


Ethical Discourse and Narrative Strategies in Yan's 老师，好美 (To My Teacher, with Love)

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Recommended Citation

Wang, Zhuo. "Ethical Discourse and Narrative Strategies in Yan's 老师，好美 (To My Teacher, with Love)." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 17.5 (2015): [<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2738>](https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2738)

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Volume 17 Issue 5 (December 2015) Article 10

Zhuo Wang,

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<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol17/iss5/10>>

Contents of **CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 17.5 (2015)**

Special Issue ***Fiction and Ethics in the Twenty-first Century***. Ed. Zhenzhao Nie and Biwu Shang

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol17/iss5/>>

Abstract: In her article "Ethical Discourse and Narrative Strategies in Yan's 老师, 好美 (To My Teacher, with Love)" Zhuo Wang discusses the way in which narrative converges with ethics at the site of a radical "ethical environment" in Geling Yan's novel. Wang focuses on how the novel's first-person confessional narration, third-person reflective narration, and online narration dialogue with and interrogate one another working together to bring forth Yan's reconsideration of the ethical dimensions of her text. Wang argues that the novel's personal and social ethics are embodied multiple narrative voices which altogether reflect on the close relationship between novels and ethical discourse in contemporary Chinese society.

Zhuo WANG

Ethical Discourse and Narrative Strategies in Yan's 老师, 好美 (To My Teacher, with Love)

Geling Yan published a new book in 2014 with the title 老师, 好美 (To My Teacher, with Love), her first novel to focus on a high school theme. Different from Yan's previous novels, To My Teacher, with Love was greeted with a storm of criticism by scholars, critics, and readers. For example, Yan "does not let go of her hands grasping the soul of the story," so that her new book "loses the last gleam of 'beauty'" (Han 19; unless indicated otherwise, all translations are mine) and the novel is merely "mechanical writing" and that it tells no more than a bad "love story" (Zhu <<http://book.sina.com.cn/zl/shuping/2014-08-25/1455648.shtml>>). Yan claims that in an effort to write her novel, she spent three years at a Chinese high school to get access to the true life of the students and that spent another six to seven years to work on the novel ("Marginal Woman" <<http://news.inewsweek.cn/detail-944.html>>). The discrepancy between readers' and critics' response and the author's view of her text requires us to examine some general principles of writing, as well as some factors unique to Yan's writing. In my view neither critics nor readers are prepared for Yan's dramatic shift in her new novel in terms of theme and style. First, Yan used to tell Chinese stories "from a distance of one hundred and twenty years" (McWilliams 133). In other words, most of her stories, located in a remote time and space, tend to be texts of "defamiliarization." However, To My Teacher, with Love tells a story about college entrance examination which is familiar to all Chinese people. Without a time and space distance or cultural defamiliarization, the dramatic nuances of the story might fall short of the expectation of readers. Second, the story is about a love affair between a teacher and two students resulting in violence and murder. The love affair between the teacher and her students is unpardonable to Chinese people who are socialized to respect their teacher and to accept his/her authority. So it is understandable that reading this book is a big challenge to readers' psychological and ethical perceptions. As a skillful writer, would Yan have not anticipated the potential issue her readers would have with the ethical problematics of the love affair between teacher and student? In my opinion this is likely. Although Yan herself wrote that her novel "is to criticize the Chinese college entrance examination" (Yan qtd. in Zhao <<http://www.xzbu.com/3/view-6167269.htm>>) and "to appeal warmth under pressure" (Yan qtd. in Li, Tang <<http://book.douban.com/review/6866525/>>), it is obvious that the scope and depth of her novel had an impact beyond her expectations. While in Western genre categories of youth literature, campus literature, or in *Bildungsroman*-s (also in many films) the theme of a love affair between a teacher/professor and a student is frequent, this is not the case in Chinese literature.

If we peel away the upper layer of the theme of Chinese college entrance examination from the story, we find two key themes in her novel: one is an ethical layer and the other is a narrative layer. Briefly, the story of the novel is as follows. Two senior high school boys, Tianyi Shao and Chang Liu, become obsessed with their high school teacher, Jiixin Ding, a 36-year-old single mother, and their sensitive and emotional relationships end up with one boy killing the other. Ding, tortured by her conscience and the public reproach, gives up on her life after beaten brutally by the families of the students. An illicit affair, two lost lives, and one "perpetrator" waiting for the legal punishment are the basic factors of the story. Yan heard this story from a friend, but it is a true story that happened in mainland China at the end of the twentieth century. Then which element in the story is appealing enough to draw Yan's attention? I think it is the context in which the story took place and what Yan is familiar with which attracted Yan. That is, the story is located in an "ethical environment" in which "human nature" is contextualized (Nie 256). The Chinese college entrance examination is a frequent theme in Yan's novels; however, in To My Teacher, with Love it is the "ethical environment" that amplifies human weakness and nurtures the story. Yan has an insightful understanding of this issue and in an interview she elaborates: "I transformed a high school campus into an environment and pushed the three characters, all very good persons, into this extreme environment, seeing the sudden fission of human nature in this environment out of expectation. But why will he [Liu] give out this dark lightning in this extreme environment? Just because he has been suppressed in his sub-consciousness for a long time and been shaped by his life states. He could not realize that such extreme behavior results from his long-term sub-consciousness and unconsciousness. And what I wanted to do in this novel was to dissect this" (Yan qtd. in Fan <<http://book.sina.com.cn/zl/wenhua/blog/2014-08-07/1814609/1268762203/4b9fc65b0102uyh1.shtml>>).

I posit that we have ample reasons to believe that the novel is not so much about Chinese college entrance examinations as about how a tragedy of love occurs in a context of social constraints. The theme of love in its various perspectives and occurrences are dominant in Yan's texts. For example, in short story "Siao Yu" tells a modern version of yearning wife and in "Aspects of Human Nature" the heroine falls in love with her uncle who is twenty-three years older. In some of her other short stories there are also incestuous love affairs: for example, in "Red Skirt" there is mother and son love affair and in "Flowers and Youth") the protagonist and his young step-mother are in love with each other. Further, Yan's texts include relations violating various ethical taboos. For example, in "Both Adam and

Eve," Eve is narrated in the contexts of lesbian love and in "Chestnut Hair" the protagonist gets married not for love, but in order to receive money for her tuition fees. In sum, Yan's texts suggest that tragic love affairs are a metaphor of human behavior and she explores human nature and social practices in this specific context, namely locating "different" love in an ethical environment: "What I concerned most in all of my novels is human nature, as it is too rich to be fully explained, too rich to be fully expected" (Li, Zongjin 106). It is worthwhile to note that in *To My Teacher, with Love*, Yan's meditation on human nature seems to be full of self-reflection and self-criticism, which is best reflected by her rethinking of the "Utmost Femininity" (Yan, "Preface"). Further, Yan's "Utmost Femininity" is her special understanding of Chinese motherhood: "motherhood embodies suffering, pardon and willing to self-sacrifice" (Yan qtd. in Fu, Sang 103). With Yan's efforts over a period of thirty years, "Utmost Femininity" is nurtured into a spiritual context shared by all Chinese women in her texts. The reason that Yan prefers "femininity" to "woman" lies in her philosophical meditation on the nature of woman. For Yan, "femininity" does not simply refer to the counterpart of masculinity in terms of biology, but includes socially constructed attributes. From the way Yan defines femininity, it is clear that her "femininity" is a "mixture" merging motherhood with sexual desire.

In Yan's literary creation, narrative and ethics are two ends of a magnet interacting with each other to produce a magnet field and hence she shares J. Hillis Miller's idea that "without storytelling ... there is no theory of ethics" (3) and she writes that "I feel that writing novels is supposed to be the process of realizing my ambition for morality, aesthetics, and politics" (Yan, Hua <<http://www.china.com.cn/chinese/RS/368020.htm>>). Yan's *To My Teacher* intersects morality and aesthetics, ethics and narrative in order to locate an ethically invested story. The voices of the first-person confessional narration and third-person reflective narration are shifting constantly in the novel with the "voices" of mass media like the internet and the newspaper and the implied author narration all with different ethical functions. Her use of multiple voices makes the novel an ideal "hypernovel" (Sontag 220): it breaks through linear time so that we can read it through different entrances none of which would force the reader as a first point of entry to the novel. While one narrative voice attempts to stereotype some position, the other voice will try to subvert it. The ethical position of the author develops in the novel via interrogating and conflicting of multiple narrative voices confirms what Anthony Kerby designates, namely that "narrative is a moral drama" (63) and what Zhenzhao Nie's suggests, namely that "the core value of literature is to cultivate humans to be moral" (11). In the following I analyze *To My Teacher* with regard to its narrative structure including the narrative's multiple voices and explore the ethical dimensions embodied in the narrative in order to underline the novel's literary value and social meaning.

Yan starts her novel with her specific narrative technique of multiple voices: "The voice is from prosecutor" (1). In the first chapter, words concerned with the auditory sense like "voice," "listen," "hear" are repeated again and again. These words convey one striking feature of this novel, namely that the narrative voices are as important as the story itself. In the words of James Phelan, voice is a "factor" in the narrative and an important "part" of narrative methods because voice "allows us to differentiate one voice from another, even when the speaker is the same, voice refers to the synthesis of style, tone (the attitude a speaker takes toward his subject matter and audience, and values (the implicit ethical and ideological judgments of subject matter and sometimes of audience)" (Phelan, *Reading* 87). Among the multiple narrative voices in *To My Teacher, with Love*, one first person narrative voice runs through and occasionally dominates the other voices. This voice comes from the heroine of the tragedy. From the perspective of social ethics, teacher Ding cannot in any way shift the blame. If it were not for her, the lives of two young boys would not have brought to an end abruptly, if it were not for her, the tragedy might not have happened. So after one boy killing the other, she becomes the target of revenge of the boys' parents and the object of public criticism. In the eyes of the public, she is a morally deteriorated "witch" (139). However, Yan endows the main narrative authority to Ding, the "vicious seducer" and bad teacher. Ding's first-person narration is an ethical act of self-judgment which undergoes several stages: from self-defense to self-confession to self-judgment. During this process Ding's recognition of the importance of ethics become clearer after painful inner struggle.

Ding's first-person narration starts from self-defense, which reveals that she is ambiguous about her ethical position and ethical identity and her narration exposes this ethical ambiguity: "I don't know whether the relations between our three are dirty. It is confusing at the very beginning from the moment you sent me a message or even earlier" (5). In other words, what is confusing to her is not the relationship itself, but the ambiguity of her ethical identity. At the stage of Ding's self-defense, she wallows in self-pity, believing herself to be a "bitter" woman with painful emotion and hard life. Literally speaking, it might be true: a 36-years old woman, divorced, single mother. In her life she takes great effort to play her social roles: daughter, mother, and of course teacher, but she knows well there is one vacant role in her life: lover. She wants to love and of course be loved. However, she is confused about who will be or might be her lover and thus she falls prey to an identity crisis with ethical confusion. In Ding's first-person narration, matters of self-identity are articulated repeatedly particularly the perspective of motherhood, a psychological foundation upon which she defends herself.

The reason she dwells on how she takes care of her male students like a mother is that she tries to find a comfortable excuse for her love. Only if she defines herself as the mother of the boys, could she accept their text messages of confessing love and texts back by writing whether she could "hug" them when they are much taller than her (97). This confused self-identity also helps her go through the embarrassing moment after she has sex with Shao. The morning after they made love, Ding seems to have forgotten what happened the night before and says hello to him as if "he was a nephew or the young son from a distant relative who visited by chance" (98).

However, Ding's perspective of self-defense does not last long and her realization comes about by doubts about her identity as mother and teacher. When Shao, witnessing her kiss with Liu, breaks down and bursts into tears, she realizes that she "makes the role of teacher neither fish nor fowl" and that the affair is "dangerous" (104). At the same time, she does not give up her chance of self-defense and claims that "when I give you this unspeakable love, I am sincere, without knowing it is poisonous" (104). At the funeral of Shao, Ding tries for the first time to reflect on her self-identity in the real sense. Not being invited to Shao's funeral, she has to hide behind a bush in front of the funeral hall, realizing she "is not qualified to attend the funeral" and admitting for the first time that she "is not certain about her identity"(148). This embarrassing situation forces her to ask herself "What am I to him?" (148) and this shocks her and has to face the recognition that she is "a female monster" and that this "female monster" is ugly, "a mixture of promiscuous lover, unprincipled mother, irresponsible sister and an old grandmother slipping candies into grandchildren's hands without a slice of knowledge of nutrition ... no one in the world is more generous about love than this female monster," but that this love is "cheap" and even "poisonous" (105). Ding might intend to find excuses by realization of her doings and feelings and comes to face her true self who should be responsible for the tragic lives of the two boys. Her recognition of the ethical perspective goes through a process from confusion to clarification parallel to the process of her transformation from self-pity to self-defense to self-judgment. And this process is transformed into action which in turn results in her giving up on her life after she has been tortured by her conscience for two years. In this way the first-person narrator transforms her relation with the story, with two boys, and with the readers through and her fate is in some way transformed as well. In some sense, it is her confessional narrative that "kills" the "female monster."

From the above analysis, we know the reason why Yan endows narrative authority to Ding and thus Yan makes the ethics a key component of the novel. It is worthwhile to note that Ding's first-person narration is not to restore the truth of this complicated case: Yan knows well that Ding is not a reliable narrator. There is no evidence to show that Yan uses "unreliable narration" (Phelan), but there is abundance of evidence that Yan is a fan of Nabokov's *Lolita*. Yan claims in several interviews that Nabokov is one of the writers she loves most and thus we can infer that Yan noticed *Lolita*'s unreliable narrator Humbert and in many ways Ding's first person-narration is similar to Humbert's. Both Ding's and Humbert's first-person narrations show "the impossibility of attaining either truth or self-forgiveness via acts of (confessional)self-writing" (Worthington 147). As a skillful writer, Yan is obviously conscious of this point. It is potentially dangerous to endow the narrative authority to one of the interested party in this incestuous love affair, because her narration might influence the "ethical position" of the readers and cause ethical confusion (Phelan, *Living* 23), which is unacceptable to Yan who believes faithfully that to write is to moralize. This can explain why Yan is so eager to reveal her ethical position and revise the character's unreliable first-person narration. Comparatively speaking, Yan is more honest than Nabokov who declares repeatedly that it is Humbert rather than he who cares about the relationship with *Lolita*. Nabokov might or might not have cared, but Yan does care, which explains why an anxious omniscient third-person narration is introduced in her novel. As to this point, Yan, after years of writing practices and strict writing training, shares an understanding with Christa Wolf: "I understand the secret of the third person narration. The third person ... can bring down more reality than the first person: I. The difficulty of saying 'I'" (120).

This third-person narrative voice appears when it narrates Liu's court hearing explaining the ins and outs of the case. This narrative voice obviously comes from Yan as the implied author and her narration forms the extradiegetic narrative level of the text. Different from the first-person's intradiegetic narration whose narratees are two boys involved in the love triangle, the third-person's extradiegetic narration posits both the implied and real readers as the audience. On this level, Yan contacts with her readers from two aspects. On the one hand, the third-person narration reiterates the illicit love affair from a different point of view and on the other hand, the third-person narration makes its own judgment on the ethical position of Ding's narration. In sum, the third-person narration seems to be a story about the story of the love affair. Thus chapter three is almost the rewriting of chapter two. The two chapters focus on the same fragment in the story, but the relations of the characters and the plot are different because they are told from different point of views by different narrators. In chapter two Ding's first person narration focuses on her sorrowful and helpless feelings after she heard that Shao was killed by Liu. In addition, her narration introduces us to two innocent and lovely teenage boys. In chapter three the third person narration focuses on Liu and his feelings. From his love for Ding and his killing of his rival, we see a cold-hearted, strong minded, and meticulous killer. In Ding's

narration, what the boys nurture for their teacher is only ambiguous admiration; while in the third-person narration this admiration becomes a crazy and jealous love. When we face the cruel consequence that one boy kills the other, it is obvious that the third-person narration is closer to the "truth."

In light of the novel's relations between protagonists and ethics, the ethical position of Ding's narration reveals the relations between Ding and her two student lovers while the ethical position of the third-person narration reveals the relations between implied author and protagonists, narrators and readers, an "ethics of the telling" (Phelan, *Living* 23). The faster tempo of the third-person narration shows that the implied author has been trying to take the upper hand in telling the story and this is demonstrated in the following two aspects: 1) Ding's first-person narration tends to be sandwiched between two parts of the third-person narrations and 2) a voice of ethical judgment from an unknown speaker accompanies Ding's first-person narration and makes its comments from time to time. Thus the ethical position of the implied author is also Yan's ethical principle. Of course, the transformation of Ding's confessional narration from ethical ambiguity to clarification and finally to death as self-salvation also influences and even shocks the ethical position of the implied author. The intention of the implied author at the very beginning of the text is to restore truth to readers; however, with the transformation of Ding's self-recognition, the implied author becomes more aware of the issue of ethical position and this decides the shift of the focus of the third-person narration. The third-narrative voice, withdrawing gradually from the story itself, tends to pay more attention to the reflection on the ethical identity of Ding. For Yan, this shift itself is both an ethical judgment and a "narrative judgment" on the "narrative aesthetics" (Phelan, *Experiencing* 7). More specifically, it is Yan's ethical reflection on her concept of "Utmost Femininity."

To Yan's women characters, the nature of femininity is in a constant conflict with social ethics and the latter will always take the upper hand. Yan is obviously not comfortable with this consequence. When talking about the protagonist Xiao Dian, the heroine who has affairs with her uncle in *The Grassland of Femininity*, "her most favorite" book, Yan observes that "Xiao Dian is a beautiful and promiscuous girl, but she has a complete human nature. Her transformation of straightening up is also the process of losing her lovely nature and her charming character flaw. She is pure but inhuman" (Yan, "Preface" 5) What Yan is ambivalent about is the distinction between man's "animal factor" and man's "human factor" (Nie 38). In other words, she is confused about man's "biological selection" and "ethical selection" (Nie 33). One of her interviews in 2006 clearly reflects her confusion. Yan puts, "I also attempt to find some similarity between man's sexual love and animal's sexual love, i.e. sexual love is destructive, but it is ever lasting as well" (Yan qtd. in Jiang 51). However, the tragic ending of love in *To My Teacher, with Love* seems to awaken Yan, making her less confident of the social meaning of her "Utmost Femininity." After she goes through a painful reconsideration of the nature of femininity, motherhood, lover, and humanity, she sentences her "female monster" to death. In this way, the death of Ding is metaphorically meaningful in the sense that it is the self-reflection of Yan that kills her concept of "Utmost Femininity."

Interweaving with the confessional voice of the first-person narration and the reflective voice of the third-person narration, there is a public narrative from the cyber world. This anonymous narrative voice is not legally binding and sometimes hard to tell the true from the false, but it is powerful to form a devastating and dominating "social mind" (Palmer 44). There are twelve internet news, anecdotes, and cyber user's comments in the novel. The cyber texts are in some sense a hypertext, a non-linear narrative which is made possible by internet technology and the openness of hypertexts subvert the concepts of linear narrative and authoritative explanation (Gillis 282). From the point of view of narration, hypertext is metaphorically a hyperlink and people who click the hyperlink might be readers, writers, or the protagonists in the novel. One of the reasons why they want to click these hyperlinks is that they are stuck in a complex predicament of ethical selection. In *To My Teacher, with Love*, the functions of these hypertexts are multiple: 1) they suggest the conflicts of public opinion launched by the lawyers of Liu, the killer, and thus these hypertexts are concerned with the life and death of the boy killer, 2) they provide some background information about the story which in some sense deconstructs the authority of the third-person narration, 3) related with one other, they suggest cyber ethics corresponding with the first-person confessional ethics and third-person critical ethics thus framing the social context in which the love affair and its tragic murder take place, and 4) they are involved in the development of the plot directly and influence the ending of the story: after Liu is sentenced to death in the first instance, his rich mother hires an experienced lawyer to handle his case for appeal and who knows well the power of the public opinion supported by the internet, so he launches internet warfare to demonize Ding: "People cannot help but ask what this woman teacher has done to the two boys so that they have lost both their minds and their moral senses? What kind of witch is Ms Ding Jiaxin, this former advisor who has long past her charming age?" (139). These online opinions pave the way for Liu to withdraw his confession and revise his testimony. With the agitation of his lawyer, Liu makes up the following testimony: It was Ding who seduced him and incited his hatred and jealousy.

It is obvious that this narrative voice from the cyber world does not intend to clarify the truth. On the contrary, this furious and unanimous voice in some sense covers and even twists the truth and the online narrative is unreliable both in fact and in ethics. As to the case of the murder, the only approach for readers is to exert the influence of their own on the text based on their ethical criteria. Because online narratives are unreliable, the narrators online are "outsiders" and hence their hearsay is at best dubious. For example, a local evening newspaper reports an interview with one of Ding's students whose comments on her teacher is completely different from the others: "Ms Ding is a respectable teacher, the best teacher I have ever known" (141). This judgment is obviously in contradiction with Ding's self-judgment, the victim's parents' judgment, and that of the school's. Thus to some online readers, this judgment is misleading and unreliable, because this evaluation is made by a girl who admires her teacher. What the online report suggests may be true, it provides an unreliable judgment in terms of the prevailing ethics of society. Further, powerful public voices are also the heavy burdens placed on Ding and this is evident when she confesses that she is afraid of the internet (306). Compared with Humbert in *Lolita*, who wanders around to avoid critical eyes and public criticism, Ding in the internet age has nowhere to go. Just as how Marshall McLuhan put it, the earth is made into a global village by the "over-extended technology" (5) and in this context people have to face the "involuntary disclosure" of the person in the public eye (Sennett 25). As mentioned above, one of the reasons why Ding gave up her life is self-judgment and self-salvation via her confessional narration. In terms of her relations with the public, the other reason might be the burden of the overwhelmingly powerful online public voices. Last but not least, the protagonist in the novel takes death as a way of self-salvation, while Yan the author proposes another issue related with the concept of "Utmost Femininity" via the death of her protagonist: is the public voice authorized to criticize her "Utmost Femininity" and sentences it to death? Yan says no. Most of the voices online are motivated by money because the boy killer's mother money and property are behind the anonymous public opinions.

In conclusion, the first-person confessional narrative, the third-person reflective narrative, and the online narrative interrogate one another working together to reveal the complex nature of Yan's "Utmost Femininity" and sentence the "female monster" in the novel to death. Thus, Yan thematizes the narration in *To My Teacher, with Love* both in a personal, "readerly," and social context. Instead of focus on moral elements in a story about the conflict between love and ethics to give the readers guidance, Yan narrates an event readers are invited to gauge in context. It is the strength of her narrative that transforms an event and its tragic consequences into her reflection on the ethical dimension of "Utmost Femininity." The novel's personal and social ethics are embodied in first-person narration, third-person narration, and online narration which altogether reflect on the close relationship between novels and ethical discourse in contemporary Chinese society.

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