

# An Interview with Mo Yan

# Mo Yan



- **Guan Moye** (1955), better known by the pen name **Mo Yan** is a Chinese novelist and short story writer. Mo Yan was born into a peasant family in Ping'an Village, Gaomi Township, northeast of [Shandong Province](#), the People's Republic of China. This is an **English translation of the interview with Mo Yan, 6 December 2012. The interviewer is YuSie Rundkvist Chou.**

- **Won the 2012 Nobel Prize in Literature**
- was born in a village in Shandong, but his father was literate.
- his eldest brother went to Shanghai's East China Normal University
- He left many books at home and Mo Yan read those language and history textbooks when he was young. Through reading novels, Mo Yan developed his interest in literature.

- All writers start as keen readers. We develop a desire to write while reading. We like to learn how to write.
- There were some intellectuals (university graduates) who taught him about literature and writers. The interest for writing grew in him at a young age.

- All writers start by writing about their childhood, especially childhood memories. His childhood period was the most difficult time in China's history. Most people were starving at the time. Children's memories from such times can be haunting.

- In winter children in the village sat by a wall and bathed in the sun, clothes were torn, they had bloated stomachs, because of lack of nutrients, legs and arms were thin.

- He was naughty at primary school and was expelled in fifth grade. He herded cattle and sheep alone. He had only the animals and the plants to talk to. When he later started writing, these memories came out and became the source of his earliest novels.



- **Why he was expelled in fifth grade?**
- It was during the Cultural Revolution. Children could go to school in theory but if one did go, and didn't do well, they 'd be deprived and denied the right to continue in school. The school didn't teach much at the time. They had to read "The Quotations from Chairman Mao." Students fought and quarreled every day. He was thrown out of school at the age of 11.

- He passed the front door of his school and saw children having fun in school. He was the only outsider. So he felt very lonely at the time. He was herding cattle at a young age. He felt hopeless. The experiences of his childhood became source of his writing. He wrote about the close and mysterious relationship between children and nature.

- If he hadn't gone through that painful experience as a child he would probably not have become a writer or he would have become a different kind of writer. Dropping out at a young age, returning to the farm, being embraced by nature and the rural culture helped him to become a writer.

- A child growing up in school, and a child growing up in the field have different relationships to nature, different feelings for animals and plants. For a long time, he thought animals and plants could communicate with humans.

- He didn't hang out with a group of children. He was with a group of adults. They were adults. He started observing the adult world earlier than most children. He started listening to adults earlier than most.

- He learned about historical figures, legends, historical events and even myths and ghost stories from the rural culture.
- It's a unique point of view to observe the world through the eyes of a child. When an adult looks at things, he's not surprised by what he sees. But when a child looks up from below, because it is an upward view it sees a lot of things that adults don't see.

- He is a conservationist. He has written books like “Life and Death are Wearing Me Out” and “Big Breasts and Wide Hips” He has expressed his agony and anger over overexploitation and the destruction of the environment.

His message:

We should slow down our pace of development. We shouldn't exploit things so quickly. We should preserve rural culture and natural heritage. Stop turning all the villages into towns. We should let the land rest. We shouldn't work the land as hard as if it was a human.

- His perspective on literature :
- First of all, don't overestimate it. Don't expect a novel, a poem or a play to change the realities of our society. That's a too high expectation. Literature is a form of art. Literature's most precious quality lies in its study of the human soul. Literature praises what's true and kind. Literature exposes and criticises what is dark and ugly. Its ultimate goal is to let our mind become richer and more expansive and make us kinder and more gracious.



- The relationship between literature and society is like the relationship of people with their hair. A society may have many novels, poems, poets and writers which is very good. But if there are less of them, life is still...survivable. So whether it is literature or art, it's like human hair. Many things in society change and disappear perhaps only literature and art will remain.

About Pen name : Guan Moye (real name)

The second part becomes Mo Yan if broken up. In traditional writing, the left side of the ideogram is “Yan” and the right is “Mo”. Also, the second part, “Moye”, sounds like “Mo Yan”.

- When he was a child, he was too talkative which caused his parents much trouble. They would often criticise him, educate him, or even scold him. They would scold him for running my mouth.
- Many great writers like Lu Xun and Ba Jin used pen names.

- There are two recurring themes in writing: hunger and loneliness.

God created three types of people:

- A group of true saints, people with higher-than-average morality, such as Confucius. Such people are selfless and prioritise other people's interests. This is not a result of education.
- The majority, average have the basic capacity for kindness. But there is also a grey area, deep within us, that sometimes puts our self-interest first.
- Another group is the opposite of saints. They are born evil. They have no sense of morality.

About religious faith:

- He felt that the birds, the animals on the ground even the trees and grass, has a soul. Everything has feelings. So he is a polytheist.
- When he went to the city he learned many theories. He thought that all the religious faiths are humanity's spiritual wealth and should be studied from an academic perspective. He respects all religions that teach people to be kind.

- About reward which he received (money):

Even without this money his life was comfortable but it will allow him to do more things. First of all, he won't have to write quickly, or without rest, just to make a living. Now he has time to fine-tune his writing as he won't be pressed to produce a large quantity. He can produce higher quality instead. Also, he can use the money to help those who need help.