrites the War *per se*, but also offers a full panorama of the chaotic political situation due to the conflicts between the Liberals and the Conservatives. From 1848 to 1885, the Liberals held the national power. The Conservatives then gained the upper hand after the War of 1885. In the novel, Don Apolinar Moscote, an authority sent by the central government, orders all the houses in Macondo to be painted blue. When José Arcadio Buendía refuses to do so, the authority claims that he is armed. In my opinion, this is a representation of the first attempt of the Conservative government to tighten its grip on the local and even remote towns. Furthermore, the immediate cause of the War of a Thousand Days is that the ruling conservatives were accused of maintaining power through fraudulent elections, and this is also specified in the novel. In the elections of Macondo, factually the Liberal vote is almost the same in number as that of the Conservative, but Don Apolinar Moscote, the magistrate of Macondo, only leaves ten of the Liberal ballots in the box, which spurs Aureliano to join the Liberal Party and to fight the war. Later, it is mentioned that those fictional Liberal heroes perceive the "emptiness of the war" (158) and almost a whole chapter is dedicated to detailing how Colonel Aureliano puts an end to it. The "emptiness of

the war” might refer to the fact that this war severely devastated Colombia and the actual winner was neither of the two Parties, not to mention the ordinary people of Colombia, but the United States.

After the War, a banana company has been developed in Macondo, which might be a reference to the fact that the Boston-based United Fruit Company moved in to the Colombian Caribbean Region in 1905. The economic boom of the Banana Zone ended in 1928 with a general strike of the workers of the United Fruit Company who demanded for “more pay, a shorter working day and better conditions” (Martin 40) and a violent suppression by the army of the Conservative government. In the novel, both the general strike and the bloodshed have been represented. Then, a long and unstoppable decline of the Caribbean Region followed. The Great Depression is depicted as the rains that last for “four years, eleven months, and two days” (García Márquez and Rabassa 302) and the tragic sight of Macondo:

Macondo was in ruins. In the swampy streets there were the remains of furniture, animal skeletons covered with red lilies, the last memories of the hordes of newcomers who had fled Macondo as wildly as they had arrived. The houses that had been built with such haste during the banana fever had been abandoned. The banana company tore down its installations. All that remained of the former wired-in city were the ruins. (García Márquez and Rabassa 317)

Therefore, judging from the content of the novel, I regard García Márquez’s novel as a rewriting of Colombian history.

In *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, events of twentieth-century Chinese history have been mentioned in a more explicit way, compared to *One Hundred Years*. The protagonist, Mother, who was born in 1900 and was married to the Shangguan family at the age of seventeen, together with her children and grandchildren, has gone through the Sino-Japanese War, the Civil War between the Nationalists and the Communists, the Great Leap Forward, the Great Famine, the Cultural

Revolution, and the new period (from 1978 onward) of China. Most of her descendants perish in the waves of war or political unrest, but Mother, an indestructible woman, dies in 1995 in the care of her youngest son Jintong.

Both of the novels rewrite histories of one hundred years. However, in defiance of the official histories and perhaps the more standard historical fiction, the historical processes are not represented as stories of historical progress. Instead, the regression of society and human species have been depicted. In this chapter, drawing on Walter Benjamin's "On the Concept of History" and his "Paralipomena to 'On the Concept of History'", I analyze how these two novels challenge the conception of history based on the scheme of progression within the empty and homogeneous time. What I am arguing is that these two novels enable their readers to realize that the convention of historiography is not the only way to approach, understand and represent the past. Also, by means of literary re-creation or re-presentation, they highlight the fact that, the received versions of history narrated based on that scheme may be problematic and they encourage readers to rethink history in a more critical way.

### 1.1 History, Progress and "Homogeneous, Empty time" (Benjamin 395)

According to Walter Benjamin, on the basis of the received historiographic conventions ("historicism" (Benjamin, "On the Concept of History" 395)), historians are keen on representing the story line of inevitable and incessant achievement of progress within "a homogeneous, empty time" (395). Progress is deemed boundless and irresistible. The belief in progress gives "the 'eternal' image of the past" (396). And to recognize the past "the way it really was" (391), to "relive an era" (391), historians are advised to surrender all the historical knowledge about the later course of history. However, with such a conceit, historians inevitably empathize with the victor, to take the victor's story as the story of the era itself, and to benefit the current rulers.

## 1.2 Challenging the Notion of “Progress”

García Márquez’s novel astonishes its readers with a compelling ending. Melquíades’s parchments turn out to be one hundred years of history of the Buendías, written in an extraordinary way. “It was the history of the family, written by Melquíades, down to the most trivial details... Melquíades had not put events in the order of man’s conventional time, but had concentrated a century of daily episodes in such a way that they coexisted in one instant” (García Márquez and Rabassa 397-398).

Interestingly enough, in Melquíades’s parchments, fragments, “daily episodes” and even “the most trivial details” are privileged. Instead of being the narrative of stories “in the order of man’s conventional time”, namely “the homogeneous, empty time”, the parchments are revealed as a collage or a montage. All the elements of the past are incorporated in “the constellation of a single moment” (Benjamin, “Paralipomena to ‘On the Concept of History’” 403). To be more precise, those events are not described in a linear narrative form associated with the idea of progress, but are exhibited or displayed like images simultaneously. The history of the Buendías “breaks down into images not into stories” (Benjamin, qtd. in P. Steinberg 74). Furthermore, as the epigraph of the parchments mentions: “the last *is being* eaten by the ants” (García Márquez and Rabassa 396), history is eventually constructed in the form of a verbal montage in the present. Thus, the history of the Buendías manifested in the parchments completely deviates from “historicism”, especially the idea of historical progress and “the concept of its progression through a homogeneous, empty time” (Benjamin, “On the Concept of History” 395).

Most intriguingly of all, this ending implicitly suggests that, the manuscript of Melquíades, revealing even the smallest details of the daily life of the Buendías, is in fact the same text of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

As mentioned above, judging from the content of the novel, especially its explicit references to historical events, such as the War of a Thousand Days, *One Hundred Years* may be viewed as a

representation of Colombian history. García Márquez even mentions that it could be a version of Latin American history as well (Mendoza and García Márquez 94). Interestingly, if this version of Colombian or Latin American history is identical to the manuscript of *Melquíades*, then what García Márquez did is exactly what the “historical materialists” (Benjamin, “On the Concept of History” 396) should do.

As a matter of fact, this history still seems to be narrated based on the progressive flow of “homogeneous, empty time”. First of all, the title of the novel mentions a specific passage of time. Furthermore, it tells the story of Macondo from the time when “the world was so recent that many things lacked names” (García Márquez and Rabassa 6) to the “biblical hurricane ” (399). However, certain attempts have been made to undermine such an illusion. For instance, different events or different temporalities are incorporated in sentences such as: “Many years later as he faced the firing squad, Colonel Aureliano Buendía was to remember that distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice” (García Márquez and Rabassa 6); “Years later on his deathbed Aureliano Segundo would remember the rainy afternoon in June when he went into the bedroom to meet his first son” (177). It is necessary to mention that plenty of similar sentences could be found in the text, which implies that this is not a random but deliberate gesture to make the novel depart from the notion of history as the linear progressive narrative.

Furthermore, it is a history, not of the government or official institutions, but of a people, mainly the Buendías. Like *Melquíades*’s parchments, instead of recounting the epic stories of the victors, the novel overwhelms its readers with “the most trivial details” of the lives of the Buendías, or in the words of Benjamin, “trash of history (daily life)” (Benjamin, qtd. in P. Steinberg 75). For instance, when García Márquez describes the house of the Buendías, he tells the readers that it has “a small, well-lighted living room, a dining room in the shape of a terrace with gaily colored flowers, two bedrooms, a courtyard with a gigantic chestnut tree, a well kept garden, and a corral where goats, pigs, and hens lived in peaceful communion” (13). Another remarkable example might

be the presentation of the products that Úrsula orders to decorate the new house: “the pianola... along with the Viennese furniture, the Bohemian crystal, the table service from the Indies Company, the tablecloths from Holland, and a rich variety of lamps and candlesticks, hangings and drapes” (62).

In reality, the attitude of García Márquez towards the faith in unlimited progress can also be noticed by means of the content of the novel. The belief in progress is closely connected with theme of the loss of memory. People in Macondo believe that they are moving through the progressive flow towards the future, which is represented by their repeated attempts to read the future in cards (García Márquez and Rabassa 29) and to strive for technological development. Instead of reflecting on the events of the past in relation to the present, they try to ignore and escape from the past, and even erase the traces of it. For example, José Arcadio Buendía and Úrsula found a new town because they want to avoid the ghost of Prudencio Aguilar. It is necessary to mention that, in this novel, the past is always represented by ghosts. Hence, in fact, they attempt to escape from a mistake made in the past. Colonel Aureliano Buendía, after twenty years of war and tiredness, busies “himself destroying all trace of his passage through the world” (García Márquez and Rabassa 170). Like the insomnia plague (García Márquez and Rabassa 41), the belief in progress gradually leads to the state of forgetting. Eventually the name of Colonel Aureliano and the fact that he has fought thirty-two civil wars sink into oblivion. Furthermore, due to the ignorance of the past, the Buendías repeat the mistakes of the preceding generations and have to suffer the consequences, such as the fact that the last Buendía was born with a pig tail. It seems that García Márquez intentionally mocks his characters’ belief in progress.

Therefore, the novel certainly challenges the notion of progress bound up with the “homogeneous, empty time”. To be more precise, the novel is intended to be a construction of history that is liberated itself from the conventional scheme.

In the case of Mo Yan's novel, the original Chinese version also seems to be linear enough, presenting the history of the Shangguan family from the Sino-Japanese War to the new period of China, though in the last chapter it turns back to relate Mother's childhood, her marriage and the births of her seven daughters (from 1900 to 1939). (It should be noted that in the English translation, the final chapter has been included as the second chapter). Nonetheless, like *One Hundred Years*, it also negates the linear progressive narrative, but in a different way. *Big Breasts and Wide Hips* is notable for its alternation of first- and third-person narration. The story begins with a third-person narration. However, a disruptive voice first appears in the second chapter of the original Chinese version (but the third chapter of the English translation). Jintong, the male protagonist of the novel, who was born during the Japanese attack mentioned in the first chapter, emerges as a first-person and in reality the main narrator. Generally, the majority of the novel (from the birth of Jintong, the Sino-Japanese War to 1980s) is first-person narration while the chapter dedicated to Mother's early life (from 1900 to 1939) and the life of the Shangguan family during the 1980s and the 1990s are mainly told by the third-person narrator. The first-person perspective in narrative diverges from the third-person omniscient narration that is adopted almost exclusively in historical narrative, both historiographic or fictive. Rather than giving the eternal image of the past and representing history as it really was, the first-person narrator enables the past to be viewed retrospectively within the frame of the present. In other words, the past and the present state of consciousness of the narrator are inextricably intertwined. The first-person narration already renders the linear progressive narrative impossible.

Jintong recounts the lives of his mother and his sisters with awe and admiration. Mother, the protagonist, risks her life constantly to save the lives of her children and grandchildren. During the Great Chinese Famine (1959-1961), Mother is recruited to turn the mill and grind the grains in the people's commune in order to supply flour to the workers of the Xiashan Reservoir project. To feed her little grandson and her eighth daughter, she swallows grains during work and throws them up at



home, regardless of the pain that this act causes her. Furthermore, her calmness, vitality and bravery are also well represented as she goes through the wars, the hunger and the difficult times of losing her children.

Jintong's eight elder sisters are all forceful and determined, and most of them, like Mother, are brave and willing to sacrifice themselves to save the lives of their family members. Thus Fourth sister, to feed her family during the Sino-Japanese War, prostitutes herself. Eighth Sister, commits suicide during the famine only to ease the burden on Mother, who turns her stomach into a "giant sack of food" (Mo and Goldblatt 440) as mentioned above. Seventh Sister, an "ultra-rightist" (Mo and Goldblatt 412), refuses to yield to political pressure. More dramatically, during the Great Leap Forward, "risking it all", she says: "if proletarian science...insists on crossbreeding sheep and rabbits in the hope of producing a new species of animal, then as far as I'm concerned, that so-called proletarian science is nothing more than a pile of dog shit!" (Mo and Goldblatt 412)

In the chapter dedicated to Mother's childhood, readers also find that the grandfather of Jintong, "a martial arts practitioner" (Mo and Goldblatt 47), is also a heroic character who fights against the German troops courageously in 1900.

Nevertheless, Jintong, with his "oedipal tendencies and impotence" (Goldblatt, "Introduction" xi), stands in stark contrast to his ancestors and his elder sisters. He refuses to be weaned at the age of seven and even attempts to commit suicide in response to his loss of Mother's breast milk. Though eventually he succeeds in switching to solid food, he cannot restrain the desire for breast milk, which is represented by his constant and ardent evocation of the primal pleasure of breastfeeding pervading the whole novel. He describes Mother's breast milk as "love", "poetry", "the highest realm of heaven and the rich soil under golden waves of wheat" (Mo and Goldblatt 299). During the 80s, because of his excessive obsession with breasts and milk, he has been sent to a mental institution. Besides his oedipal tendencies, certain events further underline the fact that Jintong is an ineffectual weakling. During the Cultural Revolution, rather than protecting his mother

from being beaten by the Red Guard Leader, Jintong falls to “his knees beside his mother” (Mo and Goldblatt 451). At that moment, Mother cannot help striking out at him: “stand up, my useless son! (451)”

The male protagonist, unlike those heroic and more engaged characters who perish in the waves of war or during the political unrest, survives and lives to tell the tale in the present. The “relentlessly unflattering portrait” (Goldblatt, “Introduction” xi) of Jintong seems to be intended to constitute a contrast to the vitality, bravery and power of the past heroes and heroines, the ancestors as well as the elder sisters of the male protagonist. The stark contrast between the past and the present unavoidably leads to the conclusion that instead of foregrounding the notion of boundless and irresistible progress of humankind itself, Mo Yan draws attention to “what he sees as a regression of the human species” (Goldblatt, “Introduction” xi) in *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*.

### 1.3 Bringing the “Barbarism” to Light

It is important to note that in *One Hundred Years*, the male Buendías believe in the fact that technological development is the driving force of the flow through which they are moving. For instance, the founder of Macondo, José Arcadio Buendía is enthusiastic about opening a way in order to get access to the great inventions. Once the founder finds it infeasible to put the town in contact with the outside world, he laments that without receiving the benefits of science, people in Macondo will see their lives rot away there and he even proposes to found a new town in a better place. It is implied that José Arcadio Buendía in fact equates the development of science with overall progress. Later, Aureliano Triste, the grandson of the founder, fulfills his grandfather’s dream by bringing in the railroad, which contributes to the accomplishment of Macondo’s modernization. Nonetheless, instead of enjoying the benefits of the trains or the electric bulbs, people in Macondo have to suffer the chaos, the violence and the degradation of moral values. A

retrogressive society which constitutes a stark contrast to the peaceful town in the past is depicted and shown to the readers. As the novel mentions,

on Sunday mornings there were scattered on the ground bodies that were sometimes those of happy drunkards and more often those of onlookers felled by shots, fists, knives, and bottles during the brawls. It was such a tumultuous and intemperate invasion that during the first days it was impossible to walk through the streets because of the furniture and trunks, and the noise of the carpentry of those who were building their houses in any vacant lot without asking anyone's permission, and the scandalous behavior of couples who hung their hammocks between the almond trees and made love under the netting in broad daylight and in view of everyone. (García Márquez and Rabassa 220)

Most importantly, the novel sheds light on the fact that the progress in natural science only endows the intruders, mainly those of the American banana company with immense power, “means” that have been “reserved for Divine Providence in former times” (García Márquez and Rabassa 219) to exclude and exploit the people in Macondo. Rather than integrating into Macondo, the “gringos” (219) build a “separate town” “surrounded by a metal fence topped with a band of electrified chicken wire” (219). Furthermore, they treat the workers of the company as animals, which directly gives rise to the great strike and the massacre. It is quite obviously that, instead of recognizing the technological development as historical progress, García Márquez gestured at the negative side of it. Like the “historical materialists”, he intends to bring the pain and sufferings of the exploited or the oppressed to light.

With the doctrines of historical progress bound up with the “homogeneous, empty time” abandoned, in *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, as in *One Hundred Years*, “barbarism” (Benjamin, “On the Concept of History” 392) is enabled to come to light. I take the “anti-foot binding proclamation” (Mo and Goldblatt 51) as an example. According to Chinese history, the traditional practice of foot

binding was officially prohibited in 1912 when the Qing dynasty fell and was replaced by a republic. The prohibition is certainly taken for a sign of historical progress towards gender equality in China. Also, it is important to note that at that time setting women's feet free and cutting men's long plaits were regarded as civilized acts to break with the feudal Qing dynasty. In other words, the official ban on foot binding could also be regarded as a political achievement, a symbol of victory as well.

Just like García Márquez, rather than celebrating the achievement of progress, Mo Yan sheds light on the barbarian side of the prohibition on foot-binding. Mother, at the age of seventeen, eventually possesses the "perfect lotus feet" (Mo and Goldblatt 49). However, the newly appointed magistrate of Gaomi personally goes down to the villages to promote the ban on foot binding. Ironically, it mentions that without any achievements in banning the smoking of and trade in opium, outlawing gambling and annihilating bandits, the magistrate could only attempt to promote the ban to earn prestige (50). As "Northeast Gaomi's number one golden lotus", Mother is ordered by the magistrate to "come up and bear witness to how disgusting bound feet can be" (Mo and Goldblatt 51). After shaming her, the magistrate even calls her "a freak incapable of manual labor" (52) in public. Since "the sons of well-to-do families...chase after girls...with big feet", Mother is deemed "a fallen phoenix", "which is worse than a common chicken" (53). Therefore, her aunt marries her off almost instantly to the son of a blacksmith and gets a mule in exchange. In this way, Mother begins her miserable life in the Shangguan family. Obviously, the ban on foot binding does not necessarily promise freedom and happiness. It also brings about new violence and suffering.

Nevertheless, by saying these two novels challenge or even undermine the belief in and the scheme of progress, I do not mean they are against development per se nor do I argue that these two texts are more real than history. These two novels seem to be intended to encourage the readers to take a more critical view of the received versions of history. Readers no longer see mere "cultural treasure", "technological development" or "progress towards gender equality". They could also

realize that the barbarism, in this analysis, the regression of the society in *One Hundred Years*, the new suffering of the women with lotus feet, are inevitably married with the achievement of progress.

In fact, written history not only silences the barbarism, but also excludes certain peoples, for example, women. In the next chapter, I aim to analyze how women, the marginalized, are written into history in both García Márquez's and Mo Yan's novels.

## CHAPTER II

### WRITING WOMEN INTO HISTORY

In the previous chapter, I have argued that both *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and *Big Breasts and Wide Hips* are intended to represent histories that are liberated from the conventional schema of progression within an “empty and homogeneous time”. According to Walter Benjamin, such a new conception of history would definitely threaten the strongest bastion of historicism: the empathy with the victors (“Paralipomena to ‘On the Concept of History’” 406) and he also argued that it was the task of the “historical materialists” to “brush history against the grain” (407), to recuperate and honor the memory of the anonymous, the oppressed peoples and classes.

It is a well received fact that written history is men’s history and women are always excluded from history and made to believe that they do not have a history. Just as the “historical materialists” in the words of Benjamin, both García Márquez and Mo Yan undertake the mission to write women into history.

#### 2.1 Úrsula

Machismo which results in immense gender inequality and a great degree of female subordination to men is a prevailing cultural phenomenon in Latin America until now.

A man’s perception of female roles is divided between two contexts: *la casa* (the home) and *la calle* (the street). Men practice a very efficient social and emotional division of labor: the official wife, to whom men refer as ‘the mother of my children’, provides respectability, raises a man’s children, provides him with domestic services, and receives the security of a public moral claim to his resources, whereas the ‘outside wife’ provides pleasure, sexual variety, excitement, and companionship (Hirsch, qtd. in web.stanford.edu).

Therefore, in the context of Latin America, women are perceived and treated as objects for the satisfaction of men's desire. The commonality of the Latin American women is "in the eye, and the hand, and the power, of the beholder" (Haslanger 226). They have been forced to be either the mothers of the children, trapped in the house or the outside wives. Thus in a Machista society, it would be an observed regularity that women are "object-like", submissive and voiceless. According to Haslanger's account, individuals who are aware of the gender differences and who look at the world in an objective way (namely inferring the natures of the objects from the observed regularities), will view the gender differences as natural and inevitable and aim to act accordingly (235).

In terms of gender differences, the representation of Macondo is seemingly faithful to the Latin American societies. There are indeed two types of women. Most of the women of the Buendías, trapped in the house, are responsible for the housework, taking care of the men, and nurturing the children, whereas women like Pilar Ternera, the seventeen virgins who are sent to the room of Colonel Aureliano, or the gypsy girl that the eldest son of the founder of Macondo encounters, function merely as sex objects, to provide sexual pleasure for the dominant males. Judging from their reactions to men's demands, it can be inferred that most of the women find it natural to provide services and be subordinate to the men.

In such a context, the acts of the female protagonist Úrsula Iguarán are extraordinary. As mentioned above, the differences between men and women in line with the corresponding norms of dominance and submission in Macondo are apparent. However, instead of viewing women as submissive, voiceless and weak by nature, Úrsula believes in the power of women and encourages them to express themselves. For example, when the founder, who is obsessed with striving for the technological development, aims to abandon Macondo and move to a new town, Úrsula, "with the secret and implacable labor of a small ant" (García Márquez and Rabassa 17), predisposes "the women of the village against the flightiness of their husbands" (17). It is compelling to find that in

fact the women achieve their goal since later it is mentioned that the founder is aware of the fact that “the men of the village would not back him up in his undertaking” (18). Later, even though José Arcadio Buendía is conscious of the fact that no other men in Macondo will back him up, he still insists that the Buendías should move to a better place for the reason that “a person does not belong to a place until there is someone dead under the ground” (18). Úrsula does not consent and replies with a soft firmness: “if I have to die for the rest of you to stay here, I will die” (18). The novel further mentions that José Arcadio Buendía has not expected that “his wife’s will was(is) so firm” (18). She refuses to submit to her husband in the interest of her whole family and most intriguingly of all, only then can the story of Macondo continue and this constitutes the first moment of the novel to show that Úrsula plays an important role in the historical process of the fictional world. Moreover, it is interesting to find the stark contrast between José Arcadio Buendía and Úrsula. The male character only entertains illusions whereas Úrsula is the one with both feet on the ground.

Rather than trapping herself in the house, she goes out and develops her own marvelous business of “candied little roosters and fish” (43) which contributes to the increase of the wealth of the Buendías. Úrsula, an independent and ambitious individual, becomes the breadwinner. Some might argue that in fact Úrsula is the mother, the nurturer all along and she indeed conforms to the proper gender role. First of all, when Úrsula is busy with her business, she leaves her grandson Arcadio and her daughter in the care of a Guajiro Indian woman and her brother, and she knows nothing about the fact that Arcadio and Amaranta come to speak the Guajiro language before Spanish and learn to drink lizard broth and eat spider eggs. This implies that Úrsula does not take nurturing the offsprings as her natural and inevitable responsibility. Furthermore, when she decides to raise a child, a descendant of the Buendías, she does it out of her will, her ambition, to “shape the virtuous man who would restore the prestige of the family, a man who would never have heard talk of war, fighting cocks, bad women, or wild undertakings” (184). Therefore, I believe the novel



demonstrates that there is still a difference between the one who bears and nurtures children out of the belief that it is natural and the one who does so out of her own will.

The influence of Úrsula is not only limited to her own family. She plays an important role in the community of Macondo. She is the first one who succeeds in finding the route to put Macondo in contact with the outside world, the route that her husband strives for but is unable to discover, which directly leads to the development and destruction of the town. For example, her discovery in fact directly results in the intrusions of “the first Arabs” (41) and later the Conservatives from the central government.

When Colonel Aureliano leaves for the Civil War between the Liberals and the Conservatives, he empowers his nephew Arcadio to be the Liberal leader in charge of the town. However, Arcadio becomes “the cruelest ruler” (105) that Macondo has ever known. Being aware of the tyrannical behavior of Arcadio, Úrsula whips him without mercy and chases him to the back of the courtyard, where Arcadio curls up like a snail in its shell (106). Most surprisingly, “from that time on she was the one who ruled in the town. She reestablished Sunday masses, suspended the use of red armbands, and abrogated the harebrained decrees” (106). Furthermore, when Colonel Aureliano decides to execute “the Conservative general José Raquel Moncada, the mayor of Macondo since the end of the war” (144), Úrsula not only goes to the court-martial to object to the sentence, but also brings all of the mothers of the revolutionary officers who live in Macondo to testify and praise the virtues of General Moncada. In fact, she has already taken up the dominant role and has the power to influence the acts and the decisions of the male characters. She believes that she is a powerful and rational agent capable of freely making decisions and she proves it by virtue of her own acts.

What is so interesting about this character is that even though Úrsula is completely different from the stereotypical women in this context, she is not depicted as the dehumanized other, but the backbone force of the family and Macondo. Her importance is also represented by her vitality and

longevity. After the banana massacre, Macondo falls into decline, “a decline signalled by Úrsula herself” (Martin 300) as she is finally dying. According to García Márquez, “...she should have been dead before the Civil War when she was almost one hundred years old. But I found that if she had been dead, the book would be ruined” (Mendoza and García Márquez 98), which suggests that Úrsula is the heart and soul of the book itself.

By giving the examples of Úrsula’s deeds and García Márquez’s words, there are two points that I aim to illustrate. First, through the representation of Úrsula, García Márquez foregrounds the role of women in the historical process and by writing women into history, García Márquez presents a novel that can be deemed as a subversive rewriting of Colombian history. Second, it is interesting to find that the reason why Úrsula can play such a significant role in the historical process is exactly that being independent and powerful, she is exceptional, different from other women in the fictional world. She achieves economic independence and has her own voice in her family as well as the political and social realms. What I am trying to say is that, I perceive the representation of Úrsula as an attempt of García Márquez to push his female protagonist onto stage as a new character, to devise a model of femininity that transgresses everything normally thought of as feminine in the context of Colombia and to justify his own construction of the new image of woman by giving it historical roots. I can see not only a new history, but also a new vision of femininity in García Márquez’s novel.

## 2.2 Mother

As the title of the novel implies, Mo Yan’s novel is first and foremost about women. Regarding how Mo Yan writes women into history, I would like to divide my discussion into two parts. In the first part, I aim to focus on the last chapter of the original Chinese version (the second chapter of the English translation) devoted to Mother’s childhood, her marriage and the birth of her seven daughters, and fragments of the first chapter describing her delivery of Jintong and his twin

sister. In other words, I concentrate on the personal, rather than national events mentioned in the novel. In this part, on the basis of Mo Yan's speech "*My Big Breasts and Wide Hips*", I intend to argue that Mo Yan brings the agonizing memory of traditional Chinese women, the oppression and suffering that have never been included in official history to light in this literary work. He constructs a history of women's oppression. Then, taking the episode dedicated to the depiction of the Cultural Revolution of China as an example, I try to discuss how Mo Yan represents specific historical movements or periods of a nation by foregrounding the experience of a woman, Mother, and thus recreates a national history from which women are not absented, a subversive version of Chinese history.

### 2.2.1 The Oppressive History of Women

The dedication of the book: "*To the spirit of my mother*" (Mo and Goldblatt) shows that Mo Yan aims to devote the novel to his own mother. Also, his speech "*My Big Breasts and Wide Hips*" delivered in 2000 in Columbia University suggests that the creation of the protagonist of the novel, Mother (Lu Xuan'er) is based on the real life of his mother. As far as I am concerned, the representation of Mother (especially the description of her early life) in the book is not only an attempt of Mo Yan to honor the memory of his own mother, but also an effort to present a history of oppression towards Chinese women.

In the speech mentioned above, Mo Yan says that his mother's feet were bound by her aunt at the age of four. Furthermore, in the words of Mo Yan, "...everybody present knows that Chinese women once had a bitter history of foot-binding, but you do not necessarily know how cruel the procedure is...Certainly...except my mother, there were thousands of women who had suffered this kind of torture..." (Mo "*My Big Breasts and Wide Hips*", *Book.people.com.cn*). Perhaps this constitutes the reason why Mo Yan describes the procedure by which Xuan'er's aunt binds her feet and the pain that Xuan'er experiences as explicitly as possible:

Her aunt fetched some bamboo strips, a wooden mallet, and some heavy white cloth...First she bent the toes back with bamboo strips and wrapped them tightly, wrenching loud squeals of protest from her niece. Then she wrapped the feet tightly with the alum-treated white cloth, one layer after another. Once that was done, she pounded the toes with her wooden mallet. Mother said the pain was like banging her head against the wall. (Mo and Goldblatt 48-49)

As mentioned in the previous chapter, once women with tiny feet are no longer regarded as beauties, but “freaks”, Xuan’er’s aunt immediately marries her off to the feckless son of a blacksmith. The conversation between Mother’s aunt and Shangguan Lü, her future mother-in-law, ironically suggests that Mother is treated as a commodity. Mother’s aunt says, “either the mule or two acres of arable land. Raising the girl for seventeen years has to be worth something” (Mo and Goldblatt 53). As Shangguan Lü agrees that Mother’s aunt can have the mule, the deal is struck “with a clap of the hands” (Mo and Goldblatt 53). Without considering Mother’s will, her aunt sells her off instantly. Although the act of Xuan’er’s aunt may seem ridiculous, it was a common phenomenon in Chinese countryside in times past. According to Mo Yan, his own mother had the same experience. In compliance with her aunt’s will, at the age of fifteen, she was married off to Mo Yan’s father who was fourteen at that time.

Mo Yan further mentions that many Chinese women, including his own mother had been plagued with the problem of producing children. “It was a common idea that women’s deliveries of offsprings were more or less the same as that of cats or dogs” (Mo “*My Big Breasts and Wide Hips*”), which implies that women in China were indeed treated as animals or even merely instruments to produce children in the past. Moreover, “because of the frequent deliveries of offsprings, women...were eaten up with diseases. When I was little, walking through the streets at night, I could hear that women in every family groaned with pain. When they were at their thirties, they had already lost their fertility” (Mo “*My Big Breasts and Wide Hips*”). In the novel, women’s

suffering caused by the issue of giving birth to children and continuing the family line has also been shed light on.

During the first three years of her marriage, Mother remains childless, which brings her endless torture, both physical and mental, caused by her mother-in-law and her husband. In fact, her husband is sterile but he is not aware of the truth. When Mother says to her husband: “nothing is wrong with me...Maybe it’s you” (Mo and Goldblatt 56), her husband flies into a rage and replies: “a hen can’t lay an egg, so she blames it on the rooster!” (56) In the novel, the ultimate value of women’s existence is their function of bearing (male) children. Indeed, it is part of a woman’s anatomy that she can bear children, but this does not mean that she ought to do it or that she deserves to be forced to do it. In reality, Mother has been reduced to an instrument, a thing, but not a person with humanity and subjectivity, and since she is regarded as a machine to produce children by nature, once failure occurs, she is the one to take the blame.

Later, she returns to her aunt’s home with “sadness...scars and bruises” (Mo and Goldblatt 57). However, instead of trying to protect her from being harmed again, her aunt justifies the ruthless behavior of the Shangguan family, as she says to Mother: “you know, you can’t blame your in-laws. Why does anyone take a wife? To continue the family line” (Mo and Goldblatt 57). When Mother’s aunt and uncle find out that it is her husband who is responsible for the couple’s childlessness, her aunt is furious about it and says: “the Shangguan family will pay for this... they’ve got a sterile mule of a son, and have no right to take out their frustrations on Xuan’er!” (58) Nevertheless, she only makes it “as far as the door” (58) of the Shangguan family, and eventually she forces her own husband, Xuan’er’s uncle, to “visit Xuan’er’s bed” (58), and Eldest Sister and Second Sister are fathered by him. However, rather than satisfying the Shangguan family, the fact that Mother has given birth to seven female children further angers them. After Mother’s delivery to Seventh Sister, her ferocious husband brands her on the inside of her thigh with “a pair of red-hot tongs” (Mo and Goldblatt 73). Women in this specific context are treated as things that exist by

nature for men's purposes, to "continue the family line" by giving birth to males, and failure to do so will lead to serious consequences. Worse still, even though Mother's aunt and uncle feel sorry about her terrible injury, they do not actually speak for her and fight for the justice; instead, in reality, they share the same perception of women, namely viewing women as tools, as objects and they help sustain the gender inequality.

Mother's delivery of Eighth Sister and Jintong coincides with the moment when the donkey of the Shangguan family is about to foal, which seems to be a deliberate gesture of Mo Yan intended to compare Mother to an animal and to emphasize the object-like status of Mother to a greater extent. In the eye of Shangguan Lü, the life of the donkey is more precious than that of Mother. She says to Mother: "you've been down this road before...Go ahead and have your baby...Your father-in-law and Laidi's daddy are in the barn tending to the black donkey. This will be her first foal, so I should be out there giving them a hand" and "I cannot stay with you" (Mo and Goldblatt 4). When Mother and the donkey both have difficult labour, Shangguan Lü first sends for the local veterinarian to attend to the donkey and only when Mother is about to die does Lü ask the veterinarian to help Mother out. She says: "that precious daughter-in-law of mine still hasn't had her baby. The best she can do is one leg...Can you come help out?...*People and animals aren't that different*" (Mo and Goldblatt 38).

The novel further reveals that, in such a context, women have been forced to victimize themselves. Mother is aware of the fact that for a woman, not getting married is not an option, not having children is not acceptable, and having only daughters is nothing to be proud of. Therefore, in order to be pregnant again and again and produce sons as she wishes, she gives her body to different men, an itinerant herb doctor, a monk, the Swedish Pastor and even a dog butcher who has harassed her sexually before. She says to the dog butcher: "I've brought some meat for you this time. Remember that time at the open-air opera when you touched me when no one was looking? Well, today you don't have to worry if anyone's looking or not" (Mo and Goldblatt 69), which is truly

pathetic. When she suffers rape by a peddler of ducklings, she gives “herself to the man without a struggle, feeling neither pain nor joy”, and her only hope is that “he [will] give her a son” (Mo and Goldblatt 62).

On the basis of his mother’s life experience, Mo Yan creates the protagonist Mother through which he expresses his sympathy towards his own mother as well as other Chinese women who had similar experiences. Through the ironic comparison between Mother and the donkey, I also notice Mo Yan’s spark outrage. Furthermore, by bringing the oppression of women that has never been touched upon in the history of the dominant culture to light and by casting Mother as a victim of gender inequality, the novel succeeds in arousing the sympathy in the readers. In critic John Updike’s view, “...one piece of pain that does linger in the mind comes when five-year-old Xuan’er’s feet are bound by her aunt” (*newyorker.com*). Also, I contend that the novel may also be intended to arouse the readers’ desire to right the wrongs. In my opinion, Mo Yan’s novel, a history of women’s oppression is represented from the perspective of the present and most importantly, for the present. Only when Chinese people, both men and women, come to realize women’s suffering in the past can they be aware of the importance of promoting gender equality in contemporary China. Also, contemporary Chinese women are indeed in need of historical motivations to fight for their own rights and protect their sisters (especially women living in the countryside) from being oppressed, used and harmed again. Thus it is imperative to recuperate the past of the oppression towards women, and to certain extend, Mo Yan succeeds in doing so.

### 2.2.2 Foregrounding Women’s Historical Experience

The Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) of China has been shed light on in *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*. Obviously, merely through an episode, the novel cannot provide a comprehensive view about this movement that lasted for a decade. What attracts my attention is that readers may be able to obtain a general idea about this social and political movement mainly through the experience of

Mother, the protagonist. In other words, the experience of Mother is exactly what matters in terms of representing history of a specific era.

The novel mentions that Mother has been a target of assault during the Cultural Revolution. At that time, former landlords, former capitalists, “intellectuals...and those with ties to the West or the former Nationalist government” (*nytimes.com*) or simply “*anyone* who *might* be seen as counter-revolutionary” (*Time.com*) would be persecuted. But the novel itself does not explain the reason why Mother has been deemed a target by the “Red Guards” in an explicit way. In my opinion, this sentence: “this elderly woman who had raised a houseful of daughters and was mother-in-law to many renowned young men flung down her dunce cap and hobbled toward the pond on bound feet” (Mo and Goldblatt 449) and the words written on Mother’s dunce cap: “Mother Scorpion<sup>3</sup>” (Mo and Goldblatt 445) might imply that the persecution is related to the social backgrounds of her daughters and sons-in-law. Since the husband of Second Sister, Sima Ku, initially the most powerful landlord of Northeast Gaomi Township, has been the leader of the “anti-Japanese commando battalion” (Mo and Goldblatt 203) linked to the Nationalists during the Sino-Japanese War and later has participated in the Civil War as a Nationalist, Mother may have been deemed as the one “with ties to the former Nationalist government” and to the landlord. Furthermore, the husband of Eldest Sister has been “a brigade leader in the Japanese Imperial Forces” (Mo and Goldblatt 183) and Eldest Sister, the leader’s “chief of staff” (Mo and Goldblatt 185), and thus, traitors to China. For these reasons, it is not surprising that such a mother would have gotten into trouble at that particular time. But readers who do not have certain background knowledge are still likely to get confused by the fact that all of a sudden, Mother, an ordinary woman from a peasant family, has been considered as a “class enemy” (Mo and Goldblatt 443) and

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<sup>3</sup> The novel itself does not explain the meaning of “Mother Scorpion”. There is a Chinese idiom “蛇 (snakes)蝎 (scorpions)心肠 (heart)” that is used to describe a person who has a heart as malicious as snakes and scorpions. Thus, I think that the “Scorpion” is also used by the “Red Guards” in the novel to describe the protagonist as a evil mother or it simply means that Mother is a malicious animal, but not a human being.



an “old-line historical counterrevolutionary” (Mo and Goldblatt 451). But as far as I am concerned, not giving an explicit explanation may be seen as a deliberate gesture of the author Mo Yan who simply aims to suggest that it is just unjustifiable and the Cultural Revolution per se is ridiculous.

The way in which the “Red Guards” humiliate Mother in public is described in detail in the novel. She has been forced to wear a tall dunce cap with the words “Mother Scorpion, Shangguan Lu” written on it and has been paraded in the street together with other “Ox-Demons and Snake-Spirits” (Mo and Goldblatt 446). “In Chinese mythology, these are evil spirits that can assume human forms to do mischief. Mao had first used this expression during the Anti-Rightist Campaign of 1957 to describe the intellectuals” (*Time.com*), and this expression was widely used to refer to the “class enemies” during the Cultural Revolution period. It simply implies that the “class enemies” were not “humans” but “evil spirits” and thus they deserved to be attacked, to be treated in a violent way. Interestingly, the novel seems to overtly emphasize that the real monsters are the “Red Guards” since it mentions that “two deep creases” that “ran from mouth to chin on the face of the revolutionary leader...gave him the appearance of a prehistoric reptile” (Mo and Goldblatt 451). It should also be noted that the act of forcing those who were condemned for political crimes to wear the dunce caps was extremely violent. According to Mao, “the crowning of evil gentry with dunce caps” was “a practice that strips them of ‘face’ so that they can no longer ‘be regarded as human’” (Anagnost 53) in his *Hunan Report*<sup>4</sup>. While talking about the Cultural Revolution, Xu Youyu, a Chinese scholar in philosophy, public intellectual and proponent of Chinese liberalism mentions: “Mao said in his *Hunan Report*: ‘the peasants who are angry, put dunce caps on the landlords and drag them to the street’...Mao went further saying, ‘whether you think such brutality is good or bad is the test of a true revolutionary’” (qtd. in *Mao’s Red Guards, the Guardian*). Therefore, what Mother has experienced is a reflection of the most common manner in which the

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<sup>4</sup> *Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan* (1927)

“Red Guards” persecuted the so-called “class enemies” during that particular period in response to the great director Mao’s words.

The most unforgettable moment regarding the depiction of the Cultural Revolution consists in the fact that Mother has been beaten up by the “Red Guard” leader. “He...walked up to Mother, and aimed a well-placed kick into her knee. ‘Kneel!’ he demanded. With a yelp of pain, Mother got down on her knees. He then grabbed her by the ear and demanded, ‘Get up!’ She’d barely gotten to her feet when he sent her to the ground again with another kick and stepped on her back” (Mo and Goldblatt 451). The Red Guard leader does not have to take any consequences for his brutality and what attracts my attention is that the novel seems to underline the fact that the Red Guard leader is actually given authority to take violent actions in a deliberate way. It is mentioned that “all his beatings were administered to give concrete meaning to the popular revolutionary slogan: ‘Knock all class enemies to the ground, then step on them<sup>5</sup>’” (Mo and Goldblatt 451). “Red Guards” were students who targeted the “class enemies” or the “counterrevolutionaries” for public humiliation and abuse in response to Mao’s call for continuing revolution. At that time, the *Little Red Book (Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-tung)* was widely distributed among those young revolutionaries and Mao’s quotations were fanatically chanted by them. For instance, “A revolution is not a dinner party, or writing an essay, or painting a picture, or doing embroidery; it cannot be so refined, so leisurely and gentle, so temperate, kind, courteous, restrained and magnanimous. A revolution is an insurrection, an act of violence by which one class overthrows another<sup>6</sup>” (*marxists.org*). This implies that Mao indeed legitimized all acts of brutality. Furthermore, in the documentary *Mao’s Red Guards*, it is mentioned that the *People’s Daily* (the most important newspaper group in China) praised the “Red Guards” and suggested that all the extreme acts of them were not to be criticized in an editorial at the peak of the Cultural Revolution.

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<sup>5</sup> It is also from Mao’s *Hunan Report*.

<sup>6</sup> It also comes from the *Hunan Report* and was contained in the *Little Red Book*. I quoted the English translation directly from the website *marxists.org*.

Therefore, Mother's harrowing experience as a target of persecution not only shows the acts of brutality of the "Red Guards", but also emphasizes the fact that the violent incidents were legitimized and it might also suggest that an individual could be persecuted for no reason. In a word, it offers a glimpse into the decade-long period of political and social chaos. Most importantly, by foregrounding the historical experience of a woman, Mo Yan recreates a national history in which women, conventionally excluded from history, have a part.

It is also interesting to find that this episode is also used to place an emphasis on the strength of women. While Mother is being paraded, someone jumps into the pond to commit suicide. Though "shouts of 'Save him!'" (Mo and Goldblatt 449) are heard all around, no one is actually willing to save the man. Being aware of this, Mother, who seems to forget that she is being paraded, castigates the crowd: "how can you people just stand there when a man's drowning?" (Mo and Goldblatt 449) and spares no efforts to save him. Her bravery constitutes a stark contrast to the cowardice of other people. However, since Mother has "flung down her dunce cap" (Mo and Goldblatt 449), she angers the Red Guard leader. Also, the leader considers the bravery deed of Mother to be an attempt "to divert the direction" (Mo and Goldblatt 451) of their struggle, which leads to the beatings mentioned above. Mother endures the pain without begging for mercy. In addition, it is equally compelling to find the contrast between Mother's bravery and strength and the impotence of her son, the male protagonist of the novel. Facing the brutality of the relentless "Red Guard" leader,

Jintong unclenched his fists, as if by instinct. His heart shudder, and he was about to ask Guo (the leader) what he thought he was doing when the young Red Guard raised his hand, and Jintong's question emerged instead as a wail: 'Mother...' He fell to his knees beside his mother, who raised her head with difficulty and glared at him. 'Stand up, my useless son!'" (Mo and Goldblatt 451).

In this chapter, my central argument is that both García Márquez and Mo Yan have the consciousness of writing women into history. I mainly focus on the representations of the most important female characters in both of the two novels, *Úrsula* and *Mother*. Through my analysis, I find that both García Márquez and Mo Yan recognize the power of women and attempt to emphasize it through their experiences in the historical process. But there is still a difference between *One Hundred Years* and *Big Breasts*. In the case of *One Hundred Years*, *Úrsula* is depicted as a heroine and she has a great impact on Macondo. To be more precise, her deeds indeed lead to significant historical changes and her deteriorating health is used to signal the decline of Macondo. But in *Big Breasts*, *Mother*, though powerful and courageous, is merely an ordinary Chinese woman who tries to survive the turbulent decades and protect her children. In other words, in my opinion, what Mo Yan intends to do is to represent the lives of the ordinary women, and to enable their pain and sorrow as well as the oppression that they have suffered to come to light. And the strength of *Mother* shown through her experience in the political unrest further suggests that women are not weak and object-like by nature, but rather they are powerful agents.

But again, it is necessary to mention that I am not trying to argue that these two literary works are more real than the received versions of history. What I have attempted to argue in the first two chapters is that these two novels, by presenting subversive versions of history (representations of the barbarism, histories in which women have a part), challenge the legitimation of official history.

As a matter of fact, they go a step further and shake the very foundation of historiography as historiographic metafiction, and this is the focus of my final chapter.

## CHAPTER III

### HISTORIOGRAPHIC METAFICTION: BLURRING THE LINE BETWEEN HISTORY AND FICTION

In the previous two chapters, I have tried to explain that by presenting history in an alternative way, these two novels reveal that the received versions of history inevitably silence the “anonymous toil” (Benjamin, “Paralipomena to ‘On the Concept of History’” 407), the barbarism and exclude oppressed peoples, for example women. As a matter of fact, they go a step further by questioning the possibility of narrating the historical actualities and whether historical “facts” (received historical knowledge) are indeed objective, neutral and impersonal through both their content and their genre as historiographic metafiction.

#### 3.1 History, Text, Producer

I begin my discussion with the banana massacre mentioned in *One Hundred Years*. Interestingly enough, the problem of how people get to know the past has already been touched upon within the content of the novel itself.

I posit that the banana massacre really did exist in the past in the fictional world. People in Macondo, who have not experienced the event by themselves, are offered two ways to get to know and make sense of this past event. They can believe in the official version, which is “repeated a thousand times and mangled out all over the country by every means of communication the government could find at hand” (García Márquez and Rabassa 297) and will be taken as the sure truth by the historians and inscribed in the schoolbooks (334) afterwards, or they can trust what the survivor José Arcadio Segundo says.

As expected, the majority of the inhabitants in Macondo accept the official version and take it as the ultimate truth. Ironically, the statement that “there were no dead, the satisfied workers had

gone back to their families” (334) completely departs from the historical actuality, which definitely mocks the conventional idea that official history is the only truth.

However, the fact that the official history is ironically revealed as a lie does not mean that the version of the survivor, who has experienced the event by himself, is favored or meant to be privileged. Regarding the number of dead in the massacre, José Arcadio Segundo tells a slightly different version every time he mentions the event. Right after surviving the massacre, José Arcadio Segundo says: “there must have been three thousand of them” (295). Later, he confirms: “there were more than three thousand of them”, and “I’m sure now that they were everybody who had been at the station” (301). Surprisingly, he even gives an exact number of the deaths the next time he mentions the event, “three thousand four hundred eight” (322) and such exactness of number makes his version even more questionable.

Furthermore, It is mentioned that Aureliano Babilonia believes in the words of the survivor. Intriguingly, when he retells what José Arcadio Segundo tells him, he could describe “with *precise* and *convincing* details how the army had machine-gunned more than three thousand workers penned up by the station and how they loaded the bodies onto a two-hundred-car train and threw them into the sea” (334). The novel does not mention whether Aureliano Babilonia’s retelling truly matches the original words of the survivor or not. In fact, when José Arcadio Segundo comes out of a coma after the massacre, he is already on the train, lying against dead people. Therefore, he could by no means have witnessed how the corpses are loaded onto the train. Furthermore, exact details like “a two-hundred-car train” paradoxically make this version even more questionable and unreal.

There might be three explanations. First of all, Aureliano Babilonia projects his subjective perception onto the description of this event, and what he says is the recreated version of what the survivor tells him. Second, it is José Arcadio Segundo who deliberately dramatizes the event and Aureliano Babilonia merely repeats what he says. Third, Aureliano Babilonia’s precise description is faithful to the survivor’s version, but José Arcadio Segundo does not exaggerate about his

experience intentionally. That José Arcadio Segundo does not take fright but experiences “a kind of hallucination” (292) during the massacre leads to my assumption that, perhaps, José Arcadio Segundo could not fully experience the event at that moment. Confronting the unexpectedness and horror of the massacre, he could not “place it within the schemes of prior knowledge” (Caruth 153), and thus the trauma “continually returns, in its exactness, at a later time” (Caruth 153). As mentioned in the novel, after the massacre, José Arcadio Segundo refuses to leave the house because he does not “want to see the train with two hundred cars loaded with dead people which left (leaves) Macondo every day at dusk on its way to the sea” (322). He seems to re-experience the trauma in its exactness every day. However, when the traumatic experience is transformed “into a narrative that allows the story to be verbalized and communicated, to be integrated into one's own, and others' knowledge of the past, [it] may lose both the precision and the force that characterizes traumatic recall” (Caruth 153). Thus, it is possible that José Arcadio Segundo tells different stories to different people. The capacity to integrate the trauma into narrative memory is also “the capacity to distort” (Caruth 154). In a word, the novel underlines the fact that neither the official history nor the memory of the survivor can refer to the brutal event of the past.

By showing two extremely different versions (or maybe three, if Aureliano Babilonia is supposed to recreate the survivor's version), the novel significantly reminds the readers of two facts. First of all, the past did exist, but people can only get to know it through texts, discourses, in this case, through the words of José Arcadio Segundo, the announcement of the government and the schoolbooks. Second, if the past can only be known in the form of texts, subjectivity is inevitably involved in the production of history. In other words, the novel enables its readers to realize the existence of the producers of history, the government and the survivor (or interpreter, Aureliano Babilonia). The past, which arrives in the form of text, has already been interpreted (or falsified

intentionally or distorted unconsciously) by the producers or/and invested with the national or personal interests.

Most intriguingly of all, instead of being a completely literary fabrication, the general strike of the workers of the United Fruit Company and the bloodshed did take place in the empirical world. It occurred on 6 December 1928 in the town of Ciénaga, Colombia (Martin 41). The similarity between the overall description of the event in the novel and the historical “fact” leads to my assumption that it is a recreation of history and obviously this is not the only historical event that has been re-presented in *One Hundred Years*. Certain historical data have been deliberately incorporated in the representation. For example, General Carlos Cortés Vargas, who was sent to end the strike by the Conservative President (Martin 40) in 1928, appears in Macondo (García Márquez and Rabassa 292). The fact that the crowd was first given five minutes to disperse and later one further minute (Martin 41) is identical to the description in the novel. Incorporating historical data into fiction is not something unconventional. What really attracts my attention is the fact that history is incorporated into a metafiction.

As mentioned above, the ending of the novel implicitly suggests that the manuscript of Melquíades coincides with the text of the novel itself. Thus it self-consciously draws attention to its own status as an artifact. However, paradoxically, it draws on historical “facts”, which are deemed objective and impersonal. Such kind of fiction is labeled as historiographic metafiction by Linda Hutcheon (1988). *One Hundred Years* asserts that both the novel itself and the historical “facts” are human, linguistic constructs, which further foregrounds the existence of the producers and undermines the objectivity of history.

The historical data incorporated in the novel are taken from the account of García Márquez’s grandfather (though he did not witness the event by himself), the memories of the “survivors and witnesses” , “newspaper archives and official documents” (García Márquez and Grossman, *Living to Tell the Tale* 28, 103). Obviously, the past only arrives in the form of texts or discourses and in



*One Hundred Years*, this has been made explicit since historical “facts” and prior literary texts “take on parallel status” (Hutcheon 124).

It is mentioned that together with José Arcadio Segundo, another union leader Lorenzo Gavilán also experiences the massacre. Lorenzo Gavilán is a character of the novel *The Death of Artemio Cruz* by Carlos Fuentes. It seems as if García Márquez wanted his readers to recognize the literary intertext as he further explained that Lorenzo Gavilán, a colonel in the Mexican revolution, “who said that he had been witness to the heroism of his comrade Artemio Cruz” (287), was exiled in Macondo. A fictional character of a prior literary work figures in another fiction in which historical data have also been incorporated. The parallel status of historical “facts” and literary intertexts further emphasizes the textuality of history. History, like literature, consists of texts that have no referents in the empirical world.

History is used, but at the same time abused in *One Hundred Years*. Although the overall description of the event is similar to the recorded “facts”, certain details of historical knowledge have been falsified. For instance, among the official records, and the memories of the survivors, the biggest discrepancy concerns the number of dead in the massacre (García Márquez and Grossman, *Living to Tell the Tale* 104). After the bloodshed, the authorities stated officially that “there were nine dead and three wounded” (Martin 42). The US representative in Bogotá said that “there were more than a thousand dead according to the Managing Director of the United Fruit Company” (Martin 42). General Cortés Vargas, who commanded the troops during the massacre, took responsibility for 47 casualties (Posada-Carbó 404). Though the statistics are still discussed and disputed to date (Martin 42), it is apparent that the exaggerated figure of three thousand dead is deliberately invented, in the words of García Márquez, to “preserve the epic proportions of the drama” (García Márquez and Grossman, *Living to Tell the Tale* 103) in *One Hundred Years*. By signaling “the difference at the heart of similarity” (Hutcheon 124) and falsifying the official records, on the one hand, the novel asserts the existence of the producer and reveals his capacity to

appropriate history and also to distort it. On the other hand, it may also “foreground the possible mnemonic failures of recorded history and the constant potential for both deliberate and inadvertent error” (Hutcheon 114). Furthermore, the fact that history as a body of texts has been appropriated, reinterpreted and even intentionally falsified in the fiction further underlines the limitation of history as narrative.

By underlining the textual nature of history and the subjectivity involved in historiography, *One Hundred Years* in fact blurs the line between history and fiction while both its content and its form as historiographic metafiction undermine the belief in a supposedly objective and impersonal history.

### 3.2 Problematizing the Inscription of Subjectivity into History

Metafictionality has also been adopted in Mo Yan’s *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*. The first-person narrator, Jintong constantly explains the reasons why he chooses to talk about certain events but omits others. For example, he says: “there is no need to mention the sound of the artillery shells...There is no need to mention...the airships...I only talk about that coffin<sup>7</sup>” (Mo 200). Occasionally, it seems as if he were addressing the readers, as he says: “I feel the delight of being a mental defect. You can say whatever you want...the mental defect always talks nonsense, right?” (Mo 363) More interestingly, he seems to respond to or refute the third-person narrator. For instance, it is mentioned: “Jintong...had spent three years in a mental institution...A scar stood out on his forehead, and his glassy eyes showed the depth of his mental defect...All Jintong did was beg, ‘Please don’t shock me...no shock...I’m a mental defect...’” (Mo and Goldblatt 507). Nonetheless, the voice of Jintong interrupts: “I don’t deny that I am a mental defect, but I only go

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<sup>7</sup> According to Howard Goldblatt, the translator, “the current translation was undertaken from a further shortened, computer-generated manuscript supplied by the author. Some changes and rearrangements were effected during the translation and editing process...” Since parts of Mo Yan’s novel have not been translated into English, I have to use both the original Chinese version and the English translation by Howard Goldblatt in the analysis. All the translations of the texts from the original Chinese version are my own.

insane while facing the breasts of women. For the rest of the time, I pretend to be a mental defect” (Mo 363). Thus, the first-person narrator himself asserts his subjectivity.

Just like *One Hundred Years, Big Breasts* also situates itself within the historical world and lays claim to being based on history. Certain historical data have been incorporated as intertexts in the fiction, for example, the propaganda slogan during the Cultural Revolution: “Attack attack attack all class enemies! Carry out the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution!” (Mo and Goldblatt 443) Furthermore, the representative popular culture of specific historical periods has also been inserted as intertext, for instance, the “Women’s Liberation Anthem” (Mo and Goldblatt 342), a popular song during the 1950s and 1960s in China. Metafictionality, fictional and historical narrative are combined in *Big Breasts*, and therefore, it can also be regarded as an example of historiographic metafiction which underlines the nature of both fiction and history as human and textual constructs. In addition, compared to *One Hundred Years*, the first-person narrator shows the existence of the producer of history in a more explicit way. Meanwhile, the attempt that the first-person narrator makes to explain the reason why he has to emphasize some events but ignore others reveals that the selectivity is inevitably involved in the process of producing history.

*Big Breasts* opens in the manner of historical fiction. With an indifferent tone, the third-person omniscient narrator tells the readers that the plot is set in “the largest village of Northeast Gaomi Township, Dalan” (Mo 31), a place that truly exists. The fictional world “Northeast Gaomi Township” generally refers to the northeast of Gaomi, a county-level city of eastern Shandong province in China, and Mo Yan, the Chinese author was born in the village Dalan. Furthermore, it makes a reference to history in a deliberate and explicit way. It mentions that “on the morning of the fifth day of the fifth lunar month, 1939...Japanese horse soldiers were trampling the corpses of guerrillas fighters” (Mo and Goldblatt 42). Jintong was born during the attack mentioned in the first chapter and he takes over as narrator in the second chapter (but the third chapter in the English translation) and tells the tale from the perspective of the present. Despite the fact that the strong

narrative voice of Jintong pervades the majority of the novel, the beginning of the novel already implies that it is not only an autobiographical memoir, but also the history of a nation. In this sense, the subjectivity of Jintong is overtly asserted since he is not only responsible for the narration of the life of his family, but also for reciting the history of twentieth-century China.

However, historiographic metafiction also problematizes the inscription of the subjectivity into history.

As I have mentioned, the voice of Jintong replaces that of the third-person narrator in the second chapter (of the original Chinese version) and the information that he gives about the experience of he himself (about what he has seen, what he has heard as a new born baby) is incredibly precise and comprehensive. For instance, the first impressive moment of his narration consists in the fact that he tells the readers the breast milk of his mother tastes exactly like “dates, rock candy, and preserved eggs” (Mo and Goldblatt 78). Later, Jintong describes in detail the outward appearance of Sima Ting, the head of the town, who has walked into the yard of Jintong’s house to pick up the corpses of the husband and the father-in-law of Mother. “Sima Ting, looking like a dried-out gourd...He had a nose like a strawberry, deep black eyes that kept rolling in their sockets, the eyes of a little boy. His aging stooped shoulders gave him the look of a candle guttering in the wind, but his hands were fair and plump” (Mo and Goldblatt 78). Jintong gets to know the surroundings of the town when his family, he himself (held by Mother) and other villagers are on their way to the cemetery to bury the dead. Equally, he tells what he has seen to the readers as explicitly as possible:

And so it went, us following the horse cart, crying from time to time, past the church, with its collapsed bell tower, and the flour mill...Then we passed the podium on the drying floor of the Sima compound...Finally, the cart turned left, following the Black Water River, and drove into a field that extended all the way to the marshland...” (Mo and Goldblatt 82)

Such precision and exactness raise a question to the readers. Without any references to the sources of information, can his recall of the events that happened when he was still a new born baby be trustworthy? As far as I am concerned, the incredibly detailed and precise description paradoxically shows that the narrator is unreliable.

The incorporation of the fantastic elements that constitutes one of the most important characteristics of *Big Breasts* cancels out the impression of a realist representation of history and questions the accuracy of the memory of the first-person narrator to a greater extent. I take Jintong's narration about the bloody Civil War between the Communists and the Nationalists as an example.

It is quite intriguing that Jintong first mentions a supernatural event that happens the night before the bloody fight that he witnesses and survives. And he deliberately compares it with the fighting scene. Jintong begins to tell his experience with these compelling words:

what happened during this night is as light as a feather, compared to the things that happened the next day, but this feather is unforgettable with its mysterious color. There is no need to mention the sound of the artillery shells, because there would be much more the next day; There is no need to mention...the airships, because I could see them more clearly the next day. I only talk about that coffin. (Mo 200)

Jintong claims to be haunted by a ghost that comes out of the coffin during that night. It is surprising that almost two pages have been dedicated to the description of the appearance of the ghost. With ferocious features, snowy white and razor-sharp teeth, and hands like talons of eagles with long nails, the ghost chases after Jintong incessantly. And Jintong thinks that she threatens to eat his heart and suck all the blood out of him. After getting rid of her, on his way back home, Jintong's legs are wet with the blood flowing on the street, and groups of blood-sucking spiders, as big as piglets, are crawling around. Filled with human blood, the spiders cannot even drag themselves through the blood river. And the spider silk, wrapped by the thick blood, winds around

the lower legs of Jintong and makes them transform into two giant candy flosses. In my opinion, this is the most horrifying scene throughout the whole novel<sup>8</sup>.

Jintong's description with excessive use of metaphors of what he sees in the battlefield the next day is no less unreal than his experience with the ghost and the blood-sucking spiders. He compares the airships to "winged calves" (Mo and Goldblatt 317), and "volleys of black artillery shells" to "flocks of crows", "little black pigs", and "big black panthers, tigers, wild boars" (Mo and Goldblatt 318). He can even see that "the goggled men behind the glass" of the airship smiles at him "like an old friend" and more airships come and drop "great flatcakes and meat-filled buns, as well as bundles of colorful paper money" (Mo and Goldblatt 320). He also mentions that they (he himself and his family) react "calmly" (Mo and Goldblatt 319) to the fight, as if "unafraid" (319). Readers may also notice his uncertainty about what he has witnessed: "from high up in the sky, they dropped their eggs, creating holes in the landscape. And then?" (319)

In my opinion, confronting the unexpectedness and horror of the fight, he reacts "calmly" because in fact he cannot place it "within the schemes of prior knowledge" and cannot make it become a "matter of intelligence" (Caruth 153). In other words, this exceedingly shocking event cannot be fully "experienced" in the past, which also explains his "uncertainty" about this event. However, the traumatic experience will continually return, in another forms, at a later time. According to Freud, memory sets in belatedly (and indirectly) after the traumatization in the form of a repetition compulsion in which the traumatized (unconsciously) acts out his lost memory (qtd. in Kerler 87), and this "acting out" can manifest itself in dreams, flashbacks and hallucinations (qtd. in Kerler 87). Therefore, I think that both Jintong's terrifying experience and the seemingly unreal battle scene may be regarded as this "acting out" of the traumatization in the form of hallucinations. And the narrator seems to overtly emphasize the supernatural event as he describes it in a surprisingly detailed way, which may suggest that the traumatic experience hauntingly rises to the

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<sup>8</sup> It is necessary to mention that the whole supernatural event has been omitted in the English translation,

surface and disturbs him like the ghost. Perhaps because of the fact that the hallucinations constantly disrupt the continuity of his recollection, what Jintong recites are in fact fragments that cannot be incorporated in “the chain of history” (Benjamin, “Paralipomena to ‘On the Concept of History’” 403). The fact that the narrator suffers from hallucinations from time to time further problematizes the inscription of his subjectivity into history.

Instead of being the origin, the generator of historical knowledge, as the traditional narrators, the historians, Jintong needs to get to know the event in the past that he has never experienced personally through discourses. For instance, in “a class education exhibit” (Mo and Goldblatt 357), when the teacher talks about the history of Northeast Gaomi Townships, she mentions one of the “monstrous crimes of the Landlord Restitution Corps (groups of landed individuals who went over to Nationalist-controlled areas after the Sino-Japanese War when their land was redistributed by the Communists)”. According to her, during the Civil War between the Communists and the Nationalists, under the leadership of Sima Ku (initially the most powerful landlord in the Township),

the Landlord Restitution Corps engaged in frenzied class warfare, and in a matter of only ten days, using every imaginable cruel means at their disposal, killed 1388 people...the restitution corps bandits...forced the revolutionary cadres and ordinary citizens to dig their own pits and bury each other...” (Mo and Goldblatt 361)

Also, in the exhibit, there is a drawing showing that “Sima Ku stood at the edge of the pit, directing the gangster members of the restitution corps as they tossed in dirt” (Mo and Goldblatt 361). Jintong has not experienced this event since he “was with Mother and revolutionary cadres and other activists on their retreat along the northeast coast” (Mo and Goldblatt 361). He reacts to what the teacher has said with a question, a question raised to himself as well as the readers: “Sima Ku, Sima Ku, was he really that cruel?” (Mo and Goldblatt 361) It is necessary to mention that, according to the narration of Jintong, Sima Ku is a courageous man and he is the only male

character that earns Mother's praise, and thus this question in fact suggests that Jintong finds it unbelievable that Sima Ku would have been that cruel.

Later, the teacher invites a survivor, "the elderly poor peasant...Mrs. Guo, to report her personal experiences"(Mo and Goldblatt 362). Surprisingly, Mrs. Guo says that Little Lion, a member of the Corps, has tried to bury her alive, indeed, but eventually the leader of the Corps, Sima Ku, saves her life. Mrs. Guo even praises the deed of Sima Ku: "You can say what you want, but Sima Ku is a reasonable man, and if not for him, that bastard Little Lion would have buried me alive" (Mo and Goldblatt 366).

Judging from the words of Jintong: "All those drawings, reeking of blood, had turned insipid, sort of like flatcakes that have soaked in liquid for days then laid out to dry. Compared to what we'd (the students present at the exhibit) heard from old woman Guo, whose personal experience had given her the voice of authority, the drawings and explanations had lost their appeal to our emotions" (Mo and Goldblatt 367), I believe that he is inclined to take the survivor's version as the truth, which is expected. However, all he affirms is personal. Meanwhile, due to the fact that he is an unreliable narrator, I cannot judge whether Sima Ku is indeed a great man by means of Jintong's memory. As a reader, what I can see are different voices, and the conventional conception of the supposedly impersonal historical "fact" lies nowhere in the novel.

By far, I have mentioned two points. First of all, the voice of Jintong is unreliable. I have explained this through his questionable memory about what he has experienced as a new born baby and a supernatural event. Also, his uncertainty about the past is revealed constantly in his narration. Second, unlike the traditional narrators with totalizing power of history, the main narrator in this novel is also searching for ways to make sense of the past, just like the readers. In a word, the issue of subjectivity has been put into question in *Big Breasts*.

More interestingly, the traditional unified identity or subjectivity of the protagonist is in fact fragmented in this novel. First of all, due to his oedipal tendencies and impotence, he is doomed to



hang himself “to death from a nipple” (Mo and Goldblatt 217) as his sixth sister says. Therefore, he can barely count as a proper subject. Moreover, fathered by the Swedish Pastor, Jintong, as a biracial, a “bastard” (Mo and Goldblatt 387), is constantly tormented by his identity. When he first looks into the mirror and gets his first good view of his features at the age of eighteen, he mentions that “frightful inferiority feelings gnawed at my (his) heart” (Mo and Goldblatt 386). He strives for subjective unity, for being a Chinese by dyeing his hair black and darkening his face. Since there is nothing to be done about the color of his eyes, he even says: “I’d have liked to gouge them out altogether” (Mo and Goldblatt 387).

Historiographic metafiction asserts but at the same time is capable of shattering “the unity of man’s being through which it was thought that he could extend his sovereignty to the events of the past” (Foucault, qtd. in Hutcheon 118). In *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, the pursuit of the subjective unity of Jintong is always frustrated and Jintong’s retelling further shows that the narrative and the historical unity seems impossible to be achieved. Therefore, the fact that Jintong’s reveries of the past are fragmentary and discontinuous, the unreliability of his recounting of the past, and the disunity of his subjectivity or identity reflect such a “shattering”. The conventional concept of an insistent, coherent and controlling narrator and its totalizing power of narrative and of history are subverted. At the same time it is implied that if history is constructed as non-contradictory continuity, then history is merely a distorted and beautified myth.

*One Hundred Years* and *Big Breasts* not only deny the legitimation of the received versions of history but also shake the very foundation of conventional historiography.

### 3.3 Replacing Official History (?)

If these two novels blur the line between fiction and history and shake the very foundation of historiography, then inevitably, another question follows: can they or will they replace the received historical knowledge? There is no doubt that they are not intended to replace authorized

versions of history due to their metafictionality. In the case of *Big Breasts*, because of the unreliability of the first-person narrator, readers will by no means be inclined to regard the novel as the historical truth. However, the case of *One Hundred Years* is much more complicated.

Researches show that the Colombians do have a tendency to believe that the description of the American banana company, the general strike and the massacre in the novel are faithful to historical actuality. In other words, the fiction of García Márquez has been taken as historical truth per se. And some of the historians even take García Márquez's fiction as a main historical source. For instance, in the section on the United Fruit Company of the book *Introducción a la Historia Económica de Colombia (Introduction to the Economic History of Colombia)*, the author Alvaro Tirado Mejía “quotes at length García Márquez's description of some of the circumstances surrounding the strike in Macondo. Yet this is a popular text, widely read by Colombian students in secondary schools” (Posada-Carbó 398).

A recent biography of García Márquez by Dalso Saldívar states that since the publication of the novel in 1967, ‘the majority of the Colombians began to talk about the three thousand deaths of the banana workers...’<sup>9</sup> (Posada-Carbó 399)

Moreover,

According to Germán Arciniegas, a leading figure who many would identify with the intellectual ‘establishment’ and the Academy of History of Colombia, Macondo is the point of reference for the interpretation of our history<sup>10</sup>. (Posada-Carbó 399)

In my opinion, there might be some explanations for the fact that *One Hundred Years*, as fiction, has been taken as official history in Colombia. García Márquez was influential in Colombia.

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<sup>9</sup> The original text is: “A recent biography of García Márquez by Dalso Saldívar states that since the publication of the novel in 1967, ‘la mayoría de los colombianos empezaría a hablar de los tres mil muertos de las bananeras...’” All the translations of the Spanish sentences, expressions and words of Posada-Carbó's text are my own.

<sup>10</sup> The original text is: “According to Germán Arciniegas, a leading figure who many would identify with the intellectual ‘establishment’ and the Academia de Historia de Colombia, ‘Macondo es punto de referencia para la interpretación de toda nuestra historia’”.

Posada-Carbó mentions that “though Colombians are not great readers, they are great readers of García Márquez’s works” (399) and García Márquez always encouraged a view that his work was a faithful reflection of reality. Furthermore, a third-person omniscient narration has been adopted in *One Hundred Years*, which causes it to be deemed real. Last but not least, from the discrepancies among the historical records about the general strike of the banana workers and its aftermath, it can be inferred that the history of Colombia is in a flux, and it is possible that Colombians do not actually have a fixed and clear idea of the past of their own country. Since *One Hundred Years*, with its realistic details, offers a concrete view of one of the most important historical events in Colombia, readers simply take it as the truth.

Following my discussion above, in my opinion, it is obvious that *One Hundred Years* challenges the very foundation of historiography and encourages the readers to enshrine and rethink the past from different perspectives. I assume that the intention of García Márquez might be to attack any authoritative voices or the supposedly sure and objective official history and to lead the readers to take up a more critical stance vis à vis Colombian history. Therefore, the fact that “*One Hundred Years of Solitude* contains today’s ‘official version’ of the developments in the banana zone in the 1920s” (Posada-Carbó 399) in fact goes against García Márquez’s will and paradoxically makes the fiction lose its ultimate value. Thus, in my opinion, not only official history, but also fiction should be treated by its readers, literary critics and also historians in a more critical way.

## CONCLUSION

“The one duty we owe to history is to rewrite it” (Oscar Wilde qtd. in Hutcheon).

In this thesis, I have sought to compare the ways that Mo Yan and García Márquez rewrite history in *Big Breasts and Wide Hips* and *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. But the most important questions are: Why is it important and meaningful to rewrite history? What impact do they have on their readers regarding the way they understand history generally? How do they influence readers of China and Colombia or even Latin America respectively?

In the first chapter, I have analyzed how these two novels deviate from conventional linear progressive narrative through different ways. In *One Hundred Years*, I have noted that the astonishing ending with the history of the Buendías constructed in the form of “constellation” in the present and García Márquez’s particular handling of temporalities are the most important ways to challenge the notion of “progress” bound up with an “empty and homogenous time”. In the case of *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, since the first-person narrator enables the past to be viewed retrospectively within the framework of the present, the present state of consciousness and the past are inextricably intertwined, which could be seen as a sign of the outright denial of the traditional temporal logic, the linear irreversible time. Furthermore, the adoption of the first-person narrator echoes what Mo Yan says in his speech “My *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*”. As he mentions, while writing history, what “the writers should be concerned with are the fates and experiences of human beings”. Moreover, the present state of consciousness of the first-person narrator constitutes a stark contrast to the past heroic deeds of his ancestors, his elder sisters, and thus readers find a regression of human species, in defiance of the conventional view of inevitable development of human beings and human societies.

In fact, the linear progressive history is a history of the achievement of progress of the victors, the famous, the celebrities, which inevitably silences and excludes the barbarism and oppressed peoples and classes. However, with the conventional temporal logic and the view of

progressive history abandoned, both *One Hundred Years* and *Big Breasts and Wide Hips* enable their readers to view history from another angle, to rethink the received versions of history that have long been taken for granted as the truth.

In the second chapter, I have argued that both Mo Yan and García Márquez write women into history and place emphasis on their strength and thus present subversive versions of Chinese and Colombian history in their novels. However, there is still a difference. Úrsula is depicted as a heroine whose acts indeed lead to historical changes in the fictional world, while Mother, though brave and powerful, is merely an ordinary woman who survives the turbulent decades. While García Márquez seems to construct a new model of femininity by giving it historical motivations, Mo Yan aims to represent the life of an ordinary woman in the historical process. I consider it meaningful to (re)write or (re)create women's history, especially in the context of the countries where men dominate. For example, as I have mentioned, in a Machista society in Latin America, even until now, most of the people, both men and women, regard women as weak and submissive by nature. However, the history represented in García Márquez's novel, a history of a powerful heroine, might enable people in Latin America to be aware of the fact that women are not weak by nature and it might also encourage women in Latin America to realize that they could be as powerful as men. Furthermore, Mo Yan's novel which brings women's oppression to light may arouse its reader's sympathy and desire to right the wrongs and thus it is meaningful for the purpose of promoting gender equality in contemporary China.

In the first and the second chapter, what I have tried to argue is that by presenting subversive rewritings of the official versions of Chinese and Colombian history, these two novels deny the legitimation of received versions of history. Moreover, the attempts of Mo Yan and García Márquez to rewrite history can also be considered as a new conceptualization of history, which constitutes the main focus of my last chapter in this thesis.

Since *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and *Big Breasts and Wide Hips* self consciously draw attention to their own status as artifacts while paradoxically lay claim to being based on history, they are historiographic metafiction, a genre labeled by Linda Hutcheon. In the analysis, I have argued that both of the two novels underline the fact that both fiction and history are human and linguistic constructs. And *Big Breasts and Wide Hips* overtly questions the ability of an individual to make sense of and even reconstruct the past through memories. History is no longer an objective record of historical events as they were but is conceptualized as text imbued with personal or national interests. However, the fact that both of the novels blur the line between history and fiction does not mean that they deny the existence of the past events or simply destroy history, and in fact they are still based on history. As far as I am concerned, historiographic metafiction is intended to make the readers aware of the distinction between the past real and the historical “facts”, which are texts with no referents in the empirical world and to attack any authorial voices. In conclusion, the attempt of Mo Yan and García Márquez to rewrite history is an effort to encourage their readers to take a more critical stance on history.

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