

# The Art of Historical Fiction: How to Write Fact into Fiction

Wendy Chen

## Don DeLillo on *Libra* and the JFK Assassination

“I think fiction rescues history from its confusions. It can do this in the somewhat superficial way of filling in blank spaces. But it also can operate in a deeper way: providing the balance and rhythm we don’t experience in our daily lives, in our real lives. So the novel which is within history can also operate outside it – correcting, clearing up and, perhaps most important of all, finding rhythms and symmetries that we simply don’t encounter elsewhere.” Don DeLillo, for *Rolling Stone*

# “On the Historical Fiction That Lives in the Space Between History and Myth

“*[E]very* work of historical fiction lives somewhere between history and myth. Before one reckons with the realities of what the research reveals, one must contend with all the layers of subsequent representation of whatever historical moment they approach. Even the most recent historical events are informed by myth. Even when you strip away the layers of propaganda and deliberate distortion, there are persuasive narratives underneath it that color our experience of every key moment in history.” - Phong Nguyen, for *LitHub*

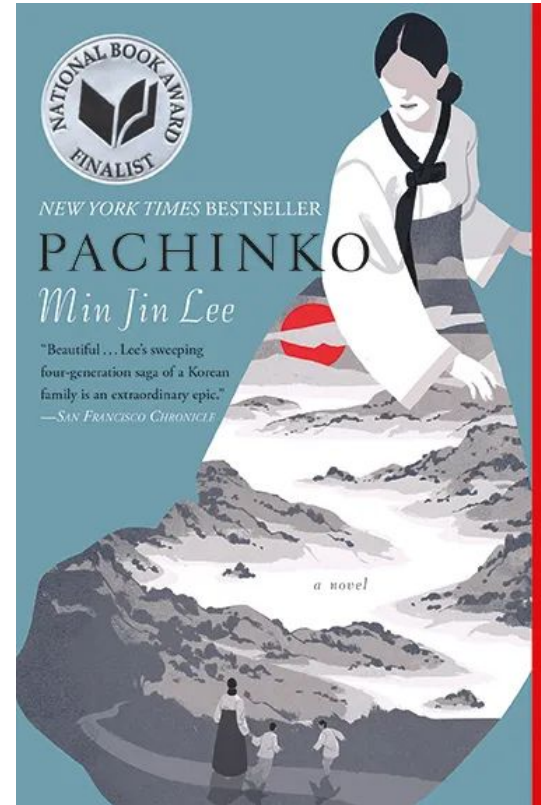
## Voices & Authority in Historical Fiction

“Which voices are speaking from what particular pasts in the pages of the historical novel, and on whose authority and terms? How does the written form of the novel embody this authority and with what consequences for diverse readerships and publics in a globalizing world? What is the writer’s burden of responsibility to represent the past with accuracy, and what does accuracy even mean in the age of truthiness and alternative fact?” - Bruce Holsinger, *Historical Fiction Now*

# Considerations of Historical Fiction

- Filling in blank spaces of history
- Provide balance, rhythms, symmetries
- Balancing history with myth
- How many layers of representation exist for the historical moment in reality?
  - In your novel? Are there layers you want to deliberately subtract, add, or alter?
- Which voices are speaking from what particular pasts?
  - On whose authority and terms? And why?
- What does truth, reality, fact, fiction mean in the world of your novel?

# *Pachinko* (2017) by Min Jin Lee



# *Pachinko*, Chapter 1

## Yeongdo, Busan, Korea

History has failed us, but no matter.

At the turn of the century, an aging fisherman and his wife decided to take in lodgers for extra money. Both were born and raised in the fishing village of Yeongdo—a five-mile-wide islet beside the port city of Busan. In their long marriage, the wife gave birth to three sons, but only Hoonie, the eldest and the weakest one, survived. Hoonie was born with a cleft palate and a twisted foot; he was, however, endowed with hefty shoulders, a squat build, and a golden complexion. Even as a young man, he retains the mild, thoughtful temperament he'd had as a child. When Hoonie covered his misshapen mouth with his hands, something he did out of habit meeting strangers, he resembled his nice-looking father, both having the same large, smiling eyes. Inky eyebrows graced his broad forehead, perpetually tanned from outdoor work. Like his parents, Hoonie was not a nimble talker, and some made the mistake of thinking that because he could not speak quickly there was something wrong with his mind, but that was not true.

In 1910, when Hoonie was twenty-seven years old, Japan annexed Korea. the fisherman and his wife, thrift and hardy peasants, refused to be distracted by the country's incompetent aristocrats and corrupt rulers, who had lost their nation to thieves. When the rent for their house was raised again, the couple moved out of their bedroom and slept in the anteroom near the kitchen to increase the number of lodgers.

The wooden house they had rented for over three decades was not large, just shy of five hundred square feet. Sliding paper doors divide the interior into three snug rooms, and the fisherman himself had replaced its leaky grass roof with reddish clay tiles to the benefit of his landlord, who lived in splendor in a mansion in Busan. Eventually, the kitchen was pushed out to the vegetable garden to make way for the larger cooking pots and the growing number of portable dining tables that hung on pegs along the mortared stone wall.

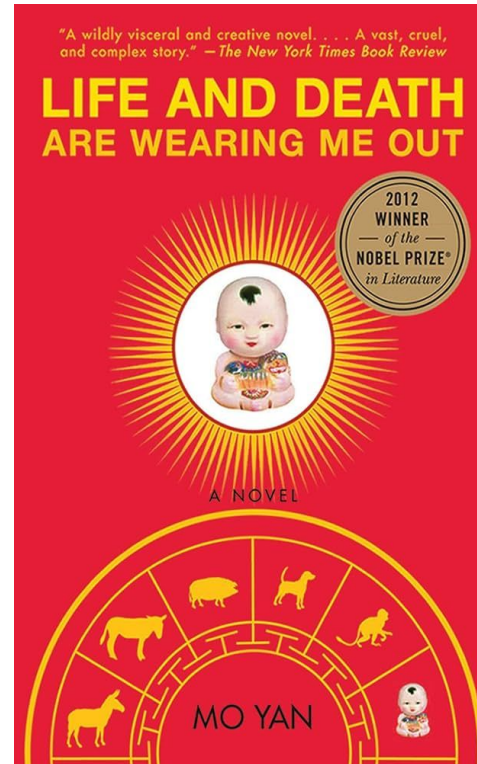
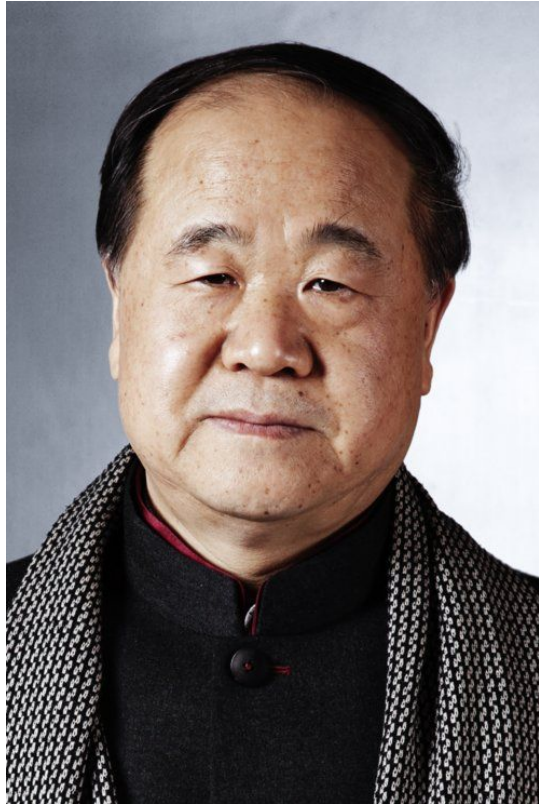
# Acknowledgements for *Pachinko*

I wanted very much to get this story right; however, I felt that I didn't have all the knowledge or skills to do this properly. In my anxiety, I did an enormous amount of research and wrote a draft of a novel about the Korean Japanese community. Still, it did not feel right. Then in 2007, my husband got a job offer in Tokyo, and we moved there in August. On the ground, I had the chance to interview dozens of Koreans in Japan and learned that I'd gotten the story wrong. The Korean Japanese may have been historical victims, but when I met them in person, none of them were as simple as that. I was so humbled by the breadth and complexity of the people I met in Japan that I put aside my old draft and started to write the book again in 2008 . . .

When I lived in Tokyo, a great number of individuals agreed to sit with me and answer my many questions about the Koreans in Japan as well as about expatriate life, international finance, the yakuza, the history of colonial Christianity, police work, immigration, Kabukicho, poker, Osaka, Tokyo real estate deals, leadership in Wall Street, *mizu shobai*, and of course, the pachinko industry. When we could not meet in person, many spoke to me on the phone or answered my questions via e-mail.



# *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* (2006) by Mo Yan



# Historical Materiality

“Back then I was on top of the world. Bumper harvests every year, and the tenant farmers eagerly paid their rent. The grain sheds overflowed. The livestock thrived, and our black mule gave birth to twins. It was like a miracle, the stuff of legend, not reality. A stream of villagers came to see the twin mules, and our ears rang with their words of flattery. We rewarded them with jasmine tea and **Green Fort cigarettes.**” (Chapter 2)

“I stepped onto the road that ran through the center of the village; only now it was paved and probably twice as wide as before. **The squat rammed-earth walls on either side had been taken down and had given way to rows of identical buildings with red-tile roofs.** North of the road stood a two-story building fronted by an open square in which a hundred or more people — mostly old women and children — were watching an episode of a TV drama on a **twenty-one-inch Matsushita Japanese television set.**” (Chapter 32)

# 2011 Interview for *HUMANITIES*: The Magazine for the NEH

“Although I was writing stories from history, I looked at these stories with a modern writer’s eyes, a modern person’s thinking and ideas about the past. The history in my novels is full of my own character. I have always had some difference with, well, the facts of history. My readers are supposed to get literature, not history—dry history—from my books. . .

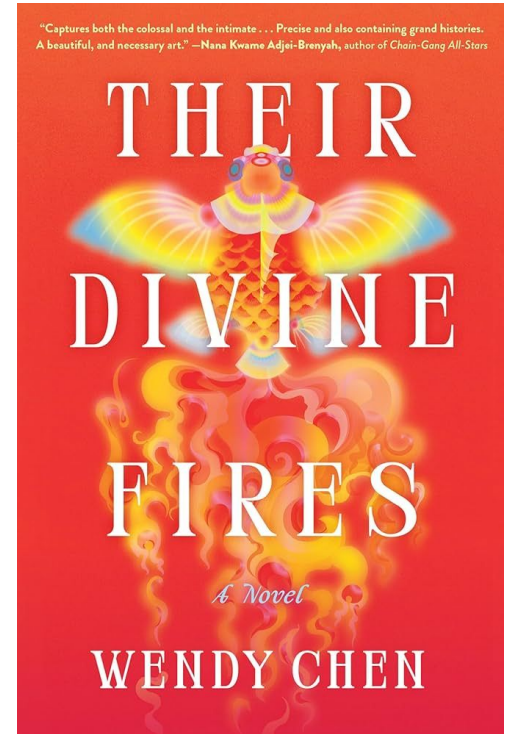
In the future, I think that people who study history should go to the real history books. But if you want to know about a far, far long ago time and what people really felt, everyday life, then you should search for this kind of thing in literature. If people still read my books in a few hundred years, they could find out all about the everyday life of people.

History books focus on events and the times, but literature focuses more on people’s lives and feelings.” - Mo Yan

# *Their Divine Fires*

The school grounds, which were encircled by a tall cement wall, included ten school buildings, three apartment buildings, two administrative buildings, one cafeteria, one athletic field, one pond, and one gigantic billboard, upon which a larger-than-life mural of Chairman Mao was painted.

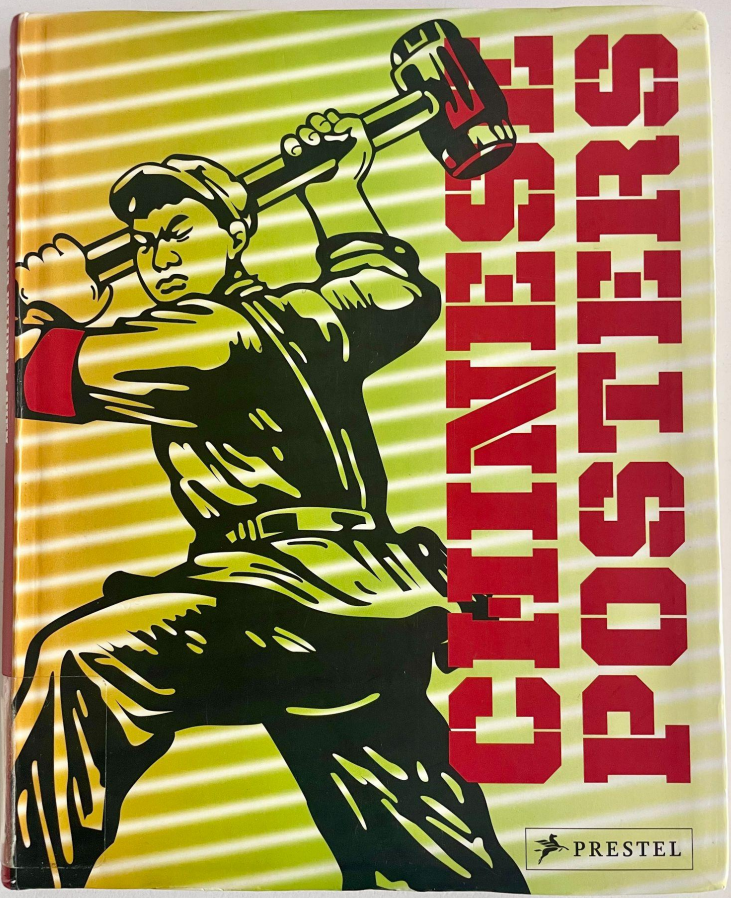
The latest iteration of Chairman Mao, Yonghong thought, was the best one so far. In this one, the sky was awash in light oranges. The clouds swirled—looking more like flames. There was the faintest trace of blue mountains in the distance, stirring the imagination. In front of this landscape, the people were marching—a great many of them—a mass. Their figures were nondescript—almost anonymous—but the clothing they wore was clean and of good quality. One could tell, even at a distance, that they were healthy and well taken care of and full of passion. And the flags they waved in the air were painted in the most beautiful of reds. The flags rippled across the mural, proudly displaying the party slogans that had been carefully painted on them.






Advance victoriously while following Chairman Mao's revolutionary line in literature and the arts, c. 1968.  
Schreitet siegreich voran und folgt der revolutionären Linie des Vorsitzenden Mao in der Literatur und den schönen Künsten, um 1968.

† At the height of Mao worship, Mao appears as radiant sun, high above the masses. The dancing figures are from the revolutionary model operas developed by Mao's wife Jiang Qing.





轻轻的一个吻  
Just one soft kiss



他是人民大救星



# Resources for Historical Fiction

When considering which resource is best for you, think about what questions you have for your work. Keep a list of questions that will grow and evolve alongside your project.

- Online databases
- Archives (digital, in person)
- Museums
- Historical Societies
- Experts in the field
- Oral interviews

# Online Databases

[Project Gutenberg](#)

[Google Scholar](#)

[Digital Public Library of America](#)

[Public library database access](#) (e.g. Denver Public Library)

[JSTOR](#)

# Archives (Digital)

- [Library of Congress Prints & Photographs Online](#)
- [Internet Archive](#)
- [Artstor](#)
- [U.S. National Archives Digital Photography Collections](#)
- [Getty Images](#)
- [Perry-Castañeda Library Map Collection](#)
- [David Rumsey Map Collection](#)
- [Library of Congress Historical Map Archives](#)
- [Open Image Collections](#)

# Archives (Library)

Public libraries will often have several focused archives and collections of materials (“collecting areas,” “special collections”).

e.g.: [Denver Public Library](#)

“The library’s collecting areas include:

- [Western History](#) (particularly Colorado and the Rocky Mountain Region)
- [Conservation](#) (history of the American conservation movement in the U.S.)
- [Tenth Mountain Division](#) (history of the U.S. Army's "Ski Troops" of World War II, who trained in Colorado)
- [African American Research Library](#) collections (history of African Americans in Denver and the Rocky Mountain West)

You can browse and search within collections in the [Blair Caldwell African American Research Library](#) and in the [Special Collections and Archives Department](#).”

# Museums

- [American Alliance of Museums Directory](#) (location)
- [Museums USA Directory](#) (subject)
- [Museums of the World](#) Database

# Historical Societies

“Historical societies are typically focused on a state or a community. They often have collections of artifacts, books, and records, and may include a museum. Some state historical societies, such as Minnesota, are quasi-governmental institutions, organized as a private corporation but maintaining the official state archives.” - [from Society of American Archivists](#)

[Preservation Directory](#) is a comprehensive directory of historic and cultural resource organizations provides detailed information for organizations located in each State and Province in the United States and Canada dedicated to the preservation of historic structures and buildings, the protection and care of cultural resources, and the revitalization of downtown districts and the preservation of main street and community.

# Experts in the Field

- Faculty at universities and colleges
- Authors of papers (JSTOR)
- Researchers at museums/libraries
- Recommendations by word of mouth
- Public figures

# Oral Histories

[“How to Do Oral Histories”](#) from the Smithsonian Oral History Project



# Reflection Questions

- What kind of histories and myths are intertwined in your project?
- What are some of your most pressing questions for your project?
- What kinds of new resources can you search out to answer your questions?
- What are some new methodologies or experiments you would like to incorporate into your project?
- How many layers of representation exist for the historical moment in reality?
- Which voices are speaking from what particular pasts?
- What does truth, reality, fact, fiction mean in the world of your novel?

Questions?