

Ethical Transformations in Yan's 陆犯焉识 (The Criminal Lu Yanshi)

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**Weihong Zhu,**  
**"Ethical Transformations in Yan's 陆犯焉识 (The Criminal Lu Yanshi)"**  
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**Abstract:** In her article "Ethical Transformations in Yan's 陆犯焉识 (The Criminal Lu Yanshi)" Weihong Zhu uses ethical literary criticism to explain the reason for the change in attitude which the novel's hero undergoes. Zhu argues that in Geling Yan's novel the turning point lies in the protagonist's realization of his inner "animal" factor. Subjected to severe tests by the extreme circumstances in a northwest prison in China, this realization helps him transform from a proud man to a humble human being, so that he learns to love his family. Although set in a grand historical background of important political events, Yan's novel *The Criminal Lu Yanshi* is not political. Disguised under a romantic story there is a serious inquiry into the nature of humanity.

**Weihong ZHU**

### **Ethical Transformations in Yan's 陆犯焉识 (The Criminal Lu Yanshi)"**

Although she has been living in the U.S. for over twenty years, Geling Yan nearly always chooses China as the background of her work, especially the historical period of the Cultural Revolution, a time that has had unprecedented impact on the Chinese people. Yan's 2011 novel *Prisoner Lu Yanshi* begins during the Cultural Revolution and extends to the 1990s with multiple flashbacks into the 1920s and 1930s, the period of the anti-Japanese War, and the time between the end of the war and before Lu Yanshi was thrown into a prison in northwest China. The novel has been hailed as an epic that records the spiritual ordeal of twentieth-century Chinese intellectuals, their yearning for personal freedom in conflict with political pressure (for more detailed discussions on this issue, see, e.g., Gao; Gong; Wang). The novel has also been read as a love story (see, e.g., Gong; Zhong) and this is also the subject of Yimou Zhang's 2014 film adaptation entitled *归来* (Coming Home). Unsatisfied with his arranged marriage, Yanshi had been eluding his wife for about thirty years and only comes to realize how deeply he loves her and his children when he is taken away to a prison in the northwest of China. Thereafter, he embarks on his difficult "coming home" journey. The storyline seems clear, but there remains one critical question: what happens in the prison that helps Yanshi come to realize his love for his family? Caiyun Li proposes that Yanshi obtains a spiritual space when confined within the cells of the prison and that it is this newly found freedom which allows him to reflect on his past life and discover his love for his wife. The explanation itself, however, raises doubts: why can Yanshi gain spiritual freedom in the state of physical confinement? How does reminiscence bring about true love?

Yujie Li points out that one prominent feature of Yan's writings is the "suspension of political correctness" (14; unless indicated otherwise, all translations are mine). Other scholars and critics have also noticed this phenomenon: Yan's works are set in a political background, but seem to have avoided evaluating the political events, i.e., Yanshi's imprisonment as an intellectual during the Cultural Revolution. Yan explained the reason when she said that "when I write, what I'm most concerned about is under what circumstances human beings will go to the extreme. Certain elements in human nature are always invisible under non-extreme circumstances. I don't write about 'revolutions'; I'm only concerned with the essentials of human nature" (Yan qtd. in Shu <<http://enjoy.eastday.com/epublish/gb/paper279/11/class027900015/hwz920964.htm>>). Clearly, for Yan the Cultural Revolution is just an "extreme" circumstance under which human nature is tested and examined. The guiding questions are what extremes human beings can go to, what hidden evils in human nature are revealed, and how much kindness persists. Yan's disclosure of her purpose of writing allows ethical literary criticism to come into play to reveal the underlying reason for Yanshi's change of attitude toward his wife. This perspective foregrounds the significance of the novel as more than just a love story or record of an ordeal. Using the theory of the "Sphinx factor" proposed by Zhenzhao Nie (i.e., the Greek Sphynx as a metaphor for humanity is a combination of a "human factor" and an "animal factor"), I argue that Yanshi owes the epiphany of his love for his wife to the discovery of his "animal factor" which comes to surface under extreme circumstances. The self-righteous man is forced to see his own defects as a humble human being so that his pride diminishes and as he no longer feels superior to his wife, he discovers his love for her.

Yanshi has a strange name because Chinese names are usually with a specific direct or metaphorical meaning of something, but Yanshi's name creates an enigma, for 陆焉识 means "How to recognize" or "How can we know?" The name remains an enigma not only to readers, but also to Yanshi himself. It is not that he does not have self-awareness, but that he does not know what/who he truly is. In the first half of his life, he is dominated by the human factor, that is, with his ethical consciousness. He identifies himself with some lofty roles and by sticking to them assumes the image of a person of high moral values. In the perspective of ethical literary criticism, human beings are marked in the society by their ethical identities which endow them with related obligations. The identity of a person is the consequence of his/her ethical choices and actions. While human beings are different from animals, humans' ethical choices determine their ethical identity and thereby duties (see Nie 263). Yanshi is the first born son of the Lu family, which is the consequence of "natural selection," but not yet the young master of the Lu's, for the young master of a family is an ethical identity that is tied to family responsibilities. Only when Yanshi is committed to these responsibilities can he become the young master of the Lu's. Yanshi succeeds and takes the responsibilities of a young master on his still fragile shoulders because he is only fourteen when his father dies. His stepmother Enniang had been married to his father for only eight months. Thinking of this woman as ominous, Yanshi's grandmother decides to send Enniang back to her parents. Enniang knows she cannot change her mother-in-law's mind. So

her only hope is Yanshi, the young master of the family, who is responsible for family business although he is only fourteen. Just before Enniang is to be sent away, Yanshi comes back home and announces that Enniang could stay and he would soon be old enough to earn money and provide for her. Yanshi's action indicates his conscious ethical identity as young master and of the duties associated with it. Once he takes up this identity, he carries out his duties thus winning everyone's respect.

It is also through moral responsibility that he enters into an arranged marriage with Wanyu. Wanyu is a girl of all virtues: beautiful, gentle, and well-educated. Unfortunately, her virtues are overshadowed by the glamour of Yanshi. From the start they are unequal in their relationship. When they first meet, Wanyu asks Yanshi to recommend her some books, perhaps in the hope of alleviating their emotional distance. But Yanshi tells her that he only reads English books. The difference in their choice of books is indicative of the great gap that would lie between them for the next thirty years. Yanshi's outstanding academic performance and sense of responsibility as the young master of his family have nurtured in him excessive self-pride at a rather young age, which spurs him to always do the "right" thing. He is not only a conscientious master, but also a principled scholar and uncompromising intellectual even at the cost of his friendships, family relations, and personal security.

Ethical identities are of various kinds, depending on blood relations, social relations, or different occupations (see Nie 263). Yanshi is a university professor and as such he abides by the ethical rules bound to that ethical identity. Yanshi's strict observance of academic ethics sets him apart from ordinary scholars. The firmness in his ethical stance as a scholar is replicated in his uncompromising character as an intellectual: "the ultimate role of an intellectual lies in his learning, analyzing, disseminating, and even challenging negating knowledge. He should not be judged as right or wrong for the knowledge he acquires and analyzes. He should also be granted the ultimate freedom, the freedom in spirit" (267). Considering it his duty to disseminate knowledge, Yanshi works diligently in his research, teaching, and writing. He is only concerned about whether the knowledge is true or false: he does not judge it from a political angle, although his persistence in the pursuit of knowledge jeopardizes his reputation. Yanshi is an expert in applied linguistics and has always been fascinated with languages and writes a column for a magazine. This column is a place for him where he can disseminate knowledge about languages to people in general and he is pleased that he can share with his readers insights about the development of human languages. In his last contribution he discusses the historical development of the Japanese language, completely ignorant of the risk of doing so at a time when Japan was invading China. A colleague of Yanshi, David, under a pseudonym, attacks Yanshi's column and accuses him of being a traitor to China. Soon the public opinion is manipulated against Yanshi, who still insists that "language is language. Although a world war breaks out, human languages are still fascinating because they have recorded the growth of human beings" (75). Yanshi's self-defense is futile because he and people like David conceive knowledge in disparate ways: as a true intellectual, he pursues knowledge for its own sake; as a fake intellectual, David uses knowledge as an instrument that can secure him a salary or threaten his opponent. Yanshi could have learned a lesson and become cautious, but his faith in the ethics of intellectuals prevents this. In fact, he even receives an offer of help: someone suggests joining the opposing camp, a magazine which had always fought against the one that was attacking him. Yanshi, however, "didn't go to the opponent of his opponent. He could always go to them for help at a later time so that he could always lose his pride and independence at a later time (76). And pride and freedom, to Yanshi, constitute the fundamental meaning of being an intellectual.

Yanshi refuses to be ideologically committed. He never joins a camp because only as an independent observer can he retain intellectual freedom. Unfortunately, remaining independent in society always seems difficult. We are always forced to join a camp; otherwise we are attacked by both camps. This is exactly what happens to Yanshi, David, and a character called Doctor Ling in Shanghai in 1936. After the Japanese invasion in Manchuria, a series of anti-Japanese students' movements break out. Doctor Ling does not approve of the students' radical behavior and publishes an article entitled "Patriotism of Students' Movement vs. Nation-Saving Science." This article, in turn, invokes serious criticism from the opposing camp to which David belongs. At a conference, when David argues with Ling about this issue, Ling drags Yanshi into his camp and asks Yanshi to explain his view to David. He does not know that Yanshi had published an article in which he argued against Ling's opinion in a humorous and mild tone. David, however, is thrilled that Yanshi joins his camp this time. He warmly welcomes Yanshi and presses him to continue with his attack: "In the following days, Yanshi had an inexplicable hate of himself: he had become what others wanted him to be, a Yanshi whom Doctor Ling wanted and another whom David Wei wanted. It was totally out of his control. Because of a moment of negligence, he lost his freedom at last" (137). Of course Yanshi is not willing to sacrifice his freedom so easily, so he tries to redeem the situation and asks the newspaper editor not to publish his article and tries to

persuade David not to use him anymore, but all in vain. In the end, both David and Ling become angry with him. Later during the Cultural Revolution when Yanshi is convicted, Ling could have saved him from prison, but refused; apparently he was still holding a grudge against Yanshi for his refusal to support his mission.

Yanshi pays an even higher price for his freedom when it comes to politics. During the anti-Japanese War, Yanshi is transferred to Chongqing with his university. There he continues to be the professor he wants to be. To him, this means teaching free of any official agenda: he does not use textbooks nor does he teach according to lesson plans approved by the Ministry of Education. He is convinced that political influence does not factor into his teaching since he teaches literature. In the eyes of other people, however, he does in fact talk about politics, for he instills into his students the thoughts of liberty and democracy. He pays a high price for adhering to his principle of ethics and is put into prison for over two years. Interestingly, Yanshi accepts his imprisonment placidly. The placidity he shows in this situation contrasts markedly with his vexation when he was dragged into David's or Ling's camp. His reaction towards the two situations accords with his conception of his ethical identity. As long as he retains freedom of thought, nothing else seems to bother him. In the first half of his life, the human factor in him plays the dominant role as his main concern is with his ethical duties. Thus, he becomes a perfect moral model, a model master, a model scholar, and a model intellectual. Complacent about his performance of his ethical duties, Yanshi is proud of himself and thus highlights the trick Yan plays on him in naming him "Who knows?" Yanshi is perfectly sure he knows who he is, but his name indicates otherwise.

Yanshi is no longer Yanshi in the prison and has three other names here. The first one is Lao Lu, a salutation with respect, but seldom used. The second one is 278, which is the prisoner number assigned to him. Yanshi generally goes by his third name, Lao Ji, which originated from a senior officer's mishearing of his other nickname "Lao Juan." It, however, cannot have been a mistake or accident on the part of the writer of the novel, Yan: "Ji" in Chinese has two meanings. First, it is an indefinite pronoun used in questions about quantity like "How much ...?" or "How many...?" Second, it is used to indicate an uncertain number, approximately corresponding to the English word "several" as in 几百人 ("several hundred people"). In practical use, it often appears in a rhetorical question such as "who do you think you are?" implying that the addressee is of little importance. Therefore, Yanshi's popular nickname in the prison, Lao Ji, carries an important implication. It is a rhetorical question to Yanshi who has had a high opinion of himself forcing him to realize that he is not that important or different, but just an ordinary human being like everyone else.

Ethical literary criticism posits that human beings exhibit the above-referred to Sphinx factor consisting of "human" and "animal" factors. The human factor is embodied by ethical consciousness. Owing to his human factor, humans have ethical consciousness which enables them to tell good from evil and this distinguishes human beings from animals. The animal factor is the opposite of the human factor: it relates to the animalistic instincts of human beings. The animal factor is embodied by natural will or free will and its existence is proof of humans' evolution from animals. However, unlike the animal part of humans' nature which is out of the control of rationality, the animal factor can be restricted by rationality (see Nie 38-39). Seen from the perspective of ethical literary criticism, Yanshi is a successful example of a rational human. The first half of his life exemplifies how a person's rationality enables him to always make the right ethical decision so that he becomes a moral model. Looking from the same perspective, however, I argue that Yanshi emphasizes so much his human factor that he forgets about his animal factor. It is only after he comes to see his own animal factor that he realizes he is only a humble human being. When Yan says that certain elements of human nature are always hidden (see above), she probably means the animal factor as in ethical literary criticism which rests on the proposition that under normal circumstances the animal factor is controlled by humans' rationality, but under extreme circumstances it may come to the surface. The prison is a place that creates extreme circumstances in several ways. First, the prison is an isolated place built in the middle of nowhere, far away from populated areas. Second, the prison is a place where all prisoners are deprived of individuality and dignity. The first measure to humble them is to call them by numbers, not by names. Whatever they did or however important they were before, they are just a number now in the prison. Here Yanshi is mingled with murderers, rapists, thieves, and criminals of all kinds. Third, the prison is cold and dangerous and the prisoners do not have enough food.

In order to survive in the prison, Yanshi first has to learn to combat hunger. Yanshi has never experienced a hunger so severe it can kill people. His family has had bad times, but Enniang and Wanyu somehow managed to feed the family. Now in prison, Yanshi has to learn his own tricks. His knowledge is no longer applied to philosophical issues, but to the satisfaction of his natural needs. He has discovered a way to make the best of the limited amount of food. He does not eat the food direct-

ly, but first soaks it with water, whether it is a piece of pumpkin, a bun, or some highland barley flour. With the same kind of precision with which he has treated matters of scholarship, he figures out the exact rules of how much water to add, in what manner, and even the direction and speed of stirring to ensure that the little food available can satisfy his stomach to the fullest. For that single purpose, he has even invented an eating tool, which is a piece of rubber from a tire tied to a chopstick. Unlike a spoon, rubber is flexible like a tongue, so it can collect food from any hidden corner of the bowl. This special eating tool soon becomes popular all over the prison. Yanshi the proud, decent master, and intellectual has perhaps never imagined that he can become a man whose mind is bent on finding food and making the fullest use of food. He is forced to see that beside the noble part of himself, the human factor, there exists underneath another less noble part, the animal factor. Under the pressure of his natural needs, Yanshi does not only have to sacrifice his dignity, but sometimes also his morality. During his prison years, Yanshi becomes close with a sixteen-year old murderer Liang Hulu who is smarter than others in finding food. One day a prisoner who sleeps beside Hulu dies. Instead of reporting his death, Hulu claims that the prisoner is ill, so he can fetch food for him. In this way he gets to eat a two-person ration. Hulu also gives Yanshi some extra food. At first, Yanshi has a moment of hesitation to accept Hulu's offer because he suspects him of obtaining it with immoral means. However, after Hulu reveals the secret to him, Yanshi "was startled by his own calmness" (Yan 25). Calmness is the reaction of the Yanshi who has been dominated by the animal factor, not the one who is governed by the human factor. Yanshi has good reason to eat the food of a dead man: he himself has to live. Interestingly, to relieve the guilt for his loss of morality, Yanshi, a minute later, reinterprets the act and secures some moral legitimacy: he guesses that the dead prisoner would not care about being taken advantage of in this way and decides that he himself would make the same sacrifice if need be. Thus Yanshi finds himself an excuse for his immoral behavior.

Yanshi's moral conscience is further tested in an event concerning his gold Omega watch. This watch had been a gift from Wanyu and is one of the few possessions that remind him of his former dignified identity. In the prison, Yanshi trades in the watch to Headman Xie for five eggs. Later Hulu steals the watch from Xie and gives it back to Yanshi. When Xie finds the watch missing, he tortures Hulu by tying him to a horse and drives the horse back and forth. Soon the skin of Hulu's head is worn off. Yanshi is among the audience watching this brutal scene of torture. He knows clearly if he confesses and gives the Omega back to Xie, Hulu will be saved, but he does not want to, because he has planned to use the watch for a special purpose. If he were still the Yanshi governed by his ethical principles, he would hand over the watch without hesitation. But now he is the desperate Lao Ji who must first protect himself: "If he saves Liang Hulu with the Omega, who will save him?" (49). To make his behavior more legitimate, he broods: "Liang Hulu even takes advantage of a dead corpse so that Liu Huzi doesn't even have a shallow grave. Shouldn't the little murderer be fixed? The little murderer has tempted Lao Ji to commit a sin—eating potatoes obtained from a corpse and turned Lao Ji from a decent scholar into a corpse-eating wolf dog. Isn't it right to 'fix' him?" (49).

In Yan's narration of free indirect discourse, Yanshi's inner heart is laid bare to the reader who witnesses a changed Yanshi from a person who does not use his power to help his friend's family out because it compromises his academic ethics to one who shamelessly justifies his behavior with cunning sophistry in order to protect his own interests. However, the reader should not mistake this change as deterioration thinking that Yanshi has degenerated into an immoral person. The reader is appalled to discover Yanshi's shameless thoughts and actions because he has never appeared so vulgar before. Upholding a high moral standard, Yanshi has always acted according to moral principles and therefore has imprinted on the reader's mind a positive image. This impression is so strong that it misleads the reader to forget that Yanshi is a human being who possesses the animal factor besides the human factor. His animal factor is not evident because he has not yet been subjected to extreme circumstances. Once he is, as in the afore-mentioned situation, it comes into play. Perhaps to compensate for the contaminating effect, Yan juxtaposes the narrator's report of the cruel scene with Yanshi's interior monologue. The narrator not only sees through his own eyes, but also through Yanshi's eyes: "Lao Ji watched with blinding eyes. He told himself to hold on" (49). Therefore, the more Yanshi tries to justify his action, the more clearly the reader feels his guilty conscience. Yanshi does persist in not handing over the watch, but at last takes action: he catches the rope and stops the horse at the peril of his own life.

The Omega scene is particularly significant because it enables the reader to witness the struggle between the human factor and the animal factor. While a person's animal factor may cause to sway from ethical principles under extreme circumstances, humanity still lives. Director Deng is a case in point. Deng's duty is to reform the prisoners and thus he should be a "good" person himself. However, when the story begins, we meet a shrewd man who knows how to trade his power for wealth. Yanshi

hears that a scientific documentary is being shown at the headquarters of the prison and that his daughter is the heroine of the documentary. He asks Deng's permission to "see" his daughter. After several years of prison life, he has learned to get around, so he bribes Deng with his Omega watch. This surely is not the only bribe Deng takes and as the story unfolds, the reader gets to know other stories of this hypocritical person. For example, his wife has a lover and he is furious when he finds out, but in the end chooses to forgive her. Further, although as the commander of the prison his hands are tied by rules, he does try to protect the prisoners. No wonder he and Yanshi develop a strange kind of rapport.

Hulu is another example where the human factor and the animal factor intermix. Hulu is a convict-murderer waiting for his execution when he turns eighteen. He killed his pregnant mother and her lover when he was only fourteen. He had never seen his father who was said to have been a travelling carpenter who visited his mother once in a while leaving behind some money. At a very young age, Hulu had to find food for his brothers and sisters. One day when he learned that his mother and her lover had eaten all the wheat assigned to them by the village, Hulu killed them. Hulu never behaves himself in the prison because he is doomed to die and nobody can kill him twice. However, such an epitome of evil exhibits his humanity in other matters. Half a year before the day of his execution, Hulu begins to make preparations. He saves a little food every day and trades it for a cap or a pair of socks. When he has several caps or pairs of socks, he trades them for cotton clothes. In this way he manages to prepare three cotton coats and trousers for his brothers and sisters before he is executed. He also makes a pipe from a yak bone for the village secretary who has taken care of his brothers and sisters during his time in prison. In these respects, then, the reader appreciates Hulu as a loving brother and grateful man, even a moral model.

Yanshi's most important mission after he is released from prison is to reunite with Wanyu and live a happy married life ever after. However, when Yanshi returns home, he finds that Wanyu suffers from amnesia and while she remembers the Yanshi of the past she does not recognize the Yanshi who came back home. There have been different interpretations of Wanyu's amnesia. Xiaoming Chen states that the event of amnesia is remarkable in that it carries political implications and that in this reading, Wanyu represents the memory of politics and the amnesia of history (Chen qtd. in Gong, Cong, Ma, Chen 119-20). Yuhua Tao and Hongxing Zhao point out two reasons for Wanyu's amnesia: to evade the sorrowful memories and to rebel against many years of oppression in a feudal society. They argue that Wanyu's amnesia is her way of obtaining individual freedom. All these interpretations may have some truth in their own right, but I assert that Wanyu's amnesia is necessary for her to start a new life with Yanshi. The Yanshi in her memory is still a "god" and if she continued to regard her husband as such in the new situation, she would not start a new life with him. Therefore, Yanshi must come back home as a new person whom she does not know. This new Yanshi has to go through the normal stages of courtship begging his beloved woman for love like any humble suitor. Wanyu, on the other hand, enjoys the happiness of a proud "princess" like any other woman being pursued, and has the right to decide whether she accepts the suitor's love out of her free will. This is exactly what happens between Yanshi and Wanyu when they are finally united. It could not have happened without Yanshi's humility and Wanyu's amnesia.

Another mission of Yanshi after his release is to remedy his relationship with his children. His son and daughter do not seem to cherish any tender memories about their father because they used to be mainly taken care of by their mother and grandmother and their father simply disappeared from their lives when they grew up. Actually he did worse than disappear. He was not around them to render help or protection when necessary, but his prisoner identity always endangered their lives. In fact his children have been scared so much that they do not want him to come back into their lives. When Yanshi writes to his family telling them that he is released and is coming back soon, his son suggests that he should not come back to Shanghai, but rent a place in the northwest. When Yanshi finally comes back, he is treated by his son's family with coldness. Some scholars criticized the novel with regard to Yanshi's son and daughter for their behavior and argued that their treatment of their father is a consequence of the Cultural Revolution and how it changed peoples ethics. Strangely, the victim of the maltreatment — Yanshi — accepts it with great peace and does not complain, but instead seems pleased to be of any use to his children and grandchildren. In my perspective, Yanshi is able to tolerate his family because he has a forgiving heart and he gains this power of forgiveness only after he has seen his own weaknesses. Li Xing presumably also has in mind Yanshi's forgiving heart when he concludes that "it is precisely forgiveness and love that Geling Yan has used to combat the increasing evil and restlessness in life" (26). Although set in a grand historical background of important political events, Yan's novel *The Criminal Lu Yanshi* is not political. Disguised under a romantic story is a serious inquiry into the nature of humanity.

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