

# Yan Lianke

# DISCOVERING FICTION

TRANSLATED AND WITH AN  
INTRODUCTION BY CARLOS ROJAS



## Praise for Yan Lianke

“Yan is one of those rare geniuses who finds in the peculiar absurdities of his own culture the absurdities that infect all cultures.”

—*Washington Post*

“Yan’s subject is China, but he has condensed the human forces driving today’s global upheavals into a bracing, universal vision.”

—*New York Times*

“China’s most controversial novelist ... [A] preternatural gift for metaphor spills out of him unbidden.”—*New Yorker*

“One of China’s eminent and most controversial novelists and satirists.”

—*Chicago Tribune*

“China’s foremost literary satirist... [Yan] deploys offbeat humour, anarchic set pieces and surreal imagery to shed new light on dark episodes from modern Chinese history.”—*Financial Times*

“One of China’s most important—and certainly most fearless—living writers.”—*Kirkus Reviews*

“A master of imaginative satire.”—*Guardian*

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## **DISCOVERING FICTION**

SINOTHEORY

A series edited by Carlos Rojas and Eileen Cheng-yin Chow

**Yan Lianke**  
**DISCOVERING**  
**FICTION**

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CARLOS ROJAS

DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS  
*Durham and London 2022*

© 2011 发现小说 Yan Lianke  
© 2022 Introduction and English Translation,  
Duke University Press  
All rights reserved  
Printed in the United States of America on  
acid-free paper ∞  
Designed by A. Mattson Gallagher  
Typeset in Adobe Jenson Pro and Futura Std  
by Westchester Publishing Services

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data  
Names: Yan Lianke, [date] author. | Rojas, Carlos, [date]  
translator.

Title: Discovering fiction / Yan Lianke ; translated by  
Carlos Rojas.

Other titles: Fa xian xiao shuo. English | Sinotheory.

Description: Durham : Duke University Press, 2022. |

Series: Sinotheory | Includes bibliographical references  
and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2021041141 (print) | LCCN 2021041142  
(ebook)

ISBN 9781478015673 (hardcover)

ISBN 9781478018308 (paperback)

ISBN 9781478022916 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Fiction—Technique. | Fiction—History  
and criticism. | Realism in literature. | BISAC: LITERARY CRITI-  
CISM / General | FICTION / Literary

Classification: LCC PL2925.L54 F3613 2022 (print) |

LCC PL2925.L54 (ebook) | DDC 895.13/52—dc23/

eng/20220111

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021041141>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021041142>

Cover art: Zhong Biao, *Take Off*, 2015. Oil on  
canvas, 59 × 47¼ inches (150 × 120 cm). Courtesy  
of Eli Klein Gallery and the artist; © Zhong Biao.

## Contents

TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION	
Creating Reality and Surpassing Realism	ix
<i>Carlos Rojas</i>	
<b>1 Realism's Four Levels of Truth</b>	1
<b>2 Zero Causality</b>	35
<b>3 Full Causality</b>	51
<b>4 Partial Causality</b>	59
<b>5 Inner Causality</b>	83
<b>6 Mythorealism</b>	99
Appendix: Chinese Authors and Works	125
Notes	129
Bibliography	133
Index	137



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## Translator's Introduction

### Creating Reality and Surpassing Realism

CARLOS ROJAS

Completed in 2010 (and published in 2011), *Discovering Fiction* opens with a reference to “A Traitor to Writing,” Yan Lianke’s afterword to his 2010 novel *The Four Books*. Set in a re-education camp for accused Rightists in the late 1950s, the novel explores not only the political persecution associated with the Anti-Rightist Campaign (1957–1959) but also the devastating famine that took the lives of tens of millions of Chinese during this same period. Known euphemistically as the “three years of natural disaster,” the Great Famine (1959–1962) was actually a direct result of a set of misguided political and economic policies implemented under the Great Leap Forward Campaign (1958–1962).

Although the Anti-Rightist Campaign and the Great Famine impacted wide swaths of China’s population, they have received relatively little direct attention by Chinese fiction authors. During the Maoist period, up through the end of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), the government exercised strict control over literary production, and even after these controls were loosened during the Reform and Opening Up Campaign that Mao’s successor Deng Xiaoping launched in 1978, certain politically sensitive topics remained effectively off-limits—due to a combination of official censorship (whereby all published fiction must be reviewed and approved by government-appointed agents) and soft censorship (whereby authors and publishers are encouraged to voluntarily avoid sensitive topics).

When Yan Lianke mentions at the beginning of *Discovering Fiction* that *The Four Books* “has almost no chance of being published in China,” accordingly, this is a reference to his decision to devote the novel to the overlapping political and humanitarian crises that afflicted China in the late 1950s. Yan Lianke had previously had several works that were either banned or recalled (such as *Serve the People!*), or that had been significantly shaped by his own practice of self-censorship (such as *Dream of Ding Village*, which was later recalled anyway). With *The Four Books*, however, Yan Lianke decided to write the novel without consideration of whether it would be acceptable to Chinese publishers and censors. Like many of his works, it was published in Chinese in Taiwan and Hong Kong and was subsequently translated into many foreign languages, but it was never officially published in Mainland China.

Like all of Yan Lianke’s fiction, *The Four Books* is closely engaged with the historical realities of modern China, though it frequently approaches these topics in an unusual, fantastic manner. For instance, during the height of the famine, the work’s protagonist, who is known simply as “the Author,” begins cultivating a secret plot of grain and comes up with the idea of irrigating the soil with his own blood:

When I lowered my head, I saw that the wheat leaves were covered with a combination of beads of blood and drops of water, and the fields were flowing with a mixture of blood and rain that alternated between light and dark red, as though it were a dyeing mill. I saw the uppermost grain of wheat sucking the blood rain like an infant sucking milk, and the wheat leaves sprinkling drops of blood-water in all directions. After the thick smell of blood dissipated and mixed with the scent of wheat, I became surrounded by a fresh new aroma.

I resolved to slice my own flesh.

I also decided to allow my blood to fully bleed out, to the point that I could no longer remain upright. I collapsed limply to the ground and closed my eyes for a while. When I opened them again, light from the setting sun was shining in through the lower part of the window, like red rain flowing into the room. (293)

The result is a crop of oversized, blood-filled ears of wheat, which are pursued intently by other residents of the re-education camp. Although clearly fantastic, this “blood grain” plotline evocatively captures the sorts

of desperate measures to which many victims of the Great Famine were driven.

Similarly, the authorities' attempts to root out and eliminate "Rightist" political and cultural tendencies is manifested, in the novel, in a practice wherein the leader of the re-education camp—a mysterious figure who is identified only as "the Child"—confiscates virtually all of the detainees' books, including both Chinese and Western works, and ritualistically burns them in a giant bonfire. Early in the novel, there is a description of how

the Child grabbed several volumes, including *Call to Arms*, *Faust*, and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, and lit them on fire. He took a copy of *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, and set it on fire. He took copies of *The Divine Comedy* and *Strange Tales from the Liao Zhai Studio*, and set them on fire as well. The Child burned many books. As he was about to burn Balzac's novels, however, he threw them back onto the pile. And when he was about to burn Tolstoy's novels, he also tossed them onto the pile. He tossed back a copy of *Crime and Punishment*, and said to those two youngsters, "Keep these, and take them all to my house. I can burn them in the winter to keep warm." (17)

It is not until near the end of the novel, meanwhile, that it is finally revealed that the reason why, in this passage, the Child sets aside Honoré de Balzac's and Leo Tolstoy's works is not, as he claims, because he plans to burn them himself, but rather because he is in the process of amassing an enormous private library that includes a copy of virtually every title that he has been publicly confiscating and destroying.

Notably, Balzac and Tolstoy are also crucial reference points in Yan Lianke's detailed discussion, in *Discovering Fiction*, of nineteenth-century European realism, and his study also references many of the other targeted authors and works mentioned in this passage from *The Four Books*—including not only Western classics like *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* but also late imperial Chinese classics such as Pu Songling's *Strange Tales from the Liao Zhai Studio* and early twentieth-century classics such as Lu Xun's short story collection *Call to Arms*. Indeed, the Child's compulsive practice of collecting and storing an eclectic array of literary texts (both premodern and modern, Chinese and Western) may be seen as a compelling metaphor for Yan Lianke's own reading practice;

and in *Discovering Fiction*, Yan offers a thoughtful reflection on how he views his relationship to earlier literary traditions—particularly to nineteenth-century European high realism, early twentieth-century modernism, mid-twentieth-century Latin American magic realism, and the more ideologically inflected tradition of socialist realism (or, what Yan Lianke calls here “constructed realism”) that was dominant during the Maoist period.

Born in 1958 in rural Henan, Yan Lianke joined the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) in 1978, the same year Deng Xiaoping launched the Reform and Opening Up Campaign, and he published his first story in 1979. Working as a professional author for the PLA, Yan initially focused on writing social realist–style works designed to improve soldier morale. The result was a set of works that resembled socialist realism, in contrast to the avant-garde experimentations of some of contemporaries, such as Yu Hua, Su Tong, Wang Anyi, and Can Xue. Yan Lianke began to gain broader recognition in the late 1980s and early 1990s with a series of six novellas set in the fictional village of Yaogou, and which were republished in 1991 as a single volume under the title *The Prison of Emotion*. The novellas, known collectively as his Yaogou series, are each narrated in the voice of a young man named Yan Lianke, like the author himself—anticipating the metafictional turn that Yan’s fiction would take in the late 1990s and 2000s.

In the late 1990s, Yan Lianke began to develop an increasingly experimental writing style that used dark humor to explore a set of underlying social realities. For instance, *Streams of Time* (1998) features a village whose residents suffer from a variety of afflictions—including darkened teeth, joint disease, skeletal deformities, and paralysis—and who all end up dying from throat tumors before they turn forty. The novel was inspired by China’s so-called cancer villages, though this term did not enter common usage in China until after the novel was published.<sup>1</sup> *Hard Like Water* (2001) is set during the Cultural Revolution and focuses on a nexus of political passion and libidinal desire, while *Lenin’s Kisses* (2004) revolves around a village where virtually all the residents are handicapped, offering a suggestive commentary on the marginalized status of the disabled in contemporary China. Finally, *Dream of*

*Ding Village* (2006) is set in a village ravaged by AIDS, taking inspiration from the HIV/AIDS epidemic that had devastated rural regions of central China—and particularly Yan Lianke's home province of Henan.

Although each of the preceding works takes inspiration from reality, they all employ an innovative narrative structure and incorporate explicitly fantastic elements. The chapters of *Streams of Time*, for instance, are organized in reverse chronological order; *Lenin's Kisses* features countless endnotes that explain dialectal words and phrases but also offer an important back story to the work's plot; and *Dream of Ding Village* is narrated by a dead boy from beyond the grave. Through these unconventional narrative frames, these works underscore the significance not only of the social realities being represented but also of the process of literary representation itself.

After *Dream of Ding Village*, Yan Lianke published several novels that each foreground authors or scholars. First, *Ballad, Hymn, Ode* (2008) is a satire of Chinese academia that uses a focus on a peasant-turned-scholar to expose a pattern of academic corruption. Two years later, Yan published *The Four Books* (2010), which revolves around a novelist identified as "the Author" who is recruited to compile reports on the other members of the camp and submit them to the authorities. *The Explosion Chronicles* (2013), meanwhile, features a Beijing-based novelist named Yan Lianke, who has been commissioned to compile and edit a local history of his hometown of Explosion, which during the post-Mao period had quickly developed from a modest village into a town, a county, a city, and finally into a provincial-level megalopolis. Similarly, *The Day the Sun Died* (2015) features an eccentric author named Yan Lianke who repeatedly quotes from his own works and is positioned as a suggestive counterpoint to the young boy—and aspiring author—who is the novel's narrator and nominal protagonist. In this way, each of these works focuses on the mediated relationship between reality and literary representation, and specifically on the factors that may influence the direction of the resulting texts. In addition, a more specific theme that runs through several of these recent works involves the sociopolitical forces that may help shape the content of a literary work or restrict its availability to the reading public—and it is no coincidence that during this same period, Yan Lianke's own works became subject to tighter oversight within China.

In *Discovering Fiction*, Yan Lianke offers a systematic overview of literary representation in China and the West, culminating in a discussion of what he calls “mythorealism.” Identifying mythorealism as the style of realism that he has followed in his most recent novels, Yan Lianke traces the style’s approaches in earlier works by figures ranging from Franz Kafka to Gabriel García Márquez, and defines it as the process of rejecting

the superficial logical relations that exist in real life in order to explore a kind of invisible and “nonexistent” truth—a truth that is obscured by truth itself. Mythorealism is distinct from conventional realism, and its relationship to reality is not driven by direct causality but instead involves a person’s soul and spirit (which is to say, the connection between a person and the real relationship between spirit and interior objects), and an author’s conjectures grounded in a real foundation. Mythorealism is not a bridge offering direct access to truth and reality, and instead it relies on imaginings, allegories, myths, legends, dreamscapes, and magical transformations that grow out of the soil of daily life and social reality.

With respect to mythorealism’s relationship to realism and reality, Yan Lianke explains that “mythorealism does not definitely reject reality, but attempts to *create reality and surpass realism*” (emphasis added). The phrase Yan Lianke deploys here for “surpass realism” (*chaoyue xianshizhuyi*) closely resembles the Chinese term for “surrealism” (*chaoxianshizhuyi*) but uses the verb *chaoyue* (“to surpass”) instead of the prefix *chao* (“sur-”). In a couple of commentaries on *Lenin’s Kisses*, meanwhile, we find two alternate ways of understanding the expression *surpassing realism* and, by extension, Yan Lianke’s concept of mythorealism itself.

First, in an interview conducted shortly after the publication of *Lenin’s Kisses*, the literary critic Li Tuo opens with a lengthy question in which he posits that *Lenin’s Kisses* contains “many elements and techniques that appear sur-real [*chaoxianshi*] (though not exactly in the sense of surrealism [*chaoxianshizhuyi*]), and as the plot progresses, these elements and techniques become intimately intertwined with a realistic drive, as a result of which the narrative becomes filled with tensions and contradictions.” Li Tuo then offers a detailed overview of various realistic and “sur-realistic” trends in twentieth-century Chinese literature,

to which Yan Lianke responds by expressing general agreement with this summary, concluding, “I think we have no choice but to use non-realistic writing practices, just as we have no choice but to use a set of sur-realistic writing practices. It is only by using these sorts of non-realistic and sur-realistic writing practices that it is thereby possible to approximate the kernel of reality and to display the inner core of life.”<sup>2</sup>

Here, Yan Lianke follows Li Tuo’s lead in describing his literary approach as being “sur-realistic,” in the sense of attempting to represent the “sur-real,” or a level of reality positioned outside of what is traditionally viewed as the real. Although this sur-realistic approach is not realistic in the sense of representing reality as it is conventionally conceived, it nevertheless attempts to capture a deeper truth by changing the way that we perceive reality itself.

Second, in his 2004 afterword to *Lenin’s Kisses*, titled “Seeking a Reality beyond ‘Isms,’” Yan Lianke had previously offered an alternate characterization of his novel’s relationship to realism when he asked his readers,

Really, please pay no heed to grandiose discussions of “reality,” truth,” “art deriving from life,” “life is the only source of literary creation,” and so forth. In reality, there is no true life laid out in front of you. Every reality, every instance of reality, after having been filtered through an author’s mind, inevitably becomes false. When true blood flows through an author’s pen, it is inevitably transformed into ink. Truth does not exist in life, and even less does it appear within fiery reality. Instead, truth only exists in the hearts of a select group of authors. That which derives from the heart and the soul is truth, strength, and realism. Even if what grows out of one’s inner heart is merely a tiny weed that does not exist in the mortal world, this will nevertheless still be a true mushroom of immortality. This is the reality of writing—a reality that transcends ideology. If one insists on raising the banner of realism, then this would have to be regarded as the only true realism—a realism that surpasses “isms” [*chaoyue zhuyi de xianshizhuyi*].<sup>3</sup>

In this earlier afterword, we find a subtle shift in terminology—from the title’s initial reference to an attempt to find “a reality beyond ‘isms,’” to the essay’s more provocative allusion to an attempt to find ‘a realism



beyond ‘isms’” (emphases added). In this allusion to an effort to move beyond “isms” we find an echo of Gao Xingjian’s concept of *meiyou-zhuyi*, which could be translated as either “without isms” (referring to the attempt to distance oneself from existing ideological formations) or as “nothing-ism” (wherein the attempt to disavow ideological formations becomes a new ideological formation in its own right).<sup>4</sup> Indeed, just as Terry Eagleton contends that the Romantic ideal of an aesthetic sphere located outside of ideology is itself a thoroughly ideological conceit,<sup>5</sup> Gao Xingjian’s appeal to a nonideological realm “without isms” is itself an ideological gesture.<sup>6</sup> In Yan Lianke’s case, meanwhile, what we find is not so much an attempt to access a reality outside of ideology but rather a representational process (“realism”) that attempts to break from a set of normalized ideological formations (“isms”). The result is a literary practice that does not imagine itself as being outside of ideology but rather attempts to reassess the relationship between reality, ideology, and literary production.

If we read Yan Lianke’s formulation of mythorealism in *Discovering Fiction* through the lens of these two earlier discussions, accordingly, we find two potential understandings of his description of mythorealism’s attempt to create reality through a practice that focuses on an attempt “to create reality [and] surpass realism” (*chuangzao xianshi, chaoyue xianshizhuyi*). On one hand, we could follow the lead of Yan Lianke’s interview with Li Tuo and understand the phrase in question as describing mythorealism’s efforts to create reality and pursue a representational practice that goes beyond conventional reality. On the other hand, if we instead follow the lead of Yan’s afterword to *Lenin’s Kisses*, we could parse the same phrase as pointing to mythorealism’s attempt to create reality and pursue a representational practice that goes beyond *conventional realism* itself.