

EXPLORING THE HIDDEN REALITIES: A JOURNEY THROUGH THE WORKS OF YAN LIANKE

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INTRODUCTION

Yan Lianke is a renowned Chinese writer of the 21st century who was born in a small village in Luoyang, Henan Province, China. Critics always called him the Son of a Farmer because of the representation of the peasant class in almost all his works. Since entering the literary world in 1978, Yan Lianke has produced some significant works, gradually developed a unique artistic style, and earned consideration both domestically and internationally. He is a very high-profile writer based in Beijing, showing his political courage while revealing some of the flaws of the Chinese government and their policies and their consequences on the peasants and common people. Moreover, he is compassionate towards humanity as well as keeps on searching for new and innovative ideas and techniques to depict rural life in China. Throughout his novels and short stories, "local reality" is a central theme, and many of his works are based on his hometown in rural Henan (Yan, "Yan Lianke on Mythorealism"). Yan Lianke's writing has always focused on the lives and struggles of real Chinese peasants, providing a vivid and meticulous portrait of the rural world. As a writer of peasant descent, Yan Lianke draws upon his profound rural experience and rich life course to create a unique gallery of local characters, showing the changes and development of contemporary rural areas. He remains deeply concerned about the living conditions of the vast number of peasant groups and uses appropriate creative concepts to explore and reflect on reality. His position of "Peasant's writers" combined with the modern consciousness of intellectuals reproduces the living situation and practical condition of peasant groups more realistically, bringing to light problems that peasants cannot perceive or express (Leung). He has given a new terminology for these types of writings termed "Mythorealism"³ (Yan "Yan Lianke on Mythorealism"). Yan Lianke's writing showcases his unrelenting pursuit of thought and art, with a keen focus on local realities that offers a compelling creative experience for contemporary literary narratives. Through his novels, Yan Lianke masterfully combines satirical wit with profound contemplation, inviting readers to reflect on the complexities of modern China and the universal aspects of the human condition. His works often serve as both mirrors and microscopes, reflecting the realities of China while magnifying the deeper truths that lie beneath the surface. His narrative exploration extends from the heart of rural communities to the corridors of political power, offering readers a multifaceted view of a rapidly changing society in China.

This paper will analyse the depiction of peasants and commoners described in Yan Lianke's novels, summarising his important works and writing style, while also acknowledging the problems that Yan Lianke had to struggle with in his literary works and how his writings are taken and understood within China and overseas.

THE REALITY OF THE VILLAGE AND PEASANTS

In the light of selected works of Yan Lianke, the researcher has tried to reveal the actual condition and tragedies the villagers and especially peasants had to face over the years. His writings depict concern about the local people and provide a new lens to see China and its policies and further change and shape the thought process of the people within China. The present research is mainly based on four well known novels of Yan Lianke:

Firstly, focusing on his work *Lenin's Kisses*, it is a satirical novel set in a fictional Chinese village called Liven (Yan and Rojas). The story revolves around establishing a "City of Tranquil Light," where disabled and mentally challenged individuals are brought together to be cared for and showcased as symbols of the government's benevolence (Moratto and Fung Choy). He described the people living near Balou Mountain, earlier they were living a harmonious life with ample food and contentment but the coming of lucrative government schemes for the betterment of the people, deteriorated the life of the people living there. In this novel author has tried to give an indirect message to the people about the policies of the government which are just to lure them not to provide any assistance, showing the selfishness of the government behind the works. The government's intention in creating the city is to gain political favour and present an image of compassion, but the underlying motives are more complex. Disabled individuals are exploited for various purposes, including attracting tourists and generating revenue. The village becomes a peculiar tourist attraction, with visitors paying to see and interact with the disabled residents. Among them is Kong Mingliang, a journalist who arrives to report on the City of Tranquil Light. Through his interactions with the villagers and the government officials,

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³ Definition of mythorealism: It represents a unique blending of mythological elements and contemporary realities.

Kong Mingliang begins to uncover the truth behind the city's creation and the exploitation of its residents. Yan Lianke uses dark humour and allegory to comment on various aspects of Chinese society, including the relationship between the government and its citizens, the impact of ideology, and the exploitation of vulnerable individuals for political gain. The novel explores the complexities of rural life, the power dynamics between the government and the people, and how people navigate their circumstances.

Secondly, *The Four Books*, which was shortlisted for the Man Booker International Prize in 2016 and winner of the Franz Kafka Prize in 2014 tells the story of the Great Famine which was China's most devastating and controversial period (Yan, *The Four Books*). The government tried their best to veil their lacunae in managing the situation during 1959-61, which took the lives of millions of people, a period of mass starvation and suffering as a result of the policies of the Great Leap Forward. Earlier many foreign authors argued about the failure of the government such as Frank Dikötter a Dutch historian describes China's starving millions as the "unintended consequences of half-baked and poorly executed economic programmes (Wemheuer; "Frank Dikotter on Mao's Great Famine"). Historian Fairbank refers to the chaotic situation and the loss of lives as "a Mao-made catastrophe... an all-time, first-class, man-made famine" (Alphahis). Speaking in 1962, the economic moderate Liu Shaoqi attributed the Great Famine to 70 percent *renhuo* (human error) and 30 per cent *tianzai* (natural disasters). (Alphahis). But this was the first time a Chinese author tried to reveal this tragedy with the help of stories in satirical form, as a result, the book was banned in China by the Book Censorship of the Chinese Communist Party mentioning the arbitrariness and violation of censorship law.

The book is divided into four sections, each named after one of the four classical Chinese texts: *The Book of History*, *The Book of Songs*, *The Book of Rites*, and *The Book of Changes* (Yan, *The Four Books*) These sections explore different aspects of the famine and its impact on society, using allegorical and metaphorical storytelling to convey the devastating effects of political ideologies and policies on ordinary people. It is a masterfully crafted novel that delves into history's darkest corners and is a testament to the power of literature to shed light on forgotten or silenced stories of the Great Famine.

Thirdly, *The Dream of Ding's Village*, which is one of the most important novels of Yan Lianke to date, was written in 2005 and was translated by Cindy Carter in 2011, which became a hallmark in the literary work of Yan with a wider consideration in the entire world. This story is set in a poor village in Henan province revealing the Blood Selling Ring in contemporary China which was a real-life blood-selling scandal in Eastern China (Moratto and Fung Choy 54). The scheme of blood selling attracted a large number of people, they started selling blood multiple times a month, and even while having some medication, sometimes it led to 16 times in a month due to the carelessness of the government and the medical authority. As a result, the contaminated blood spread HIV or AIDS in the entire village. The story is in a satirical form with a family having two sons showing the first son reaching the top of the party using unfair means of policies and activities at the cost of the suffering of the poor, while the second son is infected and finally meets death a result of the first son's policies and activities. This satire shows China as a single family, one side working towards the development of the country but on the other side, the speed of development depends on the hardship and the bloodshed of peasants and villagers. Thus, revealing the covered face of the government and its consistently growing economic policies.

Fourthly, *The Explosion Chronicles*, the novel by Yan Lianke is a masterful exploration of the intricacies of modernization, capitalism, and the human spirit (Hickling). Set against the backdrop of a rapidly changing Chinese society, this novel offers a satirical and thought-provoking commentary on the effects of industrialization and economic growth on a small rural community. The story follows three generations of the Kong family in the fictional town of Explosion. As the town's name suggests, it has experienced a series of explosive transformations over the years. From an agricultural community to an industrial powerhouse, the town's evolution mirrors China's journey towards modernization. The Kongs, initially poor farmers, become wealthy landowners and entrepreneurs as they embrace capitalism and navigate the opportunities and challenges it presents.

Yan Lianke with his dark humour, and allegory, delves into the moral dilemmas faced by the Kongs as they balance their newfound prosperity with the erosion of traditional values and the exploitation of both human and natural resources. The novel highlights a deep contrast between the pursuit of profit and the cost to the environment, local culture, and individual relationships. At its core, *The Explosion Chronicles* is a cautionary tale that explores the double-edged sword of economic development. Through the experiences of the Kong family and the town of Explosion, the novel prompts readers to reflect on the development of the country and the plight of humans and their culture in contemporary China. In other words, the novel provides readers with a nuanced perspective on the complex interplay between progress, morality, and the human condition.

SATIRE AND ALLEGORY: A DISTINCTIVE LITERARY VOICE

One of the hallmarks of Yan Lianke's literature is his adept use of satire and allegory. His novels, such as *Serve the People*, *Lenin's Kisses*, *The Four Books*, *Dream of Ding Village*, and *The Explosion Chronicles* portray social

criticisms through imaginative and original storylines. The author uses allegorical and satirical techniques to expose hidden truths that reflect the actual issues and conditions of contemporary China. This offers a new approach to writing in a country where the direct expression of thoughts and problems is restricted. "Mythorealism" is a term that is often associated with the works of Yan Lianke which is a unique blending of mythological elements and contemporary realities. Mythorealism is not exactly a bridge that offers direct access to the truth and reality but it depends on allegories, imaginings, myths, and legends that emerge from social life, day-to-day activities and social reality. Yan Lianke put forward a new trend of writing thus providing a platform for upcoming authors to put their words in front of the people and the world, he writes, "I have always used literature as a creative process aimed at searching for the meaning of life" (Yan).

THE INTERSECTION OF POLITICS AND HUMANITY

Yan Lianke is an author who writes for the common people and advocates for the voice of peasants and commoners. This is a difficult task in China, a communist country where speech and expressions are controlled by the Chinese Communist Party. Despite this, Yan Lianke is skilled in smartly addressing complicated and sensitive issues in his writing. He fearlessly tackles sensitive subjects and his novels often explore the intersection of political ideologies and the lives of ordinary individuals. For example, in his novels "The Four Books" and "The Dream of Ding Village," Yan Lianke portrays the devastating impact of the Great Famine and how it destroyed the lives of people in Ding Village respectively. His storytelling creates a deep connection between the political landscape and the emotional experiences of his characters.

A CHRONICLE OF CHANGE

Yan Lianke's novels often draw from personal experiences and real-life events, incorporating mythical elements into a realistic narrative. These novels serve as a chronicle of change, reflecting the experiences of many Chinese people who have faced similar challenges and tragedies. Despite this, few have been as brave as Yan in challenging the Chinese communist government through their writings. Yan's exploration of modernization, economic shifts, and political policies resonates with readers who have experienced similar transformations in their own lives. As a result, his work has inspired emerging writers to also shed light on sensitive social issues in China. Through Yan's novels, readers gain a unique perspective on the changing nature of society and the resilience of the human spirit.

HOW CHINA SEES THE WORKS OF YAN LIANKE

Yan Lianke's work is seen as both significant and controversial within China. His novels often touch on sensitive topics and offer critical perspectives on Chinese society and politics, which has led to a complex reception of his work within the country.

Yan Lianke is a highly regarded writer in China, known for his artistic excellence and intricate storytelling. He is respected for his use of allegory and satire to address complex issues, particularly regarding cultural and social critique touching on the atrocities and problems of peasants and commoners. Many view his novels as a nuanced exploration of the challenges faced by Chinese society, offering a reflection on contemporary issues. Yan Lianke's willingness to challenge official narratives and tackle sensitive topics such as censorship, political repression, and economic inequality has both earned him admiration and sparked controversies. Some believe his work sheds light on critical aspects of Chinese society that require attention. There have been controversies surrounding Yan Lianke's novels in China, as their critical content and portrayal of certain events or themes have led to censorship, some of his books are still banned in China, and the publications of his banned works are mainly done in Taiwan. This censorship has limited their availability and led to challenges in publishing them within the country. While Yan Lianke's international recognition and awards highlight his literary prowess, his all-important works have been translated into English bagging major literary awards with worldwide recognition, they can also evoke mixed feelings in China. This is because his works are often more celebrated abroad than domestically.

However, there is a segment within China that appreciates Yan Lianke's ability to address societal issues through literature. They see his work as contributing to the discourse on artistic freedom and expression in the country. In a nutshell, the perception of Yan Lianke's work within China is complex and multifaceted. While his creative talent and willingness to engage with challenging themes are respected, the controversial nature of some of his content and the challenges of censorship contribute to a varied reception of his novels.

HOW THE WORLD SEES THE WORKS OF YAN LIANKE

Whether talking about China or other countries of the world, Yan Lianke's work has garnered national as well as international attention and acclaim for its unique approach to addressing complex sociopolitical issues. Yan Lianke's novels are highly regarded as insightful commentaries on contemporary Chinese society, politics, and culture by authors and readers from the entire world. He employs allegory and satire to delve into sensitive topics that capture the complexities of Chinese life. His works resonate with readers worldwide who seek to understand the complexities of a rapidly changing China. Furthermore, Yan Lianke's themes are universal in nature despite being rooted in a specific cultural context only in China. His exploration of power dynamics, human desires, and moral dilemmas surpass geographical boundaries and resonates with readers from diverse cultural backgrounds. It provides a better

way to know the real China. In addition, Yan Lianke's narrative techniques, including allegory, satire, and surrealism, are tools that challenge dominant narratives and official versions of history. It enforces people to rethink and rebuild the history which was written under the patronage of the Chinese government. His work has earned both admiration and controversy, making it engaging and thought-provoking for readers globally. Yan Lianke's novels are widely recognized as powerful social critiques, shedding light on issues such as censorship, political repression, rapid urbanization, and economic development. By weaving these themes into his storytelling, he offers readers fresh perspectives on the challenges and opportunities facing contemporary China. Yan Lianke's literary contributions have earned him international accolades, including nominations for the Man Booker International Prize and the Franz Kafka Prize. These honours underscore the global recognition of his work and the universal relevance of his themes. Through his novels, Yan invites readers to engage in moral and ethical reflection, presenting characters who confront profound dilemmas that encourage readers to reflect on the choices individuals make in difficult circumstances. Yan Lianke's innovative storytelling techniques, including inventive narrative structures, allegorical landscapes, and a unique blend of satire and emotion, make him a celebrated literary voice who pushes the boundaries of traditional storytelling and provides a new way for future authors to express ideas and themes in front of people.

In essence, the world views Yan Lianke's work as a bridge between the specific context of modern China and broader human experiences. His novels engage with contemporary social and political issues, while also offering universal insights into the complexities of society, power, and the human condition.

CONCLUSION

Yan Lianke's literary contributions are an invitation to explore the multifaceted nature of Chinese society, politics, and humanity and provide a platform to examine real China through the lens of satires and allegories. His novels are not only being welcomed in Chinese-speaking countries but also surpass geographical boundaries, appealing to readers worldwide who seek narratives that challenge, provoke, and illuminate. Fast-growing China, being the 2nd economy in the world, attracts authors from all over the world to seek information about the social, cultural and economic changes within China and to know that Yan Linke's books are serving as a panacea. Through his captivating stories and allegorical landscapes, Yan Lianke unveils hidden truths about the human experience in a very delicate manner.

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