

## Conference Paper

# Character Ambivalence in Facing Social Changes in *Shifu becomes Dumb and Dumber* by Mo Yan

Arkan Tanriwa and Nurni W. Wuryandari

University of Indonesia, Indonesia

## Abstract

Social and societal changes, and the essential ambivalence of the everyman in face of those changes is the theme and major narrative thread in the short story *Shifu Becomes Dumb and Dumber* (师傅越来越幽默: Shifu Yuelaiyue Youmo) by contemporary Chinese author Mo Yan. In *Shifu*, Mo Yan relays the theme by tracing the life of the main character. The theme's logical conclusion is achieved through humor and detailed narratives of the idiosyncrasies of that main character. To provide granularity and dimension for the behaviors, thoughts and lifestyle of that character, the author introduces a minor character for contrasting effect, that brings the 'dumb and dumber' to the fore. The way the author describes Ding's idiosyncratic ways and juxtaposes them with those of the minor character, with the specific scenes as the narrative backdrop, competently and critically portrays the life and living of the essential everyman in China in the face of society undergoing rapid and fundamental sociocultural flux

**Keywords:** Shifu Becomes Dumb and Dumber short story, character analysis, social change in China

## 1. Introduction

Mo Yan is a contemporary Chinese author, born in Gaomi, Weifang, China in 1955. To this day, he has produced a number of well-known literary works, such as *Big Breasts and Wide Hips* and *Red Sorghum*. In 2011, he was awarded the Mao Dun Literary Prize for his novel, *Frog*. The next year, he was awarded

Corresponding Author: Arkan  
Tanriwa and Nurni W.  
Wuryandari; email:  
arkan.lasidaz1@gmail.com

Received: 1 March 2017

Accepted: 27 March 2017

Published: 12 April 2017

Publishing services provided  
by Knowledge E

© Arkan Tanriwa and Nurni  
W. Wuryandari. This article is  
distributed under the terms  
of the [Creative Commons](#)

[Attribution License](#), which  
permits unrestricted use and  
redistribution provided that  
the original author and  
source are credited.

Selection and Peer-review  
under the responsibility of  
the LSCAC Conference  
Committee.

 OPEN ACCESS

the Nobel Prize in literature. As such, he is a well-received author within and outside China.

Ding Shikou is a main character featured in one of Mo Yan's short story titled *Shifu Becomes Dumb and Dumber* (In this paper, the English translation of the work by Howard Goldblatt is used. The title, however, is opted out to provide a more correct understanding). This work is a short story in a collection with the same title translated into English in 2003. In the story, Ding is a hard-working factory worker who was expecting his retirement within a month. Unfortunately, he was made redundant a month shy of the retirement date. Having worked so hard in the factory for 43 years, he did not possess the capability or set of values to deal with the bigger reality outside the factory grounds. He was also confused by the different values outside the factory, as is made more apparent through a contrast in personality with his disciple, Lü Xiaohu. This idiosyncrasy later led to his own demise after a short 'love-hotel' business stint that he set up to finance his family nearly fell apart due to his own moral inclinations. Set in this condition, a few questions then appear to the fore: what values does Ding have and how do these values contrast with that of the society around him? And what are the consequences of his own moral inclinations? Additionally, where do these differences come from?

These questions remain to be answered. This paper aims to reveal perceptions of social changes in China through the eyes of the Nobel-winning author. A thorough examination of the story background and characters will be performed in order to acquire an accurate analysis of the story. The later parts of this text will examine the background of the story and parts that pertain to social changes in China within the story.

## 2. Ding Shikou: Between Old and New

There is one main character identified in this story, that is, Ding Shikou himself (usually called Ding *shifu*, a term that can be translated as "master worker"), who is the main focus of the story. A minor character worthy of note is Lü Xiaohu, his disciple, who, as it will be pointed out, serves as comparison to Ding and his old-worldly values. It must be noted that Lü does not exist by

himself—he does not have a story of his own—but always in the shadow of Ding, as a comparison to the master.

Ding Shikou has had a very unfortunate life. Since the beginning of this short story in ten parts, even Ding's father has had a wish that did not materialize. It was incorporated in his name – Ding Shikou (丁十口) signified his father's hope that a "man" (丁) would have a farm (十 inside of 口 makes 田, "farm"). Yet, instead of owning a farm, Ding became a factory worker.

Although the story did not mention explicitly why his father's hope had failed to come about, an approximate reason can still be made through pinpointing and analyzing Ding's birth and grow-up years. The age of the factory, mentioned explicitly in the story, and the duration of Ding's work would both lead to an estimation of his birth year. This number would later hint us towards the prevailing social conditions of the time.

In the story, there is a paragraph regarding the age of the factory that stopped in the 1990s. This would set the rest of the story in the 1990s. Ding worked in the factory for 43 years ([5], p. 159). If he stopped working in 1995, then he began working in 1952. It is also reasonable to assume that he was born about 15 years earlier, setting his birth year to somewhere near the Sino-Japanese War and before the Communist victory in China in 1949.

In this and later parts of this text, this approximation gives us a fairly clear start on understanding Ding's social and political background during his "value-forming" years. The 1950s in China was a period of transition towards socialist agriculture [1]. During this time, land reform was enacted and individual possession of land abolished. The policy yielded results in 1954-56; collectivization went faster than planned, and by the end of 1956, the entire country embraced the idea [1]. Soon after the success of the land reform, China began an industrialization campaign, with factory work as an important part of the policy [1].

These political backgrounds shape the way Ding lived in his early years. He could not possess land, because the individual appropriation of land was unlawful. In his productive ages, the choice to work as a factory worker was probably the most reasonable one given the industrial sector policies in China under Mao. The hope embedded in the name did not materialize due to the real conditions of the time.

Ding, however, is not portrayed solely by his birth. He is the main moving force of the story, and thus his character is the one that is sketched out to the fullest. As such, a summary analysis of the natures of the character must be performed.

## 2.1. Ding's Characteristics

From the start, Ding has exhibited a few characteristics. Firstly, he constantly felt "enormously grateful to the society", and therefore wanted to pay it back through hard work. This can be described as wanting to be a social role model. Throughout the story, narratives and acts that portray Ding as a role model can be found. For example, these quotes appear throughout the story:

他对自己带来幸福的社会感恩戴德，仿佛只有拚明干活才能报答

He was enormously grateful to the society that had brought him so much happiness, and was determined to pay it back through hard work. ([5], p. 159)

他模范地遵守社会公德，从来不把装了秽物的塑料袋子乱扔，而是带到城里，小心翼翼地放在垃圾桶里。

As someone who placed great importance on social conscience, he would never throw his trash just anywhere; no, he carried it into town and properly disposed of it in a trash receptacle. ([5], p. 181)

他捡垃圾不是为了赚钱，而是为了报德。他感到社会对自己太好了。

He picked up all the litter in the broad vicinity of the little cottage, not for any monetary gain, but out of a sense of obligation. He was a beneficiary of the best that society had to offer. ([5], p. 184)

As we can see, these quotes sketch a character that tries to be the best in following social mores and repaying back the society that had given him much happiness. This optimistic feeling that he "was a beneficiary of the best that society had to offer" repeats through the story, suggesting that it is not one-off events or feelings.

Another characteristic of Ding was that he is a hard-worker. In the factory, he was known as a hard worker, so much so that he received the calling of *shifu*,

“master worker”. Mo Yan wrote how Ding worked so hard until he decimated his own body:

几十年下来，过度的体力劳动累弯了他的腰，虽然还不到六十岁，但看上去，足有七十还要挂零头儿。

Decades of exhausting labor had bent him over, and even though he wasn't even sixty, he had the look of a man in his seventies. ([5], p. 159)

He was also noted as the “provincial model worker” by his boss in the factory. At the beginning of the story, coming to lay-off announcement day at the factory, Ding even thought that he wouldn't be made redundant because his boss had sarcastically told him so (he did not realize that it was sarcastic):

“师傅，你的来意我知道，工厂连年亏损，载人下岗势在必然，但是，像您这样的元老，省级劳模，即使厂里只留一个人，那就是您！”

“Ding Shifu, I know why you're here. After several years of financial setbacks here at the factory, layoffs have become unavoidable. But you're a veteran worker, a provincial model worker, a *shifu*—model worker—and even if we're down to the last man, that man will be you.” ([5], p. 160)

Unfortunately, these positive characteristics of wanting to be a role model and a hard worker did not bring him any positive consequences. Firstly, the people does not actually care about Ding's moral upbringing. People were nice towards him, but ultimately, he hardly received any compensation at all; he was even laid off from his job. The mayor of his city did indeed come to the factory on lay-off announcement day, and said that Ding can come to his office any time should he need financial help (Mo Yan, 2011: 6); but when he did so, he was unceremoniously thrown to the ground by the security guards and was only accepted inside after he caused a gathering of people outside the office (Mo Yan, 2011: 11-12). Inside, he was received by the assistant director of the general office who tried to give him 100 yuan, which Ding refused (Mo Yan, 2011, pp. 12-13). Perhaps even more ironically, the announcement board that was used to announce the layoffs was the one where he used to be noted, for years, as the model worker.

在过去的几十年里，他的名字每年总要几次出现在这样的大红纸上，那是他得到了先进工作者或是劳动模范光荣称号的时候。

Over the past few decades, his name had appeared on that bulletin board several times a year, and always on red paper; those were the times he had been honored as an advanced or model worker. ([5], p. 160)

Finally, there is also a certain character in how Ding perceived state and Party personnel. It is a character that can be aptly described as fear. Once, he had a nightmare that the police will arrest him due to the illegal nature of his business. During the conversation with Lü, who suggested ignoring the problem with the dead couple, Ding retorted by saying that they may be Party cadres. The third instance is Ding's fear towards Lü Xiaohu's police Cousin (always referred to simply as "Cousin").

These incidences reveal how Ding behaved in the story, and give us hints as to his moral convictions: he is socially-minded, unselfish, and hard-working. He also has a feeling of fear towards the state and Party.

Additionally, Ding is also old. His hard work had trapped him in the factory for so long, causing him to experience a certain disconnectedness with the rest of the world. For instance, there was a scene in which Ding just discovered that there are public pay toilets. He was astonished by how one needed to pay to use the toilet:

他感到一阵羞愧通上心头，不是羞愧自己身无分文，而是羞愧自己竟然不知道厕所还要收费。

A sense of shame welled up in old Ding's heart, not because he had no money, but because he hadn't known that he had to pay to use the toilet. ([5], p. 174)

Apparently, he was also impressed by the quality of the toilet, and the advent of the hand-drying machine.

徒弟带着他洗了手，放在暖风干手器下吹干，然后走出公测。

坐在车上，他反复搓着被干手器吹得格外润滑的糙手，感慨地说：

“小胡，师傅跟着你撒了一泡高级尿。”

The apprentice led him over to the sink, where they washed their hands; then he showed him how to use the blow-dryer. Their mission accomplished, they walked out of the public toilet.

Back in the pedicab, old Ding kept rubbing his rough, blow-dried hands; they'd never felt so moist and smooth.

"Little Hu," he said emotionally, "I've just taken a high-class leak, thanks to you!" ([5], p. 174)

This scene – these quotes just about the usage of a public pay toilet revealed how Ding has certain disconnectedness with the world outside the factory.

It is also manifest in how Ding was ostensibly confused with how to relate with the rest of the world. Coming out fresh from the factory, he did not have any experience in career switching and trading. At his age, deprived of any experience, he was confused about what to work for:

但自己这把年龄，跟年轻人一起来练菜摊显然是不合适了，跟徒弟去拉三轮更不合适……但需要一张能把死人说活的好嘴，而他老丁嘴笨言少，在农机厂里是出了名的。

But there was no way a man his age could compete with younger folks in opening a vegetable stall, let alone pedaling a pedicab like his apprentice. ... But you needed the gift of gab, someone would could talk a dead man into coming back to life. At the factory, old Ding had a reputation for almost never having anything to say. ([5], p. 171)

On top of that, Ding also told Lü about his inability to work something else after a lifetime of work in the factory:

“小胡，你也知道，师傅是个七级工，跟钢铁打了一辈子交道，想不到晚年，竟然落到了这步田地……”

He scratched his head. "Little Hu, you know I'm a grade-seven worker who's spent most of his life in the company of iron and steel. I never thought I'd come to this in my old age." ([5], p. 178)

These incidences shows us that Ding is an old man, disconnected from the rest of the world by his own moral inclinations and lack of personal potential.

These values contrasted with that of his young disciple, Lü Xiaohu. This contrast is of note, because it serves as expressly ostensible hints about how Ding's old values differed with the young man. This contrast may also give us hints about the sources of the difference.

Lü never thought anything about being a social role model towards others. He instead stressed personal wealth and well-being. This can be most ostensibly seen in Lü's response towards his master's despair regarding the moral validity of the love-hotel business. Ding, who had a nightmare about the police arresting him over the illegal business, was responded to by Lü with a stress upon the importance of personal wealth that Ding must pursue.

“……千万别不好意思，千万别跟自己过不去。爹亲娘亲不如钱亲，没了钱爹也不亲娘也不亲，老婆也不拿着当人。师傅您大胆地干吧，真出了事，徒弟保证帮你搞掂！”

“...You have absolutely no reason to be so hard on yourself. Being on good terms with money is more important than trying to be a good son. Without money, you can forget about a loving mother and father, and even your old lady will turn her back on you. Shifu, show some spunk and get on with your business. If there's any trouble, just leave everything to me!” ([5], p. 182)

Ding's social-minded character is also in contrast with how Lü is an individualistic one. In the end of the story, Ding was fraught with anxiety as a couple who looked like a Party cadre did not come out after three hours of renting his room under the winter cold. He thought that they were dead in the room. He ran to Lü and suggested giving himself in to the police, but Lü responded harshly, telling Ding to instead ignore the entire problem ([5], p. 191). He even thought at first that Ding was lamenting the loss of his business instead of the perceived death of the couple ([5], p. 191). Lü also thought little of the state. He mocked state apparatus and government officials. They said that the best government officials can do are “saving face” ([5], p. 165).

These characteristics, in sum, portray a character that is vastly different from Ding in moral orientations: Lü is individually motivated, thought more of personal wealth than moral validity, and did not fear the state. Although minor,

it also serves as an important point in the analyses, because it gives us ostensible hints about how Ding's old "socially-minded, unselfish, hard-working, Party-fearing" values differed from Lü's new values that are all about pursuing individual wealth and individual work that is largely free from fear of criticizing the state.

## 2.2. Ding's Ambivalence

After Ding was laid off from the factory, he opened a love-hotel business with Lü's help by converting a run-down old bus in the middle of a forest behind the factory into a room. This stint gained him financial and social success (with his wife) for a while, but then nearly ran it aground due to his own moral convictions.

What happened was that, after experiencing a short period of financial success, during winter a couple rented Ding's room and failed to reappear from the room after three hours. Sensing something strange, and worried that they may have actually died from the winter cold, Ding ran off to Lü's home and consulted him. Lü told Ding to ignore the problem, but Ding didn't comply – instead, he successfully persuaded Lü to give himself in to Cousin. After explaining to Cousin, they returned to the love hotel and found that it is empty and the signs of the room having been abandoned are there (such as dust on the beer bottles and glass). Cousin was understandably agitated towards what he felt as lying to the police and left without a further word; Lü, dumbstruck, served the ending line by expressing that Ding was "becoming dumb and dumber".

What is the actual nature of this event? It can first be assumed that the couple was Ding's own hallucination. This assumption can be verified through the ending of the story, where there was actually nothing in the room and it is as though nobody has been there for a few days (which is indeed true, because since the beginning of winter Ding didn't receive any guests to the room).

Why does this hallucination occur? It can be argued that it actually stems from Ding's moral character that was described in the above section, from Ding's wanting to be a social role model and the consequences that is brought by this nature. As was noted above, Ding constantly wanted to be a good social role model towards others. Consequently, Ding felt uncomfortable about the sexual,

perhaps immoral nature of his business venture. His characteristics, in sum, culminated towards these two lines that aptly described his total discomfort:

有时候他的心里也忐忑不安，不知道自己是在造孽还是在积德。有一天夜里竟然梦到两个公安来抓人，吓得他浑身冷汗，醒来后心脏狂跳。

There were times when he felt uncomfortable, uncertain if he was a saint or a sinner. One night he dreamed that the police came for him, and he woke up in a cold sweat, his heart racing. ([5], p. 182)

The first sentence was the concern of whether he “was a saint or a sinner” – in other words, his wanting to be a social role model, of giving back towards the society that had benefited him so much. He must be good towards others; on the other hand, he must also put food on his table by doing this illegal business. The second one was a realization that his business is illegal, and his characteristic fear of the state and doing something illegal within it sparked his nightmare.

These feelings later would culminate towards the hallucination that serves as the ending of the story. It is the peak of Ding’s moral frustration of having different values in a society that put an emphasis on new ones. Ding could not simply ignore the problem like Lü did—he even went so far as to disregard the problem on the first mention—he must be a good man who care about the well-being of others; and lastly, he also perceived that those two people may be “Party cadres” ([5]: 191). How Ding and Lü responded towards this is quite telling: Ding responded with fear and frustration, while Lü told him that if they *really* are Party cadres, it would only make the problem worse.

### 3. China in Modern Times: Differing Values

How can we ascertain that Ding’s values are old and that they clashed with new ones? It can be argued that Ding’s values stemmed from the social circumstances into which he was born and raised. Firstly, it must be noted that there is a social change in China that is explicitly mentioned in the story. The later parts of this section will try to examine the difference between the two periods.

The fact that there is a social change in China is more than apparent in the story. There is a paragraph explaining the history of the factory, which explicitly told us that it began before the 1950s as a “capitalist operation”; then in the 1950s it turned into a “semipublic company” called the Red Star Metalworks; progressing through the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, and finally ending in the 1990s as “Silesia Farm Machinery Group”, which produced pull-tab beverage cans “using new equipment imported from Germany” ([5], p. 162-3).

The means of transport used by people in China also differed from that of Ding’s times. While he used the old “Grand Defense” (*Da Guofang*) bike, which ended production in the 1960s, the story mentioned three car brands that was used by the government and factory elites, namely Audi, Jeep Cherokee, and Santana.

一辆白色的切诺基鸣着笛开进了大门。

A **Cherokee** drove in through the gates, blasting its siren. ([5]: 160)

后来，厂长坐着红色的桑塔纳厂长坐着红色的桑塔纳来了，市里管工业的马副市长坐着黑色的奥迪也来了。

Then, the red **Santana** the factory head rides in came, followed by a black **Audi** that the public works deputy mayor Ma rode in. ([5], p. 162)

There is also “a rainbow array of automobiles” which “passed slowly in front of him [Ding], with motorcycles shuttling in and out among them, like defiant jackrabbits” ([5], p. 14). The utilization of private cars by government officials is also forbidden during the time before the Open Reformation [2]. All these facts point to a certain sort of social change in China within the story.

As was noted earlier, it can be inferred that Ding Shikou was born during the reign of the former Republic. First, this can be seen from the hint of his father’s wishes, which would have directly collided with the enacted regulations and ambitions of the Communist Party that would later rule. Then, there is also the fact of the factory’s age, written explicitly in a paragraph within the story, through which we can indirectly infer Ding’s birth year.

As such, Ding would have lived through the revolutionary eras of the Great Leap Forward (1958-1961) and the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). These

two periods can deeply shape a person due to their revolutionary and highly-charged nature. Meisner, writing from 1968 in his article, *Utopian Goals and Ascetic Values in Chinese Communist Ideology*, noted that the promoted values in the “three constantly read articles” by Mao are “the value of struggle, courage, and sacrifice, and especially the virtue of unselfishness” (Meisner, 1968). Such was the social circumstance to which Ding was born, and to which Ding was presumably highly exposed to during his early value-forming years, and which Ding reflected in the story.

Furthermore, social control in China under Mao, which was a police state, was also highly regulated through the police under the Ministry of Public Safety. The police institution was strong and reached up to the villages. Their tasks include investigation, surveillance, visitation, tax collection and contribution, destruction and inspection of anticommunist elements, as well as overhearing ([7], p. 85). It is not a far stretch to presume that the conditions that Ding were born into at that time would embed his current values deeply into him.

Through the identification of the background of the rest of the story, it is also easy to work out how Lü’s values came to be different from Ding’s – he is a youngster. The story is set in the 1990s. Working backwards, we can easily assume that Lü would have been born after the Open Reformation, straight after Mao’s death in 1976. As opposed to the circumstances into which Ding was born, the values that Lü was exposed to were directly oppositional. Perhaps not coincidentally, the values that are promoted by the Communist Party after the Open Reformation are also directly oppositional to those promoted before. After the Reformation, the Chinese government replaced egalitarianism that was deeply held in Mao Zedong Thought with a competitive ethos that puts wealthy people in high regard [6]. This competitive, capitalist spirit, which is in direct opposition with the previous one, puts a lot of people in a state of moral confusion and emptiness [6]. As a result, they show different attitudes and values, ones that are in direct conflict with the previous, traditional socialist mores [3]. These values include individualism and hatred towards the Party (Kwong, 1994).

These values match the ones held by Lü. In a deep contrast to his master, he was a promoter of personal wealth instead of someone longing to be a social role model. Never did he consider Ding’s values to be something to look up to;

he never had ambivalence nor nightmares about the sexual, perhaps immoral, nature of the business, and when Ding did, he quickly dismissed it in favor of the pursuit of wealth. Furthermore, he was rather cynical towards the state personnel, which in China were an embodiment of the Party. These analyses of the values explain the likely sources of their differences.

#### 4. Conclusions and Suggestions

From the analysis above it can be seen that first, there are attitude differences between the two characters, Ding and Lü, namely that the former preferred being a social role model, while the latter preferred individuality and personal wealth. While Ding was conscious about being morally valid and always within the confines of the Party; Lü did not do so, instead preferring to justify his own ways.

This difference in attitude likely stems from differences in social circumstances through which they grew up. Ding was born in a society in which egalitarianism, unselfishness, and sacrifice, was highly prized, while Lü wasn't – he was born into a society with a primarily capitalistic ethos of pursuing wealth. This difference in moral values itself stems from the differing sociopolitical conditions of both times: Ding was born in the age of Mao, while Lü was born in the age after the Open Reforms. The government in those two times promoted differing, even oppositional, values.

Ding's deeply-held idiosyncrasies in the world with the new values ultimately led him to his own anguish which was shown through a hallucination that stemmed from the frustration about the moral validity of the 'love-hotel' business he attempted. This is the main conflict of the story, which was not against other antagonistic characters, but with himself and the values he used in relating with the greater world outside of him.

This unmatched relationship between the values of the two characters produces a certain tension in their communication. Their communication is one that is almost always marked with amusement to the younger party. Ultimately, the sentence that marks this tension between the two parties makes the title of the short story: "Shifu Becomes Dumb and Dumber".

## References

- [1] J. K. Fairbank, "The Great Chinese Revolution, 1800–1985," Harper, New York, 1988.
- [2] E. Harwit, "The impact of WTO membership on the automobile industry in China," *China Quarterly*, no. 167, pp. 655–670, 2001.
- [3] B. Hooper, "Chinese youth: The nineties generation," *Current History*, vol. 90, no. 557, p. 264, 1991.
- [4] Mo. Yan, *Shifu, You'll Do Anything for a Laugh* (H. Goldblatt, Trans.), Arcade, New York, 2001.
- [5] 莫言. *Mo Yan, Shifu yuelai yue youmo*, Shanghai Wenyi Chubanshe, Shanghai, 2010.
- [6] X. Wang, "The post-communist personality: The spectre of China's capitalist market reforms," *China Journal*, no. 47, pp. 1–17, 2002.
- [7] F. S. Yee, "Chinese Communist Police and Courts," *The Journal of Criminal Law, Criminology, and Police Science*, vol. 48, no. 1, pp. 83–92, 1957.