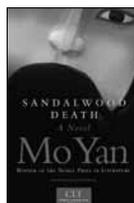


To Live Like a Warrior

By Peter Tieryas Liu

Book Review:

Sandalwood Death, by Mo Yan.
University of Oklahoma Press, 2012.



“Twenty years ago, as I set out on the road to becoming a writer, two disparate sounds kept reappearing in my consciousness,” writes Nobel Laureate Mo Yan in his author’s note to *Sandalwood Death*. Set to the backdrop of the Boxer Rebellion, the sounds from the Maoqiang Opera (a popular form of opera in Gaomi County) and the resonant boom of a newly built railway weave the rhythmic tapestry of *Sandalwood Death*. The structure is bookended by first-person soliloquies from the main characters that each present their back stories and motivations. Sun Bing, leader of the local operatic troupe, leads a revolt against the Germans after they kill his wife and children. His daughter, Meiniang, and her ambitiously long-bearded lover, the magistrate Qian Ding, are pawns in the juggle of foreign imperialism and local political corruption as they are forced to bring Sun Bing to justice. After captivity, Meiniang’s father-in-law, a retired royal executioner, is brought in to deal with Sun Bing. He is a man who makes every killing a work of art, and his repertoire includes the slicing death by five-hundred cuts, a torturous eye-popping Yama’s Hoop, and the eponymous Sandalwood Death that forms the crucifix around which the character’s orbit. The execution scenes pulsate with smells, sights, and noises, often gruesomely vivid.

As sound is so important, there’s a lyrical flow to the text, brilliantly translated by Howard Goldblatt, who does his best to form a syllabic symmetry with the original Mandarin. Some of the words are left untranslated and others ring with a poetic panache appropriate to the opera. Likewise, there is melodrama, action, betrayal, love, war, and doses of comedy within the pages of *Sandalwood Death*. The dazzling chorus reaches its crescendo

with Sun Bing's piercing execution, presented as an unjust turn of circumstance. The act comes to represent an end of an era because the industrialized nations have seized China's capital city and the Chinese are helpless against their invasion. Sun Bing's futile, but symbolic, attempt at resistance is best described in his own words before his execution: "I look forward to walking proudly down the street singing a Maoqiang aria, to live like a warrior and die as a martyr. . . . I want to be the agent of a popular awakening and the cause of crippling fear among the foreign devils." He fails at this, but the aria of his life is given a surreal twist when a double tries to take his place in a charade of mimicry that befuddles the officials and causes one to say, "This is the first time I've watched two people vying to be a condemned prisoner."

The best of Chinese literature doesn't just give insight into the Chinese condition, but that of all humanity. Mo Yan's specialty is the uniquely local spectrum through which he plays out the tragicomedy of life as in this case with a rebellion in a small town and its cast of eclectic characters. After Sun Bing is subjected to the first part of the Sandalwood Death, he is kept alive for several days as added punishment. His former troupe members perform an opera for him but are shot down by the Germans, the last Maoqiang performers in the area. In their deaths, they are reborn as artists, their sacrifice painting their politics and their message. Like all good operas, the music hauntingly lingers on long after its end.