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**From Franz Kafka to Franz Kafka Award Winner, Yan Lianke: Biopolitics and the Human Dilemma of Shenshizhuyi in *Liven* and *Dream of Ding Village***

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**Volume 22 Issue 4 (December 2020) Article 15****Melinda Pirazzoli,****"From Franz Kafka to Franz Kafka Award Winner, Yan Lianke: Biopolitics and the Human Dilemma of *Shenshizhuyi* in *Liven* and *Dream of Ding Village*"**<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol22/iss4/15>>

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**Abstract:** To date, many studies have exhaustively explained how and why Yan Lianke deals with both the intimate relationship between disease and biopolitics and the relationship between utopia and dystopia. These are certainly the most important themes in *Liven* (2004) and *Dream of Ding Village* (2006). However, biopolitical discourses cannot fully account for the complexity, depth and humanity of these novels, which in addition to exploring the complex and protean meaning of life also represent *shenshizhuyi*, an expression coined by Yan Lianke to describe his human dilemma in representing the complex relationship between *shen* 神 (soul, spirit, mind and myths) and 实 (reality). This study aims to describe Yan Lianke's notion of *shenshizhuyi* and contends that *shenshizhuyi* is not only a new mode of representation but also a biopolitical discourse whose origins are found in Franz Kafka's writings, which describe and represent human nature and the human quandary as well as the process of reification of the subject. Yan Lianke's achievements are equally important because they also describe human nature and the human quandary in a world that is gradually losing its identity.

**Melinda PIRAZZOLI**

**From Franz Kafka to Franz Kafka Award Winner, Yan Lianke: Biopolitics and the Human Dilemma of Shenshizhuyi in *Liven* and *Dream of Ding Village***

**Introduction**

We all know what happens to Gregor after his metamorphosis. He laid on the bed, rolling back and forth on his armor-plated back, his legs waved helplessly. Yet, this meticulous depiction describes what happens *after* his metamorphosis. What I need instead is a meticulous *description of his metamorphosis, the process of his metamorphosis*. Kafka did not give me this. The fact that Kafka never gave [me a description of the] "real" [process of metamorphosis] made me wonder for a long time. (Yan and Zhang 42; italics mine)

This is one of Yan Lianke's (1958-) many assessments of Franz Kafka's (1883-1924) *The Metamorphosis* (1915) in a book-length interview with Zhang Xuexin written three years before winning the prestigious Franz Kafka prize. The criteria for this award are as follows: "the quality and exclusivity of the artwork; its humanistic character and contribution to cultural, national, language and religious tolerance; its existential, timeless character; its generally human validity; and its ability to hand over a testimony about our times" (Spolecnost).

Kafka's genius did not pass unnoticed in China. According to Yan Lianke's thought-provoking analyses of Kafka's literary contribution in *My Reality, My Ism* (我的现实, 我的主义) (2011) and *Discovering Fiction* (发现小说) (2011),<sup>1</sup> Kafka was a genius because he was the first writer who dared to challenge a consolidated way of representing reality.

In *Discovering Fiction*, Yan explains that writers of traditional and conventional realism created novels or stories in which the plotline and sequence of events relied on a cause-and-effect principle, whereas Kafka invented what Yan Lianke has defined as "zero-cause-and-effect" (零因果), which bestows writers and himself with the "almighty power" to transform their characters however they want for no apparent logical reason. Yan believes that this type of power did not entail Kafka's radical abandonment of the principle and idea of truth but rather the creation of a radically new way of representing truth. As Yan commented in *Discovering Fiction*: "After Gregor's transformation into a vermin, Kafka gave up his almighty status as a writer to portray the daily life as well as the course of life of the vermin; he instead concentrated on representing Gregor's *inner life* as a vermin as well as on the *transformation* of his relationship with the outside, the other people and the world."

In this study, I contend that Yan Lianke, like Kafka, constructs his narrative about disease and disability in terms of a "zero cause-and-effect" relationship as well as an "inner cause-and-effect" relationship (内因果). A close analysis of two of Yan's novels on the pathological body, *Liven* 受活 (2004) and *Dream of Ding Village* 丁庄梦 (2006), as well as a comparison between the two novels will allow me to demonstrate that Yan's diseased and disabled characters are not less grotesque than Kafka's vermin. However, unlike Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, Yan's characters are devised to convey to his readers "what Kafka has not given him," i.e., the process of the metamorphosis, to represent the radical transformation of the Chinese countryside over the past decade.

In her recent study, Visser argues that "[u]rbanization is now dominant in China, both demographically and ideologically" (1). Yan Lianke instead decided to take up the burden traditionally borne by Chinese intellectuals of the bleak quandary of Chinese peasants and to speak on their behalf.<sup>2</sup>

This study does not want to compare Kafka's work with Yan Lianke's writings and instead focuses on the way in which Yan Lianke's literary criticism, especially *Discovering Fiction*, describes Kafka's literary work as a backbone of *shenshizhuyi* 神实主义, which is an expression coined by Yan Lianke to describe a new method of conceiving and representing the complex contemporary Chinese reality.

*Shenshizhuyi* is commonly translated as "mythorealism" and clearly explained by Yan Lianke in *Discovering fiction*: "*Shenshizhuyi*... gives up the apparent logical relations of real life and explores a 'nonexistent' truth, an invisible truth, a truth concealed by truth.... The connection between reality and *shenshizhuyi* does not lie in direct cause-and-effect links, but rather relies on human souls (灵魂) and minds (精神)"

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank the anonymous reader who suggested that I should read *Discovering Fiction* and verify the applicability of Lani K.Thompson's "mythorealism" to Yan Lianke's *shenshizhuyi*.

<sup>2</sup> For an in-depth analysis of the traditional role of the Chinese intellectual with regard to peasants, see the first chapter of Feuerwerker (*Ideology*, Ch. 1).

Mythorealism is a term used by the fantasy writer Lani K. Thompson to describe the literary production of a group of writers, including herself and Yan Lianke.<sup>3</sup> According to Thompson,

[m]ythorealism is something new: a vision of life and the world based on the fantastic aesthetic: a form of mysticism; a worldview of dreams and vision and the realm of myth. (Thompson)

In Thompson's "mythorealism" and Yan Lianke's *shenshizhuyi* spirituality and reality are foundational principles. While Thompson's aim is the creation of a "vision of life and the world based on the fantastic aesthetic: a form of mysticism," the Chinese writer focuses on the method of representing an inner and spiritual (神) reality (实). As Yan explicitly states, "*shenshizhuyi* definitely does not reject realism, but it tries hard to create reality and transcend realism" (神实主义决不排斥现实主义, 但它努力创造现实和超越现实主义) (Yan, *Discovering Fiction*).<sup>4</sup>

In light of the above, the disabled bodies in *Liven* and the diseased bodies in *Dream of Ding Village* should be considered powerful metaphors that describe the "real" grotesque inner metamorphoses of Chinese peasants in rural areas. These abnormal bodies are Yan Lianke's expedients to underscore the importance of the recovery of the symbolic values and past utopias that peasants have had to forsake as a price for fulfilling an externally imposed market-driven modernity brought about by market-driven desires, which will be argued in the course of the present study. These two novels are, in fact, powerful and eloquent descriptions of the radical impact of the new market economy not only on the Chinese peasants' inner life but also on the ways in which they relate to the world.

Compared with Kafka, Yan Lianke's vision of reality has evolved over time. In *Liven*, the characters choose not to rebel against their own quandary, which is similar to Kafka's novels. However, Yan Lianke eventually decides to take action, albeit only symbolically and metaphorically, and he represents the possibility of resistance on the part of the oppressed. The ending to *Dream of Ding Village* clearly envisions the possibility of a way out, thus conveying a very much needed sense of serenity.

### **Form and Content of *Shenshizhuyi* in *Liven* and *Dream of Ding Village***

An atheistic country cannot help but produce a type of literature that is helpless with regards to respect for humanity and respect for individuals; however, we cannot lose our faith in literature just because we do not have a religion. For example, *The Dream of the Red Chamber* (红楼梦), which was written in an atheistic country like ours, is an irreplaceable and immense cultural legacy (Yan and Zhang 65).

[When we analyze literary works] we must look at the important and enormous fetters imposed on them by both politics (政治) and the system (体制), which is an issue of conscience. However, there is another issue when facing the fetters imposed by politics and the system: when the writer cannot cry out in his own personal voice, from his own standpoint, does his personal and emotional potential risk being partly or completely lost? If we think carefully of *The Book of Songs* (诗经), almost half the poems collected in that book bear some relationship to political life; for instance, when there are so many poems about the imperial court, etc., how could they not be [a representation of] political life? How could they not be a product of the system? However, if we read them today and carefully consider the times in which they were written, they are still valuable. Their worth does not lie in the fact that they were written over two thousand years ago but rather in their literary value. Why is this so? It is because of the literary stand taken by the writer, as well as because of his or her personal feelings, exclusive and unique personal feelings.

<sup>3</sup> While Thompson's website includes Yan Lianke among the exponents of "mythorealism", the Chinese author never even mentions Thompson in his literary criticism. Since Yan Lianke provides his own definition and explanation of *shenshizhuyi*, an in-depth comparison between Thompson's "mythorealism" and Yan's *shenshizhuyi* is irrelevant to the purpose of this study.

<sup>4</sup> It is perhaps possible to draw a comparison with Kafka who, as Benjamin has once observed, "sacrificed truth for the sake of its transmissibility [...] [I]n regard to Kafka, we can no longer speak of wisdom. Only the products of its decay remain. There are two: one is the rumor about the true things (a sort of theological whispered intelligence dealing with matters discredited and obsolete); the other product of this diathesis is folly - which to be sure, has utterly squandered the substance of wisdom, but preserves its attractiveness and assurance, which rumor invariably lacks" (145).

Additionally, let us then examine Tao Yuanming's (陶渊明) (365-427) literary works. In addition to "Peach Blossoms Spring" (桃花源记) and the main bulk of "fields and gardens poems" (田园诗), the remaining pieces (from one-third to one-half of his whole poetic production) consist of poetry that expresses feelings, which are explicitly lyrical. Why do these poems have such strong literary qualities? It is because, when he was writing, he was hearkening to his feelings and to his soul, relying on his individual inner emotions. (Yan and Zhang 81-82)

These passages, which juxtapose several distinct aspects, politics, ethics, emotions and aesthetics, may well be taken as a literary manifesto of the principles that inform *shenshizhuyi*. Yan's overt interest in the quandary of lower-class people in contemporary Chinese rural areas is almost too familiar to his readers. However, despite his repeated evocations of "native soil" literature, what makes Yan Lianke's unique is his successful balance between the surreal and, at times, oneiric atmosphere that characterizes his narratives with the grotesque overtones with which his political satire is tinged.

From the above passage, one can conclude that Yan Lianke's fictional production can be best understood if the reader follows *ad verbatim* his "streams of thought" as expounded in his interview: on the one hand, we should explore the ways in which the author step-by-step recreates the trajectory of human lives devastated by the effects of the machinations of power, state apparatuses and new economic practices; on the other hand, we should focus on the representation of values that provide a new spirit (*shen* 神) as an antidote to the stark, inhuman conditions now confronted by the peasants (*shi* 实).

Despite the obvious differences in plot, the novels *Liven* and *Dream of Ding Village* share many aspects. For example, they are both composed of a text and what one might define as a paratext, in other terms a metonymy of the main text by providing commentary that is explanatory in nature. As if to mimic the format of a classical text, the paratext performs the same role as classic commentaries: a "written text as the main vehicle for the access to the worthies of old" (Rolston 7).

The presence of two interdependent and metonymical texts permits the author to deploy different discourses within both novels. In *Liven*, the paratexts, which are set forth in italics, are both the glossaries placed at the end of the chapters as well as the poetic texts that interrupt the flow of the narrative in the same manner observed in pre-modern Chinese novels. On the one hand, this novel represents in a Kafkaesque manner a sequel of surreal events in a very lifelike way, and the glossary, which is crammed with dates and place names as well as historical and political events, helps the reader set the narration within a specific historical, social and political framework.

Unlike *Liven*, *Dream of Ding Village* draws inspiration from a well-known historical event, i.e., an episode of the AIDS epidemic in Central China. Here, the paratext, which is presented in a different font and in boldface, narrates and describes the dreams of both the dead narrator as well as other characters who recount the factual causes that led to the spread of AIDS. Such dreams are an important key to entering the novel because they are narrated in a fashion that resounds with the famous adagio from the most important Chinese premodern novel, *The Dream of the Red Chamber*: "Truth becomes fiction when the fiction's true/Real becomes not-real when the unreal's real" (Cao 130). *Liven* and *Dream of Ding Village* are constructed in a mirror-like way. The main text of *Liven*, describes a series of surreal nightmarish stories, complemented by a commentary that provides readers with true historical facts. Instead, the historical events in *Dream of Ding Village* are complemented by a series of dreams that reveal the intimate ties among life, personal desires, and the representation of systems of power and state apparatuses.

The complex relationship between the real and the unreal is explained by Yan Lianke, who defines his realism in terms of *duoyuan* (多元), which would be appropriate to interpret as "heteroglossia" in this case. The advantage of multiple texts and multiple narrative registers allows Yan Lianke to maintain a balance between form and content, reality and sur-reality, stark phenomena and the oneiric dimension. This reading is also obliquely confirmed by Yan Lianke himself in the following interview excerpt:

Let's take, for instance, Kafka's *The Castle*. The land surveyor does not find a way to enter the castle. This is the story itself and is also the content itself; however, it gives us such strong feelings about the formal features of the novel. There is also *The Metamorphosis*: its protagonist, Gregor, is transformed into a vermin during the night. This is undoubtedly the meaning (内容) of the story, this is the core of the meaning or its main motor; however, don't you think that this conveys strong feelings about the formal features of the novel? (Yan and Zhang 122-123)

Here, Yan Lianke suggests that to understand his works, the reader should focus on the balance between form and content. However, Kafka's writings are not important just because of their stylistic features;

rather, Kafka's writings are also the backbone of a complex philosophical discourse about biopower. In fact, two major contemporary Western philosophers, Michel Foucault (1926-1984) and Giorgio Agamben (1942-), also relied on Kafka's fiction to reflect upon the absurdity of the mechanisms of power (or *dispositifs*) to develop their theories of the biopolitical and thanatopolitical orders. According to Foucault, as Edwards and Graulund argue,

The body of a person, and not just the sovereign body or the body politic, is also subject to the sociopolitical attempts to regulate and control that which is considered abnormal. Power and the body, in the form of the flesh and blood of the subject who is subjected to the act of power, are often inextricably related to one another. For it is precisely *on* and *in* the body that we see the effects of power: these are manifested in the classification and medicalization of the body [...], the incarceration and monitoring of the body [...], and the ways in which modern states control bodies through biopower. (Edwards and Graulund 29)

Equally meaningful is Agamben's notion of thanatopolitics. According to Agamben, through the proliferation of mechanisms of power, which are called *dispositifs* and specifically devised to discipline and manipulate individual lives, there is a progressive desubjectification of the subject.<sup>5</sup> The sacralization of *zōē* (bare life) to its extreme entails a progressive deterioration of *bios* (public life), which hampers the creation of a subjective identity and negates the possibility of living a fully-fledged life.<sup>6</sup> To reach this conclusion, as Snoek convincingly suggests in *Agamben's Joyful Kafka: Finding Freedom Beyond Subordination* (2012), Agamben mainly relies on Kafka "not so much to support his dark political theory as to show a way out, an exit strategy from the present political situation" (2).

Carlos Rojas and Chien-hsin Tsai show that biopolitics is a central issue in Yan Lianke's literary production. As I will attempt to prove in my analytical reading of *Liven* and *Dream of Ding Village*, Kafka's biopolitical narratives are also very relevant to our understanding of Yan Lianke's fiction because they not only offer an exit strategy for the reader but also provide the key to entering Yan Lianke's biopolitical discourse.

### ***Liven***<sup>7</sup>

Life, whatever that means, is certainly the starting point of the novel *Liven*. As observed by Tsai: "[i]n the west Henan dialect the work draws on, the binome *shouhuo* means 'pleasure' and is composed of two characters that literally mean 'to receive life.' The term implies that a human subject has no body, no life and no pleasure before they are given" (87).

This analysis allows the critic to address Foucauldian theories that contend that "a modern subject does not exist before its subjection by different biopolitical disciplines" (Tsai 87). However, Tsai provides a definition of the Foucauldian subject and interprets *shouhuo* in its most negative connotation, and he overlooks the positive meaning of life in this novel. His reticence is not surprising since Foucault's notion

<sup>5</sup> As suggested by Campbell in his *Improper Life*: "*Dispositifs, machine, paradigm*, these are the figures that populate Agamben's thoughts, and throughout so much of his work, we find them working to introduce death into life. What he has done in his economic reading of *The Kingdom and the Glory* is to provide his version of Foucault's *The Birth of Biopolitics*, which is elaborated as a remnant of a theological economy that has eliminated God but not Providence. The result, as in *The Sacrament of Language* [...], is the removal of stops in the sacralization of life through the proliferations of *dispositifs*. In this regard, the *dispositif of oikonomia* in modernity is taken to signal an immense intensification of the lethal effects of the *dispositif* in general because for Agamben, it is mainly through the *dispositif* that processes of subjectification take place. In other words, the providential paradigm that still holds in modernity is precisely the one that continues to render the one governed a *homo sacer* and continues to make available for those with eyes to see the falling away of every personal identity, which cannot be conceived independently of the thanatopolitical" (63).

<sup>6</sup> As Bazzicalupo and Clò suggest in "The Ambivalence of Biopolitics," "it is modernity that witnesses the entrance of life into the domain of politics as an object of care, which is to say when bodies emerge as the subject and object of expansive and productive strategies. The point of departure is the classic distinction between *zōē* and *bios*. *Zōē*, on the one hand, is bare life, the life we share with animals, and the horizon of necessity that links human beings to mere survival, to what Aristotle called "the nutritive life," that is, the power of self-preservation and resistance to death. *Bios*, on the other hand, refers to life that has form, which is to say to that form of life that is specifically human and in which politics occurs. In Greece, *zōē*, or biological life, was excluded from the political. Producing and consuming the means of sustenance as well as the reproduction of the species, and hence work and family, are subject to necessity; and they engender relationships of dependence, inequality, and non-freedom. It is exactly this biological life that takes center stage in the new modern space: a life whose needs are common to the entire species. It is a site in which work, production and family are bound by the constraints of nonchoice and of the struggle to survive when resources are scarce" (110).

<sup>7</sup> Here, I have chosen to adhere to Carlos Rojas' translation of *Shouhuo* as *Liven*. All the quotations in English are based on Carlos Rojas' English rendition (*Lenin's Kisses*).

of biopolitics addresses questions of power relationships rather than the ontological and ethical meaning of life. However, as the title seems to suggest, the readers of *Liven* are encouraged to tackle not only the notion of the subject but also the "pleasures of life" together with life in all its complex and manifold aspects.

Therefore, I suggest that the way in which traditional Chinese philosophical thinking addresses the complex relationship between the body and life should be considered. According to Kuang-Ming Wu,

[t]he Western thinker talks about performatives; the Chinese thinker per-forms, that is, forms life with life performance. The Western thinker talks about the integrity of persons; the Chinese thinker exhorts and exhibits integrity that forms itself *in* the midst of behaving fatherly or filially, sovereignly or loyally, brotherly or friend-ly and to all people kindly, i.e., kind-ly. Such behavior is not mere playing one's social role and fitting oneself into a slot in the society but acting as oneself appropriately in a specific social context as to per-form society. (16)

It is undeniable that Yan Lianke reveals a profound interest in the representation of power relations in the novel *Liven*. However, in a story that describes the metamorphosis of a group of disabled peasants into freak-show performers, the concept of "per-forming life" seems more than relevant. Furthermore, the ethical implications intrinsic to the idea of "acting oneself out appropriately in a specific social context as to per-form society" is one of Yan Lianke's most important concerns as underscored in his interview.

*Liven* could certainly be considered a Chinese translation of the relationship between the "dispositifs" of power and disabled subjects. However, what Yan Lianke adds in this novel is the idea that life is related not only to politics but also to ethics and aesthetics. In other words, while it is appropriate to read Yan Lianke while maintaining a clear focus on power relationships, when considering such power relationships, it would also be equally proper to discriminate among different forms of power: political, economic and pastoral power (a type of power that Foucault closely associated with the important role played by the Church in Europe). Furthermore, since the issues in the novel are the complex relationships between power and life, the concepts of both *bios* (political life) and *zōē* (bare life), which have meaningful counterparts in the Chinese concepts of *huo* (活) and *sheng* (生), are equally relevant because they allow readers to come to terms with the protean meaning of life.

Similar to Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, *Liven* begins with a surreal event: a snow blizzard during summer that destroys the harvest of a village uniquely inhabited by a group of disabled people who, until then, had managed to survive in peace. The rest of the novel describes the consequences of the disastrous feats of the politician and entrepreneur Chief Liu, who instead of rescuing the disabled villagers, transforms them into a circus of freak performers.

Taking advantage of his position as the mayor of Liven, Liu is determined to gain personal power, economic profit and prestige by exploiting the "different special skills" of the disabled bodies of the villagers. His fantasy of creating a mausoleum fit to host Lenin's body that serves as the object of exhibition and worship becomes an almost accessible reality when he discovers that the performances of Liven's villagers attract a large paying audience. At this point, Mao Zhi, the charismatic leader of the village who has always tried to protect the disabled villagers of Liven from the dangerous interferences of the outside world, aligns herself with Chief Liu and organizes a second troupe of performers. However, she agrees to do so only on the condition that after the accumulation of the necessary capital for the purchase of Lenin's corpse, Liven would no longer be submitted to the political control of the county. The so-called "wholers" (圓全人), the healthy and wealthy part of society, threaten to steal the fortunes amassed by the performers, whose success soon turns to failure. Mao Zhi eventually dies, and Chief Liu moves into the village temple guesthouse after deliberately crippling himself in a car accident.

In this story, Yan Lianke relies on multiple narrative registers that construct complex and multifaceted discourses on the way in which different "dispositifs" of power penetrate and dominate both the villagers' life and the formation of their subjectivity and agency. In *Liven*, there is a twofold articulation of power: on the one side is political power, which is represented by Chief Liu, a Chinese political entrepreneur who wants to transform Liven into a modern "surreal" site as a tourist attraction through the purchase of Lenin's body; and on the other side is a pure, simple and uncontaminated life that is preached and taught by Mao Zhi, the charismatic leader of the village endowed with purely symbolic power. Grandma Mao Zhi, who would like to turn Liven into a blissful, peaceful world, which is very close to the society portrayed in Tao Yuanming's "Peach Blossom Spring," aims to protect and grant immunity to this peculiar community of which she feels she is the leader. Her charisma, which is mainly drawn from her ability to transform the village of Liven into a community in which everyone may live in a dignified manner, guarantees her a prestige that is purely symbolic and detached from any kind of economic, political and legal power.

Ultimately, the confrontation between Grandma Mao Zhi and Chief Liu is a confrontation between two opposite dreams or utopias. As Song Weijie remarks, Yan Lianke does not make a distinction between different utopian dreams because, in Yan's words, "utopia serves as a constant lamp in our dreams during the long process of human development, and remains a spiritual home for the human race to live and survive" (Song 651).

While Chief Liu's and Mao Zhi's utopias are different, they both seem to have learned Foucault's most important lesson concerning biopolitical practices: "To strengthen itself, power is forced at the same time into strengthening the object on which it discharges itself: not only, but [...] it is also forced to render it subject to its own subjugation. Moreover, if it wants to stimulate the action of subjects, power must not only presuppose but also produce the conditions of freedom of the subjects to whom it addresses itself" (Esposito 37-38).

At the beginning of their performances, these disabled bodies are not endowed with agency, and they begin to comply consciously and willingly with Chief Liu's and Mao Zhi's desires only after realizing their own potential as freak performers. In this regard, Chien-hsin Tsai has observed that their attempts to "enhance their performance" with almost godlike acrobatic abilities to impress the audience end up "maximi[zing] their profit through self-destruction" (Tsai 89-90).

Clearly, the performers, who willingly hurt themselves to please the audience, are no longer mere "victims" either of Chief Liu or of Mao Zhi. Rather, they are economic subjects in their own right. In fact, as Robin Blyn insightfully suggests,

The freak-garde effectively exposes the extent to which transhumanism's idealized cyborgs and prosthetically enhanced subjects remain beholden to the 'will of others', that is, the will of market relations. In this way, the freak-garde conveys the extent to which those lauded transhuman subjects reproduce and extend the specious claims of possessive individualism that defines liberal humanism - in other words, that you can be whatever you want to be. (Blyn XXXII)

Yan Lianke's meticulous description of the exceptional skills of these "transhuman subjects" follows what the author would define as the principle of "inner cause and effect." In fact, their desire for admiration and money can transform them into superhumans. However, this desire is illusory because they are too well aware that the fulfillment of their dreams of self-sufficiency depends on meeting the audience's whimsical desires and on their leaders, Grandma Mao Zhi and Chief Liu.

The success of the performance allows all parties, including the performers, to profit economically. On the one hand, an inevitable conflation occurs between economic and political powers, while on the other hand, economic profits on the part of the performers allow them not only to lay "claims of possessive individualism" but also to nourish dreams that they may eventually become "whatever they want to become."

Blinded by desires of self-fulfillment and self-sufficiency, a new type of utopia entailed by the newly imported principles of neoliberalism is established, and the troupe deliberately turns its back on Grandma Mao Zhi:

'The time has come, and we'll have to return to Liven.'

The person asking the question was Little Polio Boy. He was playing cards and abruptly lifted up the card he was holding, as though he had suddenly thought of something of the monumental importance. Staring intently at Grandma Mao Zhi, he asked,

'What happens after we withdraw from society?'

'After we withdraw from society, no one will have authority over us.'

'And what will happen once they have no authority over us?'

'Once they have no authority over us, you will be as free and enlivened as a wild hare.'

'If no one has authority over us, will we still be able to perform our special skills?'

'This is not a question of our special skills, but rather of our exploited dignity.'

The boy threw the card he was holding onto the table.

'I am willing to have my dignity exploited,' he announced. 'If withdrawal from society means that the performance troupes have to disband, then my family will fight the withdrawal tooth and nail.' (Yan, *Lenin's Kisses* 262)

This passage, which is intentionally set at the core of the novel, is a powerful metaphor of the way in which discourses about structures of power and individual rights to life are deployed in this novel. Clearly, these performers realize that *bios*, i.e., "vita activa" according to Hannah Arendt, is inevitably dependent on *zōē* (i.e., life in terms of biological survival). This conversation occurs in Lenin's mausoleum immediately after the troupe's performance. Detained for a long time by the "wholers," who want to steal of all the performers' money, this disabled community must determine its own destiny.

This dialogue, which inevitably gradually entails Grandma Mao Zhi's delegitimation, forces these disabled performers to decide who they are and what they want to become. Their long confinement in the very place that should have become a tourist site attracting a huge amount of capital from abroad turns out instead to be the performers' nightmarish prison, where they experience all forms of abuse at the hands of the wholers. During this imprisonment, these performers are not only compelled to give away all the money honestly earned through their performances but also realize that the values professed and transmitted by Grandma Maozhi would come at the cost of their own survival and their erasure from the civilized world.

The performance of the freaks has attracted the attention of paying audiences as well as cultural and literary critics, who thus far have tended to overlook the importance of the goal of this performance: the purchase of Lenin's corpse. The desire to publicly exhibit the old Russian politician's body in a village of freaks is certainly no less freakish than the living freaks' performance.

In this regard, it is pertinent to consider Blyn's analysis of Deleuze's and Guattari's notion of desire:

The deliberate creation of a lack [of a fixed and steady desire on the part of the subject] is a function of a market economy, rather than the necessary effect of subject formation. By generating, prolonging, and exacerbating the lack and need propagated in the form of the commodity fetish, the freak-garde thwarts intellectual mastery, thereby manufacturing unrequited epistemological desires that cast hegemonic ideologies into doubt. (Blyn XXX)

From this perspective, it can be inferred that both Chief Liu and Mao Zhi are constantly fueling new and shifting desires that were continually repressed during the Maoist era and are inherent to capitalism but still undisciplined by it.

Up to this point, critics have offered different readings of the ending of this novel. For example, Chan observed the following:

The "becoming disabled" of Liu is both ironic and paradoxical. As a local leader and an "able bodied wholer", Liu used the physically handicapped people as a tool to satisfy his fantasy, which finally made him a mentally disabled madman. Not until he becomes one of the handicapped and loses the wholeness of his body does he regain his mental wholeness; in other words, by becoming physically incomplete, Liu regains his mental completeness. What is equally paradoxical is that *Pleasure Village* is employed as a metaphor for the sick society first, and later, when it returns to the previous state, it becomes one of hope. The villagers are first victims to, and later saviors of, their god, Chief Liu. (188)

There is also an alternative interpretation of the passage about the performers' unwillingness to return to a state of oblivion. Their dreams of being transformed into famous artists have definitely been shattered, and the reader cannot but wonder if their return to a state of oblivion and self-oblivion should truly be read in terms of a happy ending. After all, if there is one lesson that Tao Yuanming has taught us, it is that once you leave "Peach Blossom Spring," there is no chance of going back, regardless of how innocent and pure your reasons.

Chief Liu's return to Liven is the outcome of his mishandled lust and desire. His miscalculated political maneuvers have led him to an inevitable downfall. Finding shelter as a disabled man with other people who have shared with him the dream of fame and success and who, like him, have seen all their dreams suddenly collapse is his only way out.

The ending of *Liven*, I suggest, is fully consonant with Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*. The disabled performers are eventually condemned to confinement and isolation from the world, which can only lead them to death. The reason why they might not have fulfilled their desires of becoming self-sufficient could be the impossibility of their acquiring agency. The wholers' decision to let Liven disappear from the civil world is wholly consistent with Robin Visser's acknowledgment that the countryside is no longer an ideologically dominant source. As Song has rightly remarked, "[t]he narrative structure and the looming disillusionment of the disabled villagers in [*Liven*] exposes the negative and hesitant dimensions of the utopian imagination" (650). As in Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, in Yan's novel, there is no rebellion on the villagers' part. The decision to take action is now left solely up to both his readers who live in the countryside and readers who are in a position of power and can make and enforce ethically grounded decisions.

### ***Dream of Ding Village*<sup>8</sup>**

*Dream of Ding Village* can be regarded as a sequel to *Liven*. As mentioned above, from the perspective of form and structure, these two novels complement each other. If the notion of biopower in Yan Lianke's *Liven* can only be inferred from the title, the plot of the story recounted in *Dream of Ding village*, a story that actually occurred in Henan, has been used by the philosopher Roberto Esposito to discuss biopower in his *Bios* (33).

As Rojas has observed, Yan Lianke carried out active research before writing about the AIDS epidemic that had occurred in Henan. The idea of juxtaposing the oneiric with the hyperreal is a device that fully echoes the metonymy between text and paratext in *Liven* and is also an important component of *shenshizhuyi*.

In this novel, as Rojas argues, the idea of having the story of the epidemics recounted from the point of view of Ding Qiang, who was "poisoned by fellow villagers seeking retribution for [his father's] Ding Hui's role in contributing to the region's AIDS epidemics," frames a diegetic space that is a "liminal zone between life and death." If the construction of a liminal space is very relevant to the construction of this novel, the issue of temporality is equally relevant. Rojas' analysis of time is also pertinent in this regard:

The temporality of the novel is "borrowed" in two respects. First, from the perspective of the infected patients, it is in the interim between their initial infection and their eventual death that they find a unique opportunity to reassess their perspective on life. In his book *At Odds with AIDS*, Alexander Garcia Düttman notes that, with AIDS, a patient's sense of being fated to "die before his time" may be transformed into its very opposite, as "AIDS becomes the paradigm of the time of living and dying, of the coherent life story that can be told and narrated". AIDS, Düttman concludes, functions as a 'paradigm of the present'- a radical negation of temporality, through which one may then begin constructively reassessing one's own relationship to time itself [...].

Second, from the perspective of the nation, the epidemic unfolded just as China was transitioning from a Maoist state into a global superpower. Under the economic expansion that was catalyzed by Deng Xiaoping's 1978 Reform and Opening Up campaign, China attempted to quickly open up to the West while, at the same time, limiting its exposure to potentially harmful elements.

Rojas' analysis of the time construction in the novel well reflects the coexistence and the tensions among the villagers affected by epidemics as well as the political and economic powers' attempts to control and handle the residual "everlasting present time" of these diseased people.

As in the previous novel, there are two opposite modes and spirits of life (as well as death) governance in this novel. Yan focuses on the agents of different forms of power, i.e., all members of the Ding family: the narrator's grandfather, an informal schoolmaster, and his father and Ding Hui, new-born, self-made entrepreneur. This novel narrates the development of the complex relationship between the narrator's grandfather, who is the charismatic leader of the newly born city, and his father, Ding Hui, who is in charge of the local blood market. At the very beginning of the novel, Yan portrays the unclear dynamics of the development of the Chinese economic power in the countryside, a type of power that is only informally legitimated by political powers: "My father was the first blood merchant in the village, and he soon became the richest. This is the reason why our house, which was built at the very center of New Street, was three storeys high, even though the local building regulations limited each house to only two. If anyone else had tried to do the same, the government would have put a stop to it. However, when my father added a third, no one seemed to mind" (Yan, *Dream* 19).

Equally important is the conversation between the narrator's grandfather and his father that occurs immediately after the passage mentioned above:

Grandpa picked up his chopsticks, but instead of eating, he stared at my father as if he were a stranger. There was no warmth in Grandpa's eyes.

My father gazed back at Grandpa just as coldly. Two complete strangers.

'Dad why aren't you eating?' he asked finally.

'Son, there's something weighing on my mind and I've got to say it.' [...]. 'I had a meeting in the county today...,' Grandpa began.

'And they told you that the fever is AIDS, and that AIDS is a new incurable disease, right?' my father interrupted.

'You might as well eat your dinner, Dad because you're not telling me anything I don't already know. It's just the sick ones who don't, and most of them are pretending not to know.' He looked at Grandpa with disdain. It was the sort of glance a student might give a teacher setting an exam on some subject his students

<sup>8</sup> All the English quotations of *Dream of Ding Village* are based on Cindy Carter's translation of this novel.

had long since mastered. Then, ignoring Grandpa, he took up his bowl and chopsticks and buried himself in his meal.

Grandpa was a teacher, sort of. He had spent his whole life working in the school ringing the school bell. Now, in his sixtieth year of life, he was still the designated caretaker and bell ringer. (Yan, *Dream* 17-18)

As in the former novel, there are two contrasting forms of power. Similar to Grandma Mao Zhi, Grandpa is the charismatic leader of the village who upholds traditional values, while Ding Hui represents the new face of power after the advent of modernization. Here, Yan Lianke describes the transformation of an old-fashioned village, in which Grandfather was recognized as a spiritual guide, into a "modern city," and although it is equipped with all facilities, it still deprives its citizens of "the right to live a decent life." Prey to Ding Hui's insatiable greed, all the citizens contract HIV. Lacking medicine and formal hospitals, the school soon turns out to be the only shelter for these people. However, after a brief period of harmonious coexistence, it also becomes a site where new battles are waged. Again, the issues here is the desire to survive and to obtain economic and symbolic power. In this case, Yan introduces two characters, Ding Yuejing and Jia Gengzhu, who despite being seriously ill, seize Grandfather's power and take control of the school, government money and food donations.

There are two forms of contagion at stake in this novel. Yan Lianke deals with the HIV contagion and describes a process of self-commodification (a process that is the inevitable outcome of an unclear and unstable alliance between economic, symbolic and political powers as observed in the case of the disabled performers in *Liven*), which transforms these diseased bodies into desiring subjects.

The schizophrenic logic of capitalism cannot but come to mind when reading this novel. As in *Liven*, capitalist desire is the engine that transforms the characters of *Dream of Ding Village* into voracious capitalists. In other words, if HIV is a threatening, highly contagious disease, then the logic of capitalism, which impels different forms of power to cannibalize these sick bodies, produces unhealthy desires that are no less threatening and contaminating than HIV.

The novel has a bipartite structure. While the main corpus of the novel follows what happens to the inhabitants contaminated by HIV, Grandfather's "dreams" reveal the increasing degeneration of Ding Hui's lust for money and power as well as the attempts of the innocent narrator, Ding Qiang, to counteract his father's schemes. These dreams are Ding Liang's important antidote to reality or, according to Yan Lianke's principle of *shenshizhuyi*, "a spiritual home [for him] to live and survive" (Yan and Zhang 78).

Unlike Ding Hui, the villagers who cannot but live in the present "are compelled" to behave improperly, to say it with Kuang-Ming Wu, to "per-form" their ritual obligations: in one case, a red jacket is stolen as a "late bridal gift"; at other times, wood is stolen to make proper coffins, and marriages are arranged to complete life cycles. These are only minor examples compared to the love story between Lingling and Ding Liang, the narrator's Uncle. At the school, he meets Lingling, who also affected by HIV. They fall in love, get a divorce from their previous spouses, and marry. In this novel, Yan Lianke introduces love as a powerful antidote to both disease and death. They fight and eventually win against empty social conventions that are still upheld by Grandpa as well as by all the other authorities, who want to control not only the way in which people live but also the way in which they die.

At the end of the novel, in a dream, Grandfather learns from his dead nephew that Ding Hui is organizing a fake wedding for his son:

'Grandpa! Don't let them take me!'

My cries shook the heavens.

'I don't want to leave here! Don't let them take me!'

My screams ripped holes in the sky.

'Save me, Grandpa, save me...'

The idea struck my father like a thunderclap, draining the colour from his face and making his hands shake. Trembling, he bent down and picked up a stick, a stout piece of chestnut that someone had left lying on the ground. He began walking towards the crowd, following the funeral procession. In a few quick strides, he caught up with my father, who was lagging at the edge of the crowd. Grandpa raised the stick over his head and brought it down on my father's head, smashing in the back of his skull. The blow fell so quickly that my father didn't have time to turn around or to cry out. He swayed for a second, then fell with a soft thud, like a sack of flour.

A puddle of blood bloomed on the ground, as red as a blossom in spring. (Yan *Dream* 331-332)

This passage can be interpreted as Yan Lianke's powerful response to the Luxunian outcry to "save the children" at the end of "A Madman's Diary" (狂人日记) (1918). Moved by his nephew's desperate cries, Grandpa decides to kill his own son. Seen in this light, what is at stake in this passage is not a murderous

act but rather Ding Liang's bold and final rebellious act against Ding Hui's predatory and cannibalistic impulses. In other words, this murder follows *shenshizhuyi's* logic of an "inner cause-and-effect."

After a period of detention, Grandpa is released from prison, and after returning to a deserted village, he has a final explanatory dream:

That night there was a rainstorm, a torrential downpour that transformed the plain into a rust of expanse of mud. Grandpa dreamed of a woman, digging in the mud with the branch of a willow tree. With each flick of the branch, each stroke of the willow, she raised a small army of tiny mud people from the soil. Soon, there were hundreds upon thousands of them, thousands upon millions, millions upon millions of tiny mud people leaping from the soil, dancing on the earth, blistering the plain like so many raindrops from the sky. Grandpa found himself gazing at a new teeming plain. A new world danced before his eyes. (Yan, *Dream* 341)

In Yan Lianke's novels, dreams should be read in the same way as dreams in *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, which teaches us that fiction may become truth if we treat dreams as part of our reality. They are also in line with the spirit of *shenshizhuyi*, which seeks a type of invisible truth.

As Tsai observes, this novel begins with dreams that reproduce "well-known dreams from the book of *Genesis* in the Bible" (97) and ends with the dream of this mythical woman. The woman dreamt by Grandpa should be interpreted as a modern Nüwa, the mythical creature who stopped the flood, mended the Heavens and restored order to the world, thus fashioning a new world. We should not forget that this mythological creature is portrayed not only as the creator of a new world but also as the goddess who, by mistake, created a stone that was transformed into Jia Baoyu, the protagonist of *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, who descended upon earth to recount his own story.

Through this last dream, Yan Lianke describes the possibility of repairing the calamities that have fallen upon the world and of creating a new spirit of the world. This reading allows us to fully account for not only the presence of dreams within this complex novel but also the proof that *shenshizhuyi* can conflate, in Yan Lianke's own words, "imagination, metaphors, myths, legends, dreams, demonization, and transplantation born from everyday life and social reality" (*Discovering Fiction*).

## Conclusions

In his "Notes on Kafka," Adorno wrote the following:

Through reification of the subject, demanded by the world in any event, Kafka seeks to beat the world at its own game - the moribund becomes the harbinger of Sabbath rest. This is the other side of Kafka's theory of the unsuccessful death - the fact that the mutilated creation cannot die any more is the sole promise of immortality which the rationalist Kafka permits to survive the ban on images. It is tied to the salvation of things, of those which are not enmeshed in the network of guilt, those which are not exchangeable, useless [...]. According to the testimony brought by Kafka's work, in a world caught in its own toils, even the very work which reproduces life helps increase that entanglement. 'Our task is to do the negative - the positive has already been given us'. (270-271)

Based on Yan Lianke's self-admission in his works of criticism, Kafka's representation of the reification of the subject is also the point of departure of *shenshizhuyi*. Similar to Kafka, Yan also "performs the task to do the negative." However, Yan Lianke has clearly underscored that he is also interested in "what Kafka has not given him," which is the process of *metamorphosis*. Not surprisingly, in these novels, Yan Lianke meticulously follows step-by-step the process of reification and objectification of the subject by framing it within a wider political and economic setting. Furthermore, unlike Kafka's writings, the Chinese writer eventually chooses to rebel against such a state of reification in his second novel and decides to have Grandpa kill his own son, the blood merchant Ding Hui. In other words, while Yan Lianke is highly indebted to Kafka in terms of style, theme and content, to the extent that they share the same concerns regarding life and biopolitics, Yan Lianke cannot but reflect the influences of his own cultural tradition.

To date, many studies have exhaustively explained how and why Yan Lianke deals with both the intimate relationship between disease and biopolitics and the relationship between utopia and dystopia. These are certainly the most important themes in these two novels. However, biopolitical discourses cannot fully account for the complexity, depth and humanity of *Liven* and *Dream of Ding Village*, which explore the complex and protean meaning of life and also represent *shen*.

Franz Kafka's writings have inspired philosophers and cultural thinkers throughout the world because they describe human nature and the human quandary. Yan Lianke's achievements, as I hope to have demonstrated, are equally important because they also describe human nature and the human quandary

in a world that is gradually losing its identity. Yan Lianke deserves to be a Franz Kafka Prize recipient because in this contemporary Chinese world replete with writers, he is still one of the few who can be qualified as a true intellectual.

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