

Research Assessment Exercise 2020
Impact Case Study

University: The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology

Unit of Assessment: 30-Chinese Language and Literature

Title of Case Study: Understanding Contemporary China and the World through Mythorealism

1. Summary of the impact

Former People's Liberation Army soldier and Chinese novelist Yan Lianke is globally renowned for what he dubs his "mythorealism" style, a literary approach that combines details of quotidian life with allegorical representations to push beyond literary convention and deliver outspoken reflections on contemporary Chinese society. The two novels he has written since becoming writer-in-residence and visiting professor at HKUST in 2013 represent major milestones in the development of this style. Yan has also published a two-volume work of criticism and literary autobiography, based on his courses at HKUST, that reconstructs the development of his artistic worldview. His significant cultural impact on literary expression and insight into contemporary China and the human condition, as well as his global reach, is evident from numerous reviews in leading international and Chinese publications; a mass audience of more than 311,000 attracted to a single live event; and economic impact from tens of thousands of sales for works in Chinese and 6,500 hardback copies within around six months of release in English for books published while at HKUST.

2. Underpinning research

Yan Lianke's literary output prior to his role at HKUST is characterized by a deep knowledge of Chinese literature and international writing, ranging from American black humor to Russian naturalism; the distinctive rooting of his stories in the countryside of eastern China; and the courage to address controversial issues in contemporary China. This led to novels (later translated into English and many other languages) tackling the utopianism of communism and the open-door era (*Lenin's Kisses* 2004; Lao She Literature Prize), blood-selling and HIV infection (*Dream of Ding Village* 2006), and the Great Leap Forward (*Four Books* 2011). Many of his novels are unofficially banned in mainland China.

Yan's time at HKUST witnessed his departure from literary realism, the dominant style in contemporary Chinese fiction, and his adoption of an avant-garde sensibility that he calls "shenshizhuyu" or mythorealism. He first coined this term in his 2011 non-fiction book *Discovering the Novel*, characterizing it as a mode of literary representation uniquely suited to depicting the absurdist features of contemporary Chinese life. As a style, mythorealism integrates settings and details from everyday life – hence its "realism" – into allegorical plotlines studded with absurdist and often uproarious episodes.

His 2013 novel, *The Day the Sun Died*, written while in residence at HKUST, was one of his first works of fiction to reflect this new direction in his writing. It represents an important milestone in the development of his style – a shift encouraged by his physical and psychological distance from the mainland while in Hong Kong. The novel is set in a rural village whose inhabitants, during the course of a single night, begin sleepwalking and enacting the transgressive behaviors that they normally suppress during their waking hours. The events take place against the backdrop of an unpopular new government policy: all corpses are henceforth to be cremated, rather than buried, with legal sanctions for those who disobey [R1, R4].

The second novel that Yan wrote at HKUST, *Want to Sleep Together Quickly*, pushes the genre of mythorealism in an even more radical and experimental direction. It follows the story of "Yan Lianke", a down-on-his-luck author who sets out to make a fortune by writing a screenplay with a female collaborator. This avant-garde novel features multiple structures and narrators, and blurs the boundaries between what is real and what is fictional. It also represents a major shift in Yan's writing, as it is the first of his novels to depart from his familiar rural terrain and place its protagonists in an urban setting (Beijing) [R5].

In addition, Yan drew on his experiences as a course instructor at HKUST to produce a two-volume collection of lectures, *Yan Lianke's 12 Lectures on Literature*. This publication represents a departure in Yan's oeuvre, as well as a one-of-a-kind work of contemporary Chinese literature, in that it combines critical readings of canonical texts with how-to advice for aspiring authors. Each lecture analyzes a different aspect of the writer's craft, such as character, setting, language, as illustrated by a single short story written by a nineteenth or twentieth-century author who has inspired Yan, e.g. Goethe, Zola, Shen Congwen, Gogol, Kafka, Lu Xun, and Yasunari Kawabata. Through these lectures, Yan returns to the sources of his inspiration and encourages younger writers to learn from the masters of modern fiction [R2, R3].

Yan's novels have received global literary acclaim. He was awarded the Franz Kafka Literature Prize, 2014 (for overall oeuvre), Dream of the Red Chamber Prize, 2016 (for *The Day the Sun Died*) in Hong Kong, was a finalist for the Man Booker International Prize in 2016 and 2013, and was nominated for that prize in 2017. His work has attracted extensive academic interest, with around 2,680 citations on Google Scholar (30 September 2019) and is discussed in literary and cultural journals, such as *Modern Fiction Studies*, *Chinese Literature Today*, and *China Perspectives*, alongside other contemporary Chinese literary giants, such as Mo Yan and Ma Jian.

3. References to the research

[R1] Yan Lianke. 2015. *The Day the Sun Died*. Taipei: Rye Field [in Chinese].

[R2] Yan Lianke. 2017. *Twelve Lectures on 19th Century Writings*. HK: Chung Hwa [in Chinese].

[R3] Yan Lianke. 2017. *Twelve Lectures on 20th Century Writings*. HK: Chung Hwa [in Chinese].

[R4] Yan Lianke. 2018. *The Day the Sun Died*. Trans. Carlos Rojas. London: Chatto & Windus [in English].

[R5] Yan Lianke. 2019. *Want to Sleep Together Quickly*. Taipei: Flower & Art [in Chinese].

4. Details of the Impact

Yan's position as writer-in-residence and visiting professor at HKUST has enabled him to attain a heightened critical perspective on contemporary Chinese society, at the same time raising his awareness of global social conditions. As the *New Yorker* magazine observed in a feature-length profile, in Hong Kong, "Yan experienced what it was like to scale China's digital firewall and gaze out at a world filled with information and books banned by his motherland" [S1]. Yan's *societal impact on culture* as a result of this experience is evidenced by the reception that the books written while at HKUST have received. This shows impact, within and well beyond China, on readers, critics, and other writers by a) creating new forms of literary expression and understanding of experimental literature, and providing Chinese and English-language readers with fresh insights into modern China and the human condition; and b) influencing literary discourse in the Chinese public sphere by generating new ways of thinking about contemporary literature, and inspiring mass audiences and other writers. The works have also had *economic impact*, through combined sales of tens of thousands of these books in countries and regions across the world (mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, US, UK, Australia and New Zealand) during the review period, with more countries planning to publish (e.g. France, Spain, Japan).

Generating new understanding of modern China and global trends in society among English-language readers: The English-language publication of *The Day the Sun Died*, translated by Carlos Rojas, has been widely seen as cementing Yan's international reputation as one of China's most important living writers. In the words of the *Economist*: "This exuberant but sinister fable confirms its author as one of China's most audacious and enigmatic novelists." [S2] The English translation was published in the United States by Grove Press and Brilliance Audio North America, Chatto & Windus in the United Kingdom, and Text in Australia and New Zealand, creating *economic impact for international book publishers and sellers*. Approximately 6,500 copies of the first hardcover edition were sold in these markets from Spring 2018 to the end of 2018, a notable figure for a literary work in translation, as confirmed in email communication with Yan's agent Laura Susijn, who

represents the writer worldwide [S3]. A paperback was published in the US and UK in 2019. The book also received large-scale media coverage in the form of positive reviews in major newspapers and magazines, including the *Economist*, *Guardian*, *New York Times Book Review*, *Los Angeles Times*, *South China Morning Post*, and *Washington Post*, as well as in the long-established US literary magazine *Ploughshares* and *Asian Review of Books*. The novel was named Best Book of December 2018 by Amazon Book Review, and received a starred review in the book business bible *Publishers Weekly*. Of special significance was the publication of a long-form profile of Yan in the *New Yorker*, a rare honor for a foreign-language author and an event that has further raised his profile.

Significantly, *The Day the Sun Died* has provided English language reviewers and readers with new understanding of the moral quandaries of contemporary China, while at the same time connecting the fate of Chinese society to global issues of social and political importance. “If you want to know what it’s like to live in China, read Yan Lianke,” recommended the *Amazon Book Review* in its citation for Best Book of December 2018 [S4]. English-language newspaper reviews and profiles in major media outlets also observed that the book’s allegorical critique of consumerism and consumption made it relevant to global audiences. “Its description of a society seized by its worst impulses, enacting the repressed hatreds and nightmarish obsessions of its inhabitants, felt more familiar the more I considered it,” wrote J Gewirtz, reviewing the work for the *New York Times Book Review*. “Yan’s subject is China, but he has condensed the human forces driving today’s global upheavals into a bracing, universal vision.” [S5] As the reviewer for *Ploughshares* observed: “No matter where we live, this is our story, too, or *could* be, if things don’t change. Modern day China may be obsessed with work, progress, and production, but the novel also asks us to question our own culture and lives in the US.” [S6] In addition, *Washington Post* book critic Ron Charles noted: “[Yan’s] vision of social decay and commercial exploitation is so relevant to life in the United States that we may have to ban [his book] here, too.” [S7]

Readers’ reviews on Amazon.com indicated that *The Day the Sun Died* led some individuals to reflect on their own society [S8]. “I wasn’t sure what to think of *The Day the Sun Died* in the beginning, but as it moved forward, I couldn’t put it down... I wanted to know what was going to happen to this family and their village. ... The tiny details shared by [the narrator] don’t seem important at first. But then you begin to see how these slight references weave the story together, becoming a statement about the larger world and the choices we make as a society,” stated “bookreporter”. Reviews also revealed that English-language readers gained further insight into the social and political problems of contemporary China. “Filled with unforgettable imagery this poetic rendering looks at a political policy that sharply diverges from the wishes of the people,” noted “mainlinebooker,” while Angela Reis praised the “haunting exploration of the anxieties, secret desires, and unfulfilled needs of people in modern China”.

Informing new understanding of experimental fiction and society among Chinese-language readers: The Chinese edition of *The Day the Sun Died*, published by Rye Field (Taipei) in 2015 (Hong Kong and Taiwan sales undisclosed), and Yan’s second novel written at HKUST, *Want to Sleep Together Quickly*, released in 2019 by Flower & Art (Taipei), have had impact on Chinese readers through their experimental approaches and critical analysis of Chinese society. While the former has not been sold in mainland China, the latter has captivated readers in both Taiwan and mainland China, reaching an initial print run of 80,000, and garnering considerable attention from the mainland China media, including reviews in *New Beijing Daily*, Tencent Culture News, Dalian Literature online magazine, and WeChat online magazine, and interviews in *Beijing Youth Daily*, *Jinan Daily*, *Global People Magazine*, *Nan Fang People Magazine*, and the Sina Reading website, reaching audiences of millions. On the work’s brave role in shining an unvarnished spotlight on the current Chinese writing field (among others) and exploring new forms of writing, Dalian Literature pointed out: “Isn’t the meaning of *Want to Sleep Together Quickly* actually Yan Lianke’s self-reflection and self-awakening? In his work, Yan Lianke not only consistently exposed the shortcomings and pain of China’s eccentric society but also ridiculed his own shortcomings and pain. This is indeed the backbone and courage of the Chinese contemporary literary field.” [S9]

Mainland readers who left comments on WeChat and the online bookselling site Douban praised Yan's experimental, self-deprecatory style, and his ability to illuminate the perplexities of contemporary life in China [S10]. "Reality and fiction, reason and absurdity, true feelings and hypocrisy, perfectly blended in the lines of words, allowing readers to see human nature and understand life," wrote one reader. Another observed: "There was one shocking sentence in the book: It is not because I don't write; it is the truth of life that will not let me write. Indeed, this is the current situation in China. ... It is fiction and reality, and it is hard to distinguish. This is the fascinating part of this book."

Impacting the discussion of literature in the Chinese public sphere, generating new ways of thinking about contemporary literature and inspiring other writers: Interest in *Yan Lianke's 12 Lectures on Literature*, based on his classes at HKUST, has been extraordinarily high. Both volumes were reprinted within two months of their initial publication. While figures for this print run remained confidential, an additional 100,000 copies were expected to be published by Peking University Press later in 2019. The reception of Yan's method of teaching creative writing at HKUST – providing guidance through critical reflection on masterworks of the past – inspired Wei Bingxin, the editor-in-chief of the highly popular Phoenix Net Culture Reading Channel, to organize a live-streaming event in Beijing. Yan delivered a public lecture at the University of Chicago Chinese Center, Renmin University, on 17 December 2017, attended by over 300 people and simultaneously broadcast live on Phoenix's website. More than 311,000 people tuned in to the website to watch, and 20,400 people have since viewed the transcript of the lecture on the WeChat public account of the Phoenix Net Culture Channel. In his talk, Yan introduced his audience to the concept of "bitter coffee literature," a term of criticism for authors who depict human suffering merely for the purposes of bourgeois entertainment. According to Wei, the impact of Yan's concept of "bitter coffee literature" on the public discussion of fiction in China has been significant, as the concept has been "widely disseminated by media, such as Pear Video, and has become a hot topic for [the] literary world and readers. To this day, many reporters often use 'bitter coffee literature' as a question to discuss with writers for literary views and literary criticism when interviewing writers. To some extent, Mr. Yan Lianke's literary criticism has become a concept of criticism." [S11] Wei further reflected on Yan's outreach, which included a series of creative writing classes at Renmin University in 2015 and attracted "many young writers": "He was not satisfied with the achievements and pursuits made by himself alone; instead, he intended to pass down the torch of literature, never to let it burn out. Being a mentor, he used his own way to complete another great task." [S11]

5. Source to corroborate the impact

[S1] Jiayang Fan, "Yan Lianke's Forbidden Satires of China", *New Yorker*, 8.10.2018. [On file]

[S2] "Yan Lianke's Dark Satire of Modern China", *Economist*, 28.7.2018. [On file]

[S3] Email communication with L. Susijn, August 2019. [On file]

[S4] Chris Schlupe, "An Amazon Best Book of December 2018," *Amazon Book Review*. [On file]

[S5] Julian Gewirtz, "In a Brutal Chinese Satire, Villagers Surrender to Their Worst Impulses," *New York Times*, 28.12.2018. [On file]

[S6] Amber Wheeler Bacon, review of *The Day the Sun Died*, in *Ploughshares*, 7.12.2018. [On file]

[S7] Ron Charles, "'The Day the Sun Died' Is a Social Comedy That Bleeds Like a Zombie Apocalypse", *Washington Post*, 24.12.2018. [On file]

[S8] Amazon reader reviews by "Mainlinebooker", 16.12.18, "Angela Reis" 23.12.18, and "Bookreporter", 13.1.2019. [On file]

[S9] Dalian Literature Online Magazine, 10.04.19. [On file]

[S10] Comments by "the sunflower in the dark," WeChat online magazine, 25.02.19; "A Drop of Lake Water", Douban, 20.1.2019. [On file]

[S11] Testimonial by Wei Bingxin, Editor-in-Chief, Phoenix Net Culture Reading Channel [On file].