CONTENTS

Teaching Dream of Ding Village in Wisconsin ................................................................. 1
Preface ............................................................................................................................... 3
1. GLOBAL PANDEMICS: CHINA AND THE WORLD .................................................... 5
2. IN THE WORLD/CHINA: YAN LIANKE AND HIS WORK .................................... 17
3. DEVELOPMENTALISM AND CHINA’S ROARING 1990s .................................... 31
4. MEDICINE, AFTERLIFE, AND KINSHIP ............................................................... 48
5. LIFE IN THE COUNTRYSIDE: UTOPIA OR DYSTOPIA? ...................................... 69
6. WIND, WATER, TREES, SOIL: THE CHANGING NATURE OF HUMAN-ENVIRONMENT RELATIONS IN MODERN CHINA ................................................................. 86
7. DREAMS AND GHOSTS: EXPLORING NARRATIVE DEVICES .......................... 103
8. PREPARING TO MEET THE WRITER ....................................................................... 122
Teaching *Dream of Ding Village* in Wisconsin

Reading Across Time and Place

*Dream of Ding Village* is a work of fiction. While its sociocultural and geopolitical contexts are integral to its impact, and to our critical reflections on the text, it is also important to remember that this is a work of literature. While literature can help us teach culture, history, politics and so on, no one text can bear the burden of representing an entire nation, culture, or people. As you teach this text, please keep in mind and emphasize where you can the cultural specificities that make it unique. Doing so in a clear and explicit way will also help you and your students appreciate the text’s ability to speak across time and space. Certain sections of the teaching guide, such as Units 1, 3, and 4, will be especially helpful in this context.

How to Use This Guide

The material in this guide is intended to provide a variety of options for teaching Yan Lianke’s *Dream of Ding Village* and its many contexts. We believe that the historical and cultural background is necessary for understanding this work and the questions it provokes, but we encourage you to teach the text thematically as well, tying it into other disciplinary issues and regular features of your core curriculum wherever possible.

Readings

The recommended readings in the guide are intended for teachers, but some are also accessible to students. These readings provide further background information for instructors as well as a variety of materials that might aid instructors in creating handouts and supplementing class discussion.

Points for Discussion, Assignments, and Activities

The recommended points for discussion, assignments and activities provided in this guide are designed to be tailored to the way you teach the text in your own course, as well as your particular time constraints, interests, and goals. The individual units might be taught over one or several days, or over the course of a few weeks. You can mix and match ideas from the various sections to create your own syllabus. Each unit is organized according to themes that include points for lecture and discussion, suggestions for close reading, specific quotes from the text or other readings, as well as in-class activities and assignments that might be used to further discussion.

Close Reading Strategies

The guide assumes that you will have read the entire text, but all units also offer suggestions for specific passages within the text that would benefit from careful and attentive reading, analysis
and discussion. During discussion and for assignments, students should be encouraged to support their interpretations with evidence from the text. Close reading lends itself well to both large-group work and small-group discussions, and is an excellent way for students to develop their critical thinking skills as they make connections, use evidence to support their views, and discuss the impact of various literary techniques. For close reading to work successfully, it’s important that the teacher always remind the students to point to the passage, line, or occurrence that supports their position when they’re sharing their ideas. Close reading teaches students the difference between “opinion” or “personal reaction” and “analysis.” It also helps teach students to assess the text on its own merits, and to avoid essentializing the cultural components of the text or stereotyping based on generalizations.

Teaching Toward the Student Conference
Schools participating in the 2019-2020 program will bring students to the University of Wisconsin-Madison on Monday, April 19, 2021 to present their work to their peers and meet the author Yan Lianke in person. At the time of the completion of this guide, we are planning to move the conference to a virtual format, due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Unit 7 in this guide is explicitly devoted to preparing students for this visit and for the student conference. Prepare them for a successful conference by encouraging them to challenge themselves with projects that provide critical interpretations of the text in unique and complex ways. There is no limit to the type of project they might prepare. Past projects have included essays, painting, sculpture, weaving, photography, film and other multimedia, dramatic performances, song, dance, and more. The only requirement is that the students’ projects must present a critical analysis of the text. Students will be required to write a short summary of their projects, which will be submitted to Aaron Fai approximately three weeks before the student conference.

Each school will select one student, or group of students, whose work is exemplary, to present to the entire conference. It’s recommended that the students themselves select (by voting) the “best” project for this presentation, which will be about 3 minutes in length. It is our expectation that these presentations will be polished, rehearsed and timed, and that they will provide an opportunity for your school to feel pride and investment in its participation in the program. All other students are expected to present their work in poster sessions during the conference, and will have the opportunity to stand next to their projects and answer questions about them from other students and conference participants. Every student who attends the conference should present her/his work at the conference.
Preface

Selected for the Great World Texts program before January, when the outbreak of Covid-19 took off first in China then in Europe, the United States, and the rest of the world, *Dream of Ding Village* comes at a major historical crossroad. The novel’s perspective on a far-reaching health crisis, profiteering and government corruption, and trauma and hope in times of an epidemic certainly resonates with the events of 2020. The current crisis is further compounded by rising geopolitical tensions between the United States and China, making it all the more important to read Yan’s work as a reminder of the shared humanity between the common people of these two countries. Overall, the novel presents us with an invaluable opportunity for reflection and comparison. At the same time, its timeliness poses a necessary challenge: to avoid hearing it as only an echo of the present, but to instead grapple with the particularity of its historical experience. The novel asks us to bear witness.

The AIDS village crisis in central China’s grain belt region of Henan began in the early 1990s, when the provincial government began promoting a new industry: farmers could supplement their limited incomes by donating blood plasma at the collection stations that began to pop up across the countryside. Once it took hold, HIV spread widely thanks to the reuse of needles and the blood centrifuges used to separate plasma from the blood. By the mid-90s, the incidence and deadliness of the outbreak was clear to some government officials, but public awareness of the crisis was suppressed for another half decade so that those responsible could continue profiting (and, later, to cover up their actions and escape liability). Around 2000 the stunning proportions of the crisis came to light as local journalists and writers, researchers, and officials reported on the conditions in the countryside. In a village like Wenlou, with a population of 800, 65% had HIV. About 40 were dying a year. And those who had AIDS symptoms were doubly treated as outcasts: both shunned by fellow villagers who only partially understood the cause of the disease, and coldly ignored by a government wrought by corruption and lack of resources. Accurate infection and mortality rates are few, but one estimate suggests that at least 600,000 people contracted HIV through the emergent plasma economy.

The AIDS village crisis stands out as a deadly epidemic primarily caused—or at least greatly exacerbated—by economic factors. The blood trade was a lucrative one: blood collectors (known colloquially as ‘blood heads’) sold plasma to larger companies who produced various blood products, or exported it abroad. Officials who allowed illegal collection centers to operate received kickbacks. And, for villagers themselves, the cash inflow from regular blood donation unlocked otherwise unreachable material wealth. The backdrop to this situation is the country’s broader march toward “postsocialism”: since the death of Mao Zedong in 1976, the Chinese Communist Party has charted a course away from the model of planned economic development and the maintenance of strong social welfare nets, steering instead toward
policies of economic liberalization such as the privatization of profit and the deregulation of industry. (These economic reforms have become largely decoupled from political liberalization like democratization—the two do not go hand-in-hand, despite what many of us in America have been taught to believe.) In a situation where the old system is dismantled and all must compete to find new ways to fend for themselves, the explosion of get-rich-quick schemes is inevitable. The great many who fall further behind provide an easy target to hucksterism and exploitation. *Dream of Ding Village* masterfully documents this cycle of feedback and its human costs.

Born in 1958, Yan Lianke has emerged as one of the leading chroniclers of the ills and absurdities of China’s headlong plunge into post-socialism. His prolific output has made him one of the most prominent novelists of his generation. *Dream of Ding Village* is part reportage, part fantasy. Reportage because it is based on several years’ worth of careful research that Yan conducted in his native Henan. Fantasy because of its richly imaginative world, where the dead tell tales and dreams cause events. The result is a work that both documents and gives expressive voice to the victims of the crisis—a potent and moving blend makes *Dream of Ding Village* officially banned (though hardly unknown) in the People’s Republic of China.

This guide is intended to prepare readers for an engaged and informed reading of the text. The first three units provide important contextual and background information, including a biography of Yan and his works. The middle units cover major and interrelated themes of the novel such as disease and medicine, changing visions of rural utopia, environmental degradation, religion and popular belief about the afterlife, dreams, and more. The final unit addresses the topics of engaged reading and preparation for the year-end conference. The guide was primarily researched and compiled by Yuzhe Li, a doctoral student in the Asian Languages and Literatures Department at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, with the support of Aaron Fai and the Center for the Humanities.

Anatoly Detwyler
Assistant Professor of Modern Chinese Literature
University of Wisconsin-Madison
1. GLOBAL PANDEMICS: CHINA AND THE WORLD

OBJECTIVES
- To read Dream of Ding Village with a global perspective by understanding the novel within the human history of pandemics;
- to provide general knowledge of the history of HIV/AIDS pandemic in China and its relationship to the blood-selling of the 1990s;
- to explore the censorship of public discussion on HIV/AIDS in China, especially the government’s sensitivity surrounding the blood-selling as a cause of the HIV/AIDS epidemic as revealed in the novel.

HANDOUTS
- “Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS),” The Cambridge World History of Human Disease
- “Continuing Crackdown in Henan Province,” Restrictions on AIDS Activists in China

PREPARATORY & RECOMMENDED READING

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES
1918 Pandemic Influenza:

HIV/AIDS Global:
● Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). “Let’s Stop HIV Together.”

HIV/AIDS in China:
● China Ministry of Health, and UN Theme Group on HIV/AIDS in China. A Joint Assessment of HIV/AIDS Prevention, Treatment and Care in China. December 2003,

Research on Other Epidemics in China:
● Hanson, Marta E. Speaking of Epidemics in Chinese Medicine: Disease and the Geographic Imagination in Late Imperial China. Routledge, 2011.

UNIT ORGANIZATION
This unit is divided into three subsections: “Age of Pandemics,” “AIDS in China: Emergence and Spreading,” and “Public Discussion on AIDS in China.” The second subsection is accompanied by an additional part, “Close Reading & Points for Discussion.” Beginning by acknowledging the present situation of COVID-19, this unit opens onto a discussion of Yan Lianke’s Dream of Ding Village by situating the AIDS crisis in China within a broader history of pandemics and global health crises. Pandemics are palpable and urgent events. They are also not limited to recent human history. The situation of the HIV/AIDS pandemic in China and China’s response to it are addressed in the latter two subsections, which should be understood within a global view.

OPENING QUESTIONS
● What do you know about COVID-19? How has it influenced your life?
● What is the difference between a pandemic and an epidemic? (‘Pan’-: all-inclusive, esp. In relation to a whole continent. ‘Epi’-: upon, here meaning related to a community.) Can you list the pandemics you know about that have happened in world
history/American history? How about epidemics? How have those pandemics impact on human history, politically, economically, culturally, etc.?

- What do you know about the situation of HIV/AIDS in the U.S.? What is the condition of people infected with HIV in the U.S.? Are they encountering stigma or discrimination? How would you get along with someone with HIV?
- What is a government’s responsibility for its people during a pandemic? Is there a difference between the responsibilities of the local and central (national) governments?
- What is your impression of the freedom of mass media in China? In comparison, how much and what extent of freedom do American mass media have?

AGE OF PANDEMICS
2020 has become an unusual year. The whole world seems to be paused due to an unexpected pandemic—COVID-19. We have to work at home, socially distance from others, switch from in-person to online classes, and so on. Pandemic, a word that used to belong to history, is now a part of everyone’s life. And yet we humans have been going through many pandemics for a long time.

The earliest recorded pandemic can be traced to 430 B.C. during the Peloponnesian War. Various pandemics found in historical records include leprosy, malaria, tuberculosis, influenza, and smallpox. One of the most famous and devastating pandemics in history was the Black Death, also called the Second Plague Pandemic, which killed an estimated 40% to 60% of all people in Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa in the mid-fourteenth century (Green 9). The disease was indiscriminately contagious through air and through the bite of infected fleas and rats, and there was a high global mortality rate. Fear spread among people. As no effective treatment was found, many fled from cities to the countryside to reduce the risk of being infected. Massacre of heretics happened in some communities, since some people believed the Black Death was a punishment from God and that cleansing the troublemakers could gain God’s forgiveness. What we now know as “quarantining” was practiced in order to deal with the pandemic in some regions, which helped to slow the spreading of the Black Death. The word quarantine comes from Italian quarantena and means “forty days.” In fourteenth-century Italy incoming ships were required to remain isolated for this period of time in order to prove no one on board was infected with the plague.

Another more recent influential global pandemic was the 1918 influenza pandemic. The so-called Spanish flu likely originated in Kansas. It was caused by a novel virus at that time—the H1N1 virus—and was accelerated by the movement of people during the Great War (now known as World War I). Unlike previous influenza which usually killed more vulnerable populations including very young and very old, the 1918 influenza killed more young adults. A healthy person might die overnight. The 1918 influenza was highly contagious and resulted in high mortality due to complex reasons, such as the lack of effective vaccine and antibiotics associated with the influenza infections, the cover-ups of the pandemic in countries wanting to maintain national morale in the wartime, the large-scale movement of population between the frontiers and the homelands, etc. It is estimated that one-third of the world’s population was
infected with the H1N1 virus, and twenty to fifty million people died of the 1918 influenza pandemic, which makes it the most severe pandemic in recent human history. In the U.S., the average lifespan in 1918 was depressed by a dozen years, and some researchers believe more people were killed by this influenza than in the Great War itself.

In more recent decades, pandemics have become increasingly familiar to people in the era of globalization. After the deadly 1918 influenza pandemic running widely from 1918 to 1919, the U.S. experienced several more influenza pandemics, including the 1957-1958 H2N2 pandemic, the 1968 H3N2 pandemic, and the 2009 H1N1 pandemic. Other than these influenza pandemics, the AIDS, and Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) are also influential global pandemics in recent years.

The history of previous pandemics offers useful clues to understanding what we are experiencing now. For example, the actions taken by governments and individuals to prevent the spread of infection in recent COVID-19 pandemic can find their parallels in the 1918 influenza pandemic. Non-pharmaceutical interventions were used worldwide, including isolation, quarantine, good personal hygiene, use of disinfectants and masks, limitations of public gatherings, etc. (CDC and NCIRD, “1918 Pandemic (H1N1 virus)”)

The naming of the 1918 influenza pandemic, widely called the "Spanish flu" before being formally renamed by the World Health Organization (WHO), implies the role of media in that pandemic. Terming it “Spanish flu” was not referring to the origin place of the virus, but because the flu was first widely reported by Spanish coverage thanks to Spain’s neutral position in World War I and its media not being subject to the wartime news blackouts like in other countries. We find parallel media cover-ups in almost all later pandemics, even though the human cost of 1918 showed the world how local inaction and unawareness led to global consequences.

Therefore, when it comes to the current situation, revisiting previous pandemics can be revealing. More issues about pandemics deserve to be contemplated:

- From the standpoint of individuals, what might happen to the victims of the disease? Would those infected suffer not only physically but also mentally?
- In terms of coverage on pandemics, what role has and should mass media play? What if the media is censored by authorities to conceal the severity?
- As for the consequences of the pandemics, what social transformations might pandemics invoke, economically, politically, and culturally?

Though *Dream of Ding Village* tackles a regional pandemic—HIV/AIDS in China—rather than a global one, Yan Lianke’s novel cannot be discussed without situating the AIDS crisis within a global view. Moreover, the novel can also offer us a good opportunity to return to different aspects of the historical moment of the 1990s, examine the complexity of pandemics, as well as think about what social change pandemics may bring to a nation, a village, and most importantly, to a community of people who are under the burden of a contagious disease with unknown parameters.
AIDS IN CHINA: EMERGENCE & SPREAD

Pandemics are not only global from a geographical standpoint (in that epidemics spread across boundaries between countries/continents). Pandemics also connect people from different cultures, nations, and social systems with the same shared goal: to take effective measures to control the spread of disease. In the case of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in central rural China, *Dream of Ding Village* asks readers to look through the lens of a variety of issues surrounding the epidemic, including public health management in China as well as the general public’s perception of the epidemic.

Before reading Yan Lianke’s novel on HIV/AIDS in China, it is useful to review some basic facts about about the HIV/AIDS, particularly its spread in the U.S. AIDS in America was first found in gay men in Los Angeles, New York City, and San Francisco in 1981. It did not attract significant attention among the general public at first, and for years had been stigmatized by many people as a disease that only certain groups of people could get. However, when the movie star Rock Hudson was diagnosed with AIDS in 1985, HIV/AIDS suddenly turned into a palpable issue for many Americans. Rock Hudson's death from AIDS that year shocked society, even though the epidemic had already spread nationwide (Shilts, “Acknowledgements”).

Since the 1980s, one response that the U.S. government had taken to weaken the spread of HIV/AIDS was to ban HIV-positive non-US citizens from entering the country. This ban lasted through the early 2000s, was lifted by temporary order during President George W. Bush’s administration, and then permanently withdrawn in January 2010 during President Barack Obama’s administration. However, stigma and discrimination toward people with HIV has never disappeared, and misconceptions about how HIV is transmitted still exist. The stigma and discrimination towards HIV carriers also results in stigma attached to the whole community of those more vulnerable populations, including LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer or Questioning), Black people, Hispanic/Latino people, etc. Although the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) has launched a plan, *Ending the HIV Epidemic: A Plan for America*, setting a goal to end the HIV epidemic in the U.S. by 90% by 2030, some activists argue that “unless the complex set of economic and socio-economic factors that drive these group’s risks to HIV are addressed—including discrimination, stigma and poverty—it is likely that HIV will continue to disproportionately affect men who have sex with men, African Americans/black people, Latino/Hispanic men, transgender women, prisoners and people who use drugs.” (“HIV and AIDS in the United States of America (USA)“)

Living in the present moment of COVID-19, we clearly see that pandemics are an arena for public health debate. To get pandemics under control, one straightforward way would be to close the borders between regions, so as to stop infected people from migrating across regional boundaries. As mentioned above, the U.S. used this measure to reduce the risk of HIV/AIDS entering America from other countries. Such a method is to effectively build an invisible *cordons sanitaires*, a Latin term that means “sanitary border”:

The knowledge, institutions, and practices of public health aimed to regulate the circulation of matter (or people) constituted as dangerous because of their circulation
and contact with unknown people in unknown places: prostitutes with venereal diseases, waterborne microbes in the drains and sewers connecting urban spaces, infected migrants, soldiers or seamen traveling the globe, smallpox accompanying trading routes. Lines or barriers drawn across these global, local and bodily circulations and connections are often what have constituted public health measures: *cordon sanitaire* of various kinds. (Bashford 1-2)

Likewise, the Chinese government did the same thing in the early years when HIV/AIDS was discovered overseas. After AIDS was first identified in 1981 in the U.S., early epidemiological studies suggested that “homosexual men, recipients of blood transfusions and blood products (especially hemophiliacs), and intravenous drug users” were the populations most at risk for HIV/AIDS (Kiple 573). Because recipients of blood products (such as haemophiliacs) might be infected with HIV from the imported product contaminated by HIV, the Chinese Ministry of Health issued a notice restricting the import of foreign blood products in September 1984 to prevent HIV/AIDS from spreading to China. However, the disease was not successfully prevented. In June 1985, a male Argentine-American tourist died of AIDS in Beijing. Shortly after this case, four HIV infections were detected among hemophilia patients who had received transfusions of imported blood products. These cases increasingly attracted the Chinese government’s attention. A *cordon sanitaire* was built through laws and regulations, and attempted to eliminate the risk of foreigners infecting native Chinese and to restrict more rigorously the import of foreign blood products. Foreigners who planned to stay for more than a year in China were required to undergo HIV testing, and HIV-positive foreigners were not permitted to visit China. HIV-positive foreigners who were already in China were asked to leave the country. In August 1985, the central government issued a more strict notice to abandon imported blood products, reemphasizing the danger of spreading HIV via import.

Yet some pandemic experts at the time considered HIV/AIDS unlikely to become an epidemic in China. They formed this idea based on their knowledge of the transmission routes of HIV. Because HIV/AIDS was highly related to drug addiction, homosexuality, and casual sexual contacts, which were opposed by both the government and in public opinion, these experts believed the HIV/AIDS would simply not become widely spread in China. AIDS was even called the “loving capitalism disease” in the 1980s, so many Chinese people thought a western lifestyle was to be blamed for causing this disease. Specialists overlooked the threat of HIV/AIDS to China as well. In 1988, a virologist called HIV/AIDS a foreign threat: “The only way for HIV/AIDS to come into China is from foreigners.” (Wu 5)

Such misunderstandings continued to be widespread from the late 1980s to the 1990s. However, most people neglected another way of HIV/AIDS affection: injection. In Yunnan Province, a province bordering Burma, Laos, and Vietnam in southwestern China, indigenous
people with drug-addictions switched from smoking and eating opium to injecting refined heroin in the late 1980s. However, the injection of drugs with syringe sharing increased the risk of getting contagious diseases. An epidemiologist working for Yunnan Center for Disease Control and Prevention was shocked by the results of an HIV test survey she conducted among drug users in the detoxification centers set by the government to monitor local drug users. The results showed that forty percent of drug users who came from poor remote rural villages had been infected with HIV, which at that time was still viewed as a foreign or western virus by most people (Wu 5-6).

Though infections of HIV kept growing in south-western provinces, coastal cities, and metropolises like Beijing and Shanghai through drugs, homosexuality, and prostitution, the population in central Chinese provinces, especially rural people who lived in poor and remote villages, heard little about this disease. These villagers never would have thought that they would be exposed to the threat of HIV/AIDS, and yet the virus came and spread through blood extraction and transfusion. In poor villages in central Chinese provinces like Henan, Shaanxi, and Anhui, villagers were paid more for selling blood than for selling agricultural products. The spread of HIV/AIDS in these underdeveloped rural villages was thus mostly a man-made tragedy. The development of the so-called “plasma economy” and unsterile plasma collection procedures caused HIV/AIDS to reach epidemic proportions in those areas in the early 1990s, which finally outbroke in the late 1990s and early 2000s. [For more on the plasma economy, see Unit 3] As a native of Henan Province, Yan Lianke presents the tragic fates of the HIV-infected villagers in Dream of Ding Village, interweaving historical fact with his knowledge of rural life.

CLOSE READING & POINTS FOR DISCUSSION
Unit 3 will focus more on the plasma economy in these central Chinese provinces during this period, which was the factor most to blame for the HIV/AIDS epidemic in those areas. Here we aim to help students read the local context of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in China with a global view, which forms the foundation of the story in Dream of Ding Village.

To move to a literary overview of the local HIV/AIDS epidemic in China, the discussion can begin by asking some questions related to the students’ personal experience: How is HIV/AIDS perceived by local people in Wisconsin? Have you noticed any prejudice in your community or from the mass media against those living with HIV/AIDS?

After considering over the above-mentioned questions, students will be prepared to find some resonance when close reading the following extract from Chapter One of Volume 2 of Dream of Ding Village:

The fifth thing Grandpa learned was that AIDS had originally been a foreigners’ disease, a big-city disease rumoured to affect only deviant people. But now China had it, too. It was spreading across the countryside, and those who were getting sick were normal, upstanding people. The sickness came in waves, like swarms of locusts descending over
a field and destroying the vegetation. If one person got sick, the only certainty was that many more would soon follow. (9-10)

You can encourage students to make a contrast between their own perception of AIDS and Grandpa’s perception of AIDS shown in this extract. You can also raise further questions to students, such as:

● Would you associate HIV/AIDS to a certain group of people? Why or why not?
● Would you consider HIV carriers to be guilty, that their getting infected should be blamed on their own behavior? Would you view AIDS as a disease out of immorality? Why or Why not? [See the Handout, “Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS)”, pp. 549-550, for the history of people’s conceptions about AIDS and attitudes towards the HIV infected person]
● What was Grandpa’s previous opinion about AIDS? What was his current opinion about AIDS? What changed Grandpa’s opinion?

PUBLIC DISCUSSION ON AIDS IN CHINA

The possibility of an outbreak of a blood-related epidemic in Henan province was noted by two medical workers named Gao Yaojie and Wang Shuping. From 1991 to 1993, several local specialists including Gao and Wang found the unusual high rate (or morbidity) of Hepatitis C and malaria, which had been controlled to a low level previously. They notified the Henan provincial government, but the government paid little attention to their observations, and the unsafe blood trade kept developing, peaking in 1994 and 1995. The local officials’ knowing little about HIV/AIDS, especially their lack of knowledge about the transmission route of HIV, finally led to the spread of the lethal virus during that period. In 1995, the HIV/AIDS epidemic in several central Chinese provinces was reported to the central government. Public health officials in the Chinese central government at last responded to the epidemic and pushed the local governments in these provinces to close the blood banks. In September 1995, the Ministry of Health in China released a report called “Recommendations on Strengthening HIV/AIDS Prevention and Control,” which determined that HIV/AIDS would have spun even more out of control in China if effective prevention measures had not been taken in time. According to this official document, it was estimated that the real number of the HIV infected had reached 50,000 to 100,000 in China by 1995, and the speed of HIV diffusion was still increasing. The document also reminded all levels of governments and departments to pay attention to the transmission of HIV by blood, and hoped to carry out and popularize voluntary blood donation as soon as possible, as well as to prohibit individual blood donation with payment in the meantime.

Although the central government urged local governments to take actions to control the disease, the local governments did not follow the requirements seriously. In Henan province, the local government still tried to conceal the real impact of HIV/AIDS from both the central government and the public. This situation can be attributed to various reasons. These officials feared that they would lose their current work and position if the higher authorities knew the actual infection data. For those poor villages that had become richer by joining the blood trade,
it would be difficult to make as much money if they no longer sold their blood, and villagers from the impacted villages might be discriminated against by outside people if the local epidemic was disclosed to the public. In addition, the blood-selling agents (called “bloodheads,” translated from Chinese), acting as liaisons between blood donors and blood purchasers, did not want to give up such lucrative business. As for the pharmaceutical companies, it was more profitable to purchase cheap blood collected from the poor villagers. These various interests all made it possible for some blood banks to keep running in later years, by appeasing the local governments and avoiding national regulation.

Despite the contrast between local and central government policy, HIV/AIDS attracted more and more attention from high-level policy makers. In November 1998, the State Council in China released a long-term plan to control the HIV/AIDS nationwide, which aimed to completely end the transmission of HIV via blood collection and transfusion by 2002. The collection and use of plasma has been regulated more strictly since October 1998, when the “Blood Donation Law” started to take effect in China.

However, the regulations and policies were too late for many: according to the 2004 official estimation by the Chinese government, about 200,000 to 300,000 people in central provinces including Henan, Hebei, Anhui, Shaanxi, and Shanxi were infected with HIV during the heat of the blood-selling boom from the early-to-mid 1990s. As HIV/AIDS has a five to ten years latency period, the HIV/AIDS epidemic in those regions outwardly manifested mostly in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The public coverage of HIV/AIDS in the so-called “AIDS villages” occurred during this period. The Wenlou village in Henan province was the first “AIDS village” reported by mass media and soon became well-known to the general public of China. According to one of the pioneers fighting with HIV/AIDS, Doctor Gui Xi’en, who did research in Wenlou village in the late 1990s, over 65% of residents in Wenlou village had been infected with HIV. His report submitted in October 1999 to the vice prime minister of China at that time spurred more action by the central government and more open discussion on the HIV/AIDS epidemic in “AIDS villages” like Wenlou village.

In May 2001, the State Council in China issued an “Action Plan on HIV/AIDS Prevention and Treatment in China (2001-2005),” requiring local governments to conduct more effective measures to address the HIV/AIDS pandemic in China. This five-year plan restated the goal of banning illegal blood banks by the end of 2002, which also implies that dangerous blood collection practices remained prevalent in the early 2000s. In November 2001, Executive Director Peter Piot of the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV and AIDS (UNAIDS) urged Chinese leaders to take stricter actions in tackling AIDS, arguing that China’s prevention efforts would determine the global burden of HIV/AIDS in the next two decades (Bezlova). The increasing infection rate and the pressure from the international community required the Chinese government to open up public discussion on the HIV/AIDS crisis. According to some, HIV/AIDS was no longer a taboo topic in China in the early 2000s, but was still a sensitive one. For example, HIV-afflicted Chinese farmers from Henan province were barred by Chinese authorities from attending the first international conference on HIV/AIDS held in Beijing (Bezlova).
Though HIV/AIDS remained a sensitive topic for Chinese government in the early 2000s, some official media shed light on the domestic crisis much earlier. One of the Chinese official newspapers, the People’s Daily, started to report on HIV/AIDS as early as the late 1980s, particularly since December 1, 1988, the first World AIDS Day. The reports at that time portrayed HIV/AIDS as an international problem, rather than focusing on the local situation of HIV/AIDS in China. This kind of framing of the topic continued until the mid-to-late 1990s, when HIV/AIDS broke out in atypical regions like central Chinese rural areas rather than southwestern and coastal provinces, and among populations like farmers rather than drug users and sex workers (Hood 214-215).

However, reflections and criticism in the media of blood-selling practices in the central provinces remained rare until the early 2000s, when the events were officially recognized by Chinese authorities. A detailed report, “The Shocking ‘Plasma Economy’: Interviewing ‘AIDS villages’ in Henan Province,” was published by the influential magazine Sanlian lifeweek in September 2001, which was later forwarded by official Chinese online medias including the people.cn and cctv.com. The assessment report of the HIV/AIDS situation in China given by UNAIDS in June 2002, titled “HIV/AIDS: China’s Titanic Peril,” criticized the elusiveness of the HIV/AIDS numbers and the insufficient governance of HIV/AIDS epidemic in China. Moreover, the outbreak of the SARS epidemic in China in 2003 greatly changed people’s attitude towards epidemics among both the Chinese authorities and general public. The deadliness of SARS accelerated reforms in the field of public health and the transparency of information on epidemics in China. The pressure from the international community, the outbreaks of HIV/AIDS due to the blood-selling in the 1990s, and the 2003 SARS epidemic all contributed to building a more flexible environment for mass media in China. Media coverages on the “AIDS villages” in Chinese central provinces increased since 2004, among which the epicenter Henan province was frequently mentioned and discussed.

Even though Yan Lianke’s Dream of Ding Village was written during this period, when discussion of the blood-selling in central Chinese rural areas became slightly less restricted, the battle of how to disclose the truth of the “AIDS villages” continued. The local and central government remained at odds in how to present the information. Gao Yaojie, who has received many domestic and international rewards for her work on the HIV/AIDS situation in Henan province, encountered pressure from the local Henan government as she revealed the truth of the scandal. [See the handout “Continuing Crackdown in Henan Province” for the barriers that local authorities of Henan province set for AIDS activists and journalists] The possibility of openness and free discussion on the 1990s blood trade did not last long. Reports and public discussions on the epidemic and the “plasma economy” cooled after 2005. Dream of Ding Village could not avoid being censored, despite the fact that Yan Lianke had preemptively self-censored portions of the novel. Published in 2006, Dream of Ding Village only existed in the open cultural market for a very short time and was soon officially banned in mainland China ever since.
WORK CITED


ASSIGNMENTS, ACTIVITIES & PROJECT IDEAS

- Ask each student to identify a creative or artistic piece on COVID-19 or an earlier pandemic and introduce the work to their classmates. The piece could be of any form/genre: literary works, music, movie, drama, etc. Students can share their introductions within divided groups in the class. The student should keep his/her introduction brief (e.g. within 100 words) and highlight the most interesting connection to the topic of pandemics. Students may ask themselves the following questions in preparation for their presentation: What draws me to this piece? What features do I find the most powerful, and why? How does this piece speak to a historical event in a way that more official documentation, such as a news report or government.
announcement, does not? By keeping different ways to represent pandemics in mind, students can benefit from this activity and make more creative readings on *Dream of Ding Village* in later units.

- Ask every student to compose a personal short work on their experience during the COVID-19 pandemic, or to imagine themselves experiencing any pandemic that occurred in human history. Students may use any genre they know, including short fiction, poetry, essay, lyrics, play, sample diary, correspondence, coverage, etc. Encourage students to present their own memory, feelings, and thoughts of the pandemic in their works. This work could be a draft instead of a polished one, as after doing more literary reading of *Dream of Ding Village* in later units, students might come up with new ideas and want to revise their draft work.

- Encourage students to do some research on the impact that HIV/AIDS has had on people in the U.S. Beginning with the Wikipedia page [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HIV/AIDS_in_the_United_States](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HIV/AIDS_in_the_United_States), students can explore the history of AIDS in the United States. How is AIDS seen differently now than it was in the 1980s? Beyond advances in scientific research, what particular factors have contributed to shaping these changes? Students can reflect on the many social, economic, cultural, religious, and other dimensions of a health crisis.
2. IN THE WORLD/CHINA: YAN LIANKE AND HIS WORK

OBJECTIVE
● To learn about Yan Lianke, author of *Dream of Ding Village*
● To recognize common themes and styles of Yan Lianke’s novels and his theory of *mythorealism*
● To understand Yan Lianke’s status literary circles in and outside China.

HANDOUT
● “Major Works of Yan Lianke” (by Jun 2020)
● “Yan Lianke” (The SUSIJN Agency)

PREPARATORY & RECOMMENDED READING

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES
*Yan Lianke’s novels translated into English:*
*[For the introduction and synopsis of each novel below, see the Handout “Major Works of Yan Lianke” and “Yan Lianke” (The SUSIJN Agency)]*


*Majors political campaigns in PRC history:
The Great Famine*
UNIT ORGANIZATION
This unit is divided into three subsections: “Biography of Yan Lianke,” “Themes and Style of Yan Lianke’s works,” and “Yan Lianke: China’s Most Controversial Writer?” The second subsection is appended by an optional close reading of the extract from The Explosion Chronicles, which is aimed at helping students grasp the “mythoreal” style of Yan’s novels.

BIOGRAPHY OF YAN LIANKE
It is common to begin talking about someone’s biography with their date of birth. However, the precise date is uncertain for Yan Lianke 阎连科²: born in a rural village in Henan province, one of China’s most populous provinces that lies in central China, Yan Lianke does not know his exact birthdate. According to his mother, a rural woman from a traditional background who remembers according to agricultural conditions, Yan was born in a hot day. In that year, the sweet potatoes were a good harvest, though ironically, because of the commotion of the Great Leap Forward (1958–1962), no one had time to collect them so they were ultimately left to rot in the fields. The date was finally determined to be 24 August 1958 by a local clerk who was in charge of registration when Yan join the Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA) in his twenties and his birthdate was required for recordkeeping. From the beginning, Yan’s personal timeline has been inseparable from the momentous events that structure modern Chinese history.

It is necessary to explain the Great Leap Forward (1958-1962) and the consequent Great Chinese Famine (1959-1961). They were two pivotal events in PRC history which have direct bearing on the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The Great Leap Forward was announced as an attempt to use widespread mass mobilization to catch up with U.K. and U.S. levels of industrial and agricultural output in the span of fifteen years. Rural people were robbed of their land and livelihood: they were first forced to join communes where people farmed collective plots, shared tools, and ate government-issued food in public canteens. Later, they were forced to join the nationwide steel-making movement, and had no time to take care of their farmland,

² Note: the conventional structure for names in East Asian countries (China, Japan, Korea) is the family name, followed by the given name (called “first name” in West). So Yan Lianke’s family name is Yan, while his given name is Lianke; Mao Zedong’s family name is Mao, given name Zedong, etc. This guidebook follows this convention for all Chinese names.
resulting in heavily reduced agricultural harvests. Food shortages resulted in 1959 and brought mass starvation to many regions. In Yan Lianke’s hometown in Henan province, people followed Mao Zedong’s instructions with great eagerness. The famine that ensued was disproportionately severe. The Great Famine made hunger, poverty and physical pain shaped Yan’s most profound memories of childhood. Yan is aware of how much the human factor matters in that catastrophe; therefore, he refuses to call it by the “Three-Year Natural Disaster” (the officially approved term which is used by textbooks in China), arguing that it should be acknowledged as a man-made disaster (for more, see Fan, “Yan Lianke’s Forbidden Satires of China”).

Another major historical event, the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), also occupied a significant place in Yan’s childhood. It was a violent mass movement initiated by Mao Zedong, who became deified in the process. The Revolution caused immense damage to many aspects of Chinese society and culture. In the early months of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, schools and universities were closed as youth turned their attention to political mobilization. In 1967, primary and middle schools were allowed to reopen, though their focus was mainly on reciting chairman Mao Zedong’s quotations and learning Mao’s “supreme instructions” (namely that Mao’s words are all of the highest value and should be treated as truth, and his instructions should be followed by people unconditionally). Yan was a primary school student that year. When he went to middle school in 1972, he started to read novels, but all he could find were the officially-approved Chinese revolutionary literary works, which often are limited to revolution and historical events as subject matters, and are heavily influenced by political requirements. The nationwide craze for Mao and the suppression of traditional and outside culture during the Cultural Revolution left a deep impression on Yan, and appears in his novels in a variety of ways.

Yan Lianke decided to change his fate—not to become a peasant like other men in his family but to become an urban citizen—when he ran into Zhang Kangkang’s novel, The Boundary Line, in 1975. It was not the story the novel tells but the life experience of the author Zhang that appealed to Yan: on the back cover of the book, Yan learned that Zhang was previously a “sent-down youth” (educated teenagers from cities who were sent to the countryside for rural reeducation during the Cultural Revolution), but because she wrote this novel and was invited to Shanghai by the publisher to revise her novel, she was allowed not to go back to the countryside. Zhang’s experience showed Yan a possibility to escape the rural village and move to a large city, which was always his dream. He began to write his own novels in hopes of someday similarly receiving an invitation from a publishing house.

Writing later proved to be a successful way for Yan to achieve his dream. Though he dropped out of high school because of poverty in 1975 and failed the college entrance exam in 1977, shortly after the Cultural Revolution, Yan joined the PLA in 1978 at his twenties and held a noncombat position there. He published several novels and dramas in the Army and was thus admitted to Henan University in 1983. It was not until Yan went into the Army that he realized that there were so many literary works in the world: in the army library, he came across many foreign novels, including Gone with the Wind, Les Miserables, and Madame Bovary. Such works
opened a new window for him: unlike the “red classics” (officially-approved works on revolution and history) that he used to read during the Cultural Revolution, he got to know what a good novel looks like, and how wonderful the world of literature is.

Yan stayed in the Army for twenty-six years. This prolonged experience has played an important role in Yan’s writing. He recalls that in the second year after he enrolled in the army, the Sino-Vietnamese War (17 February to 16 March, 1979) began, and he found that almost everyone in and outside the military was afraid of the war and the frontier. He was surprised by how family members were so worried about him that they prayed for Yan not to be sent to the frontiers. In contrast to the “red classics” and their full-throated enthusiasm for heroism, revolution, and battle ground combat, actual people’s hate and fear for the war drove Yan to doubt the representation of heroism in China’s mainstream narratives and its high praise for brave individuals who bear great moral virtue and always make altruistic sacrifices. Instead, in novels such as Summer Sunset (Xia riluo) and Serve the People! (Wei remin fuwu), Yan brings Chinese soldiers down to earth by portraying their basic material and sexual desires.

The novel Summer Sunset (1992) brought Yan Lianke so much trouble that he was asked to self-criticize for nearly half a year in the Army. At that time, Yan had already written many propaganda novels and dramas following the mainstream ideology in previous years. He did not realize he had touched the sensitive line of the CCP and the Army until he was criticized by the Army for Summer Sunset, which reveals the complexity of humanity, like how army heroes could also be selfish, greedy for sex, money, and promotions in rank. This novel became Yan’s first step of rebellion against the official narrative: in later years, Yan decided to follow his own heart and to write about what he considered to be the reality of modern China. Thus he gradually transformed from a propaganda writer to “China’s most controversial writer.”

Yan has written and published many literary works since 1979. [For a comprehensive guide, see the Handout “Major Works of Yan Lianke”] In 2004, Yan was dismissed by the Army because of another sensitive novel that he published that year, Lenin’s Kisses (Shouhuo). Fortunately for him, he was invited to join the Beijing Writers Association soon after losing his Army position. Appreciated for his literary achievement, Yan became a professor in Renmin University in Beijing in August 2008, one of the top universities in China; he currently also jointly holds a position in the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology since 2015. He feels lucky to be able to work in two very different places in recent years: his original motivation to go to Hong Kong was to escape from Beijing when he won the 2014 Franz Kafka Prize (and he is the first Chinese who won that prize), which brought him much anxiety and restlessness. Residency in Hong Kong has been precious for Yan: rather than doubting the value of literary writing that

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3 In China, a famous writer usually holds a position in the Chinese Writers Association, a nationwide government body, which aims to professionalize the writing trade. It is comprised of magazines, literary-prize panels, academic symposia, book reviewers and so on. Beijing Writers Association is one of the collective members of the Chinese Writers Association. It is worth noting that Chinese Writers Association has no official connection with the government body named the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (Sapprft), which is in charge of managing publishing in China and conducting censorship. [For more information about the censorship situation in China, see “The Real Censors of China” by Eric Abrahamsen]
plays witness to the unbelievable cruelty of Chinese society, the liberal culture of Hong Kong has made Yan believe the significance of literature again. However, we must note that the ongoing protests and the passage of the National Security Law on 30 June 2020, a law which effectively strips Hong Kong of its self-governance, has changed the course of political and cultural sovereignty in Hong Kong. Many see these as markers that Hong Kong’s liberal culture has ended for good, and that intellectuals and artists such as Yan who have made Hong Kong their home are no longer safe from censorship and arbitrary political imprisonment.

POINTS FOR DISCUSSION

● Why do we need to know about the author of a work? What are the pros and cons of knowing about the author of a work before we read a novel? Do you prefer to know about the author before or after reading their book?
● What can we learn from Yan Lianke’s life experiences? How can fiction or personal memoir be used to question or counter officially-narrated history (such as that provided by textbooks)?

THEMES AND STYLE OF YAN LIANKE’S WORKS

As with many globally-minded writers, Yan Lianke believes that the writer should surpass geographical and linguistic limits in search of capturing and depicting a universal human nature. Writers can use literature to express universal humanity, express their concerns for the common issues that people from different nations and regions are facing together, such as protecting the environment, preventing war, etc. In comparison with other disciplines, what literature can do is examine the world through the heart and spirit—in Yan Lianke’s words, literature concerning the environment may not be as immediately effective or as critical as the actions of activists and politicians, but human complexity captured by literature can profoundly influence more people.

Discovering and contemplating humanity is crucial in reading Yan’s novels. Especially for western readers who may know little about the specifics of the Chinese context, the common humanity in the novels is where we may find resonance. Yet to make a more comprehensive reading of Yan’s novels, it is also necessary to know more about Yan Lianke and the contemporary Chinese society he has experienced. While Yan’s literary world grows from his memories of his hometown, his fictional concerns are not limited to the little village he grew up in. Through his literary world, especially through his fictional villages, readers can find reflections of both China and the world.

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4 The reason why Hong Kong can persist as a more liberal cultural atmosphere is because of its status as one of the Special Administrative Regions (SARs) in China. Hong Kong and Macau used to be colonies of the U.K. and Portugal respectively, and they became two SARs of the PRC in late 1990s under the principle of “One country, two systems,” which suggests that they could retain their own governmental system, legal, economic, and financial affairs, etc. Mainland China also proposes to apply this principle to Taiwan for unification with Taiwan. Therefore, unlike mainland China where many foreign websites are blocked and cultural works face the pressure of censorship, Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan are places with freer cultural circumstances. Many books that cannot find publication in mainland China usually go to Hong Kong and Taiwan for publication.
Yan Lianke believes he belongs to the farmland: even though he left his hometown decades ago, he still considers himself a peasant of that land. Yan’s hometown—Tianhu village in Henan province—lies at the foot of several hills and near the middle and lower reaches of a river. Situated among hills, plains, and rivers, the village has a good location and has developed many trade markets in recent years. Yet in Yan’s youth, from the 1960s to 1980s, the village was poor and remote. Not far away from the village is the hometown of Cheng Yi and Cheng Hao, who are famous philosophers and Confucians in the Northern Song dynasty (960-1127), and the temple made in memory of them was damaged during the Cultural Revolution. For Yan, his birthplace is always the foundation of all his writings, and can even represent the whole world. For example, the cunning, ambitious, and selfish politicians that one can read in media coverage can also be found in Lenin’s Kisses (Shouhuo) and The Explosion Chronicles (Zhalie zhi): the county magistrate and the mayor in these two novels are politicians who have humble beginnings but desire to be promoted to official circles and are insatiable for more power. Under the guise of serving the ordinary people, these provincial politicians actually only care about how to satisfy their own desire.

In Yan Lianke’s novels, rural China not only gives birth to ambitious and mercenary farmer-born politicians, but is also the arena of revolution, urbanization, and modernization. To be more specific, it is the interaction between the countryside, revolution, urbanization and modernization that fosters both rural politicians who are anxious to achieve quick success, as well as short-sighted villagers. Such interaction generates the profundity of Yan’s characters: each character has their own distinct individual identity, and each identity indicates an aspect of the Chinese society. Yan’s work aims to reveal the diverse individual memories of the nation’s history. For instance, in Serve the People! (Wei remin fuwu) and Hard as Water (Jianying rushui), he illustrates the restless sexual desire of soldiers and revolutionists, as well as the violence and death involved in political and economic campaigns, which the official narrative tries to understate and even conceal.

Yan Lianke’s grim interpretations of contemporary Chinese history sometimes incurs censorship from the government. But Yan persists in touching sensitive topics: from the Great Leap Forward (1958-1962) and the Great Chinese Famine (1959-1961), to the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), the Sino-Vietnamese War (1979), and the adverse impacts on the society resulted from the Chinese economic reform (since 1978), Yan’s wide ranging novels always provide clear-eyed observation of recent and current events in China. But rather than providing a straightforward documentary of historical events, Yan’s narrative style and structure is quite unusual. Carlos Rojas, professor of Duke University and the translator of Yan’s many works, describes about Yan’s experimental literary forms in an interview:

One of the things I like about Yan Lianke is that although there are a common set of concerns that run through all of his works (or at least his works since the mid-1990s), each of his novels tends to have a very distinct voice and narrative structure. While there are quite a few other contemporary Chinese authors who have been very experimental in their shorter works, many of them tend to adopt a more conventional narrative structure for their longer novels. In Yan Lianke’s novels, by contrast, structure
consistently receives as much attention as content. (Wasserstrom, “On Yan Lianke’s Fiction”)

As Rojas mentions, Yan Lianke’s novels are both realistic and fantastic. On the one hand, Yan’s novels are concerned about contemporary Chinese society; in other words, the reality of life is the theme and base of Yan’s novels. On the other hand, the literary worlds that Yan builds are full of ridiculousness. He exaggerates the dark sides of humanity and society: for example, in *The Day the Sun Died* (Rixi), “my uncle,” who is the head of a local crematory, made abundant money by compelling villagers to send their dead family members to the cremation, and profited from selling the “corpse oil” refined from the deceased. Rather than reflecting a real-life story, such cannibalism is a rather common symbol in Chinese literature that can be found in many literary works. The absurd plots in Yan’s novels provide a bizarre images of the village, which is quite different from the conventional pastoral of an idyllic countryside, which is popular in both the classical and modern Chinese literature, that the countryside is usually portrayed as utopia with rustic and kind-hearted villagers and pure beautiful sceneries.

The absurdity of Yan Lianke’s novels not only lies in the grotesque and unthinkable plots or characters. It also comes from his narrative method and structure of the novel. *Dream of Ding Village* and *The Day the Sun Died* share similar narrators: the former chooses a twelve-year-old dead boy, and the latter chooses a fourteen-year-old idiot. The viewpoint of children, whose understanding of the world often differs from the adults, is effective in perceiving the chaos of society while also building a dream-like atmosphere for Yan’s novels. These narrators strengthen the unlikelihood of the story and constructs a magic world. Rather than using the term “magical realism” (one of the most important features of literature in the 1960s Latin America, which contains elements of magic to detail a strong presence of the phenomenal world), Yan gives his writing style the unique name: “mythorealism” (shenshi zhuyi). In the collection of his critical essays, *Discovering the Novel* (faxian xiaoshuo), he defines “mythorealism” as follows:

> Mythorealism [...] abandons the seemingly logical relations of real life, and explores a “nonexistent” truth, an invisible truth, and a truth concealed by truth. Mythorealism keeps a distance from any prevailing realism. The mythorealist connection with reality does not lie in straightforward cause-and-effect links, but rather relies on human souls, minds [...] and the authors' extraordinary fabrications based on reality. [...] Imaginations, metaphors, myths, legends, dreams, fantasy, demonization, and transplantation born from everyday life and social reality can all serve as mythorealism methods and channels. (trans. Song, 2016)

Yan hopes to reach a place close to the core of reality through the method of mythorealism. Instead of depicting and representing reality as it looks like in real life, mythorealism aims to find the truth about life that lies under the superficial reality. In *Dream of Ding Village*, in addition to the ghost teenage boy narrator, the vague boundary between real life and dreams helps to create a fantastic style and bring readers a kind of mysterious feeling. *[For a close reading of the dreams in Dream of Ding Village, see Unit 7]*
The language of Yan Lianke’s novels is also worth attention. Yan’s novels makes use of the dialects in Henan, and sometimes he needs to add endnotes to explain the meaning of the words in dialect. Combining the Henan dialect with the mandarin (the standard official language in mainland China) in his novels, Yan adds a local and vulgar favor to his novels, which is consistent with his literary world of rural China. According to Rojas, one challenge he encountered when translating Lenin’s Kisses was to find the appropriate English words and phrases for the dialectal expressions in the Chinese. (Wasserstrom, “On Yan Lianke’s Fiction”) But the form of endnotes is not only limited to explaining dialect words; more importantly, the endnotes can constitute independent chapters of the novel, and play the role of complicating the narrative order of the novel. Lenin’s Kisses is exemplary in Yan’s use of endnotes in his novels: the novel offers comprehensive and long narrative about the historical contexts of places and characters in the endnotes, which are kin to flashbacks in the chronological narrative.

In addition to novels, Yan Lianke also writes prose and literary criticism, and has made many speeches in and abroad China. His long prose memoir, Three Brothers: Memories of My Family (Wo yu fubei), which was originally published in Chinese in 2009 and its English translation was just published in 2020, is more popular among Chinese readers than any of his previous works. Unlike the bizarre style in most of his novels, Three Brothers tells mundane stories of Yan’s family members, in which Yan also shares his genuine self-reflections with his readers via his delicate and subtle words. This book is a good source of material for students who want to know more about Yan Lianke and his biography.

CLOSE READING OF THE EXPLOSION CHRONICLES
The Explosion Chronicles can be a good text in helping students get a better idea of the mythorealism coined by Yan Lianke. Before close reading the following excerpt, students should refer to this report about China’s ambition to build a megalopolis: “China plans to build new city nearly three times the size of New York.” (https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/apr/04/china-plans-build-new-city-nearly-three-times-the-size-of-new-york?CMP=twt_gu) As incredible as it may seem, such speed in construction is common in the boom-time China has experienced in the last thirty years.

So how does Yan Lianke present such “Chinese speed” in his literary works? Consider this excerpt about how skyscrapers can rise in a flash from The Explosion Chronicles:

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5 China has a diverse linguistic life: other than the official language Mandarin (putonghua, literally “common speech”), other languages are referred to as dialects (fangyan). The phonological system of some dialects, which was developed from ancient times, can be very different from Mandarin. In addition, dialects each possesses their own vocabularies, like the Chinese title of Yan Lianke’s Lenin’s Kisses—shouhuo (literally “enjoyment”) —is a word in Henan dialect, and it is difficult to find a Mandarin equivalent that describes the exact meaning of shouhuo. Dialects in China are important to keep the varieties of Chinese culture. Until recently, many Chinese people were raised bilingually, speaking a dialect with their families and using Mandarin in public life.
Mingyao began marching the same march that he had practiced countless times while in the army, with his fists to his chest and his knees lifted high, and his feet parallel with the ground. He marched forward step by step, so that all of the medals on his chest jangled in unison with his footsteps. The troops continued until they reached the site where the Hall of the People was being built, and then they marched around the scaffolding three times. Instantly, a Hall of the People large enough to hold fifty thousand people sprang up like a tree. They marched three times around the half-finished World Trade Center; then he ordered his troops to stand in silence, staring straight ahead, whereupon Explosion’s tallest twin towers were erected. Finally, he led the troops and virtually all of Explosion’s other residents who were following behind them, and together they proceeded to the International Conference Center on the other side of the square. He then ordered the crowd behind him to spread out, and once they had completely surrounded the construction site, he stood on the roof of a crane truck that was being used to construct the center. Raising both fists into the air, he shouted into a microphone,

“Great Explosion! Great construction!”
He shouted again,
“Let’s set our sights on Beijing and Shanghai! Let’s set our sights on Tokyo and New York!”
Everyone then shouted with him,
“Great Explosion! Great construction!
“... Let’s set our sights on Beijing and Shanghai! Let’s set our sights on Tokyo and New York!”

In the midst of those shouts, an iconic egg-shaped building was erected.

Possible questions for discussion:

● How do you feel about the boundary between the real and the fictitious in this excerpt? How can you distinguish between reality and imagination?
● What is a novel? How to understand the fictionality and reality of a novel? What is the relationship between novel and everyday life?
● Have you witnessed anything directly or in the news that seems too absurd to be true? If so, do you think a conventional "realist" approach would be inadequate for representing this event?
● Using the excerpt text to support your opinions, share your understanding of the "mythorealism" coined by Yan with the class.

YAN LIANKE: CHINA’S MOST CONTROVERSIAL WRITER?
On the back cover and the first page of the Grove Press edition of Dream of Ding Village, both the introduction of this novel and several book reviews mention the novel’s being banned in mainland China. Yan Lianke’s novels often encounter official censorship. Some have been banned from releasing, some have been heavily revised and differ significantly from what they...
originally were. The censorship is limited to Yan’s works rather than confining his personal freedom. He is not under surveillance from the government, and he is tolerated for his politically sensitive works. He can write anything he wants, though some of his works may not be allowed to be openly published. He has faced neither government harassment nor been forced into exile like some of his contemporaries (Yang, “Yan Lianke: ‘Propoganda is a nuclear bomb’”). According to Eric Abrahamsen’s observation of China’s censorship, “Dissidents are regularly disciplined or imprisoned for their academic research, their journalism, their legal activism or their ethnic identity. But a mere poem rarely lands anyone in prison.” (Abrahamsen, “The Real Censors of China”) In other words, writers can write whatever they want and would not be punished by the government because of their works. Whether these works can get published is another thing—publishers estimate whether works will be allowed by higher official censorship and then decide whether to publish the work or not. The fear of censorship controls the flow of information and art as much as the act of official censorship itself.

Official censorship contributes to Yan Lianke’s being labeled as one of the most controversial writers in contemporary China. This label on the other hand popularizes his novel in the West: though all of his works are originally written in Chinese, his works (especially his fiction) have been translated into more than 20 languages in recent years, including English, German, French, and Russian. Yan made his first debut in the Anglophone world in 2008 with the novel Serve the People!, which helped him gain fame among western readership for its status of being censored in China: “This sexually charged political satire by one of China’s most distinguished authors was instantly banned in its native China, with propaganda ministers reportedly apoplectic about its depiction of the People’s Liberation Army during the Cultural Revolution.” (Yan 2008, back cover) Following Serve the People!, Dream of Ding Village was translated into English for a similar reason: dealing with the topics which are politically sensitive in China and being prohibited from release and dissemination by Chinese authorities. Novels carrying this degree of official stigma easily attract the interests of western publishers and critics, as well as their target readership (Lee 4).

Yet Yan Lianke himself doesn’t like being viewed as “China’s most controversial writer.” In the speech of a symposium on Yan’s writings held in Fudan University in China, Yan Lianke commented on his status of controversy, saying this status brought him more embarrassment than honor in China, as being controversial meant that there would be more barriers that hinder his works from being published. Yan is not only controversial in the Anglophone world but also in his homeland: as early as 1992, his work Summer Sunset (Xiari Luo) sparked intense debate in literary circles and was later banned by the government. Yan is controversial in China mainly for his pitch dark portrait of Chinese society: the extramarital love affairs in Serve the People!, the AIDS pandemic in Henan province due to governmental mistakes in Dream of Ding Village, the maladies of bureaucracy and the irrational economic progress in Lenin’s Kisses, and so forth. The image of China that Yan depicts, which is full of ugly human nature and unreliable Chinese officials, easily attracts the notice from critics outside China.

However, the tabooed nature of his novels in China is not enough to tell the whole story of Yan Lianke’s influence and position in world literature. Yan Lianke has won numerous prizes both
inside and outside of China: *The Golden Cave* and *Years, Months, Days* earned him the first and second Lu Xun Literary Prize in 1998 and 2001, and *Lenin’s Kisses* earned him the Lao She Literary Award in 2005, which are two top literary prizes in contemporary China; *Dream of Ding Village* received “The Best Ten Books Award” from *Asia Weekly* in 2005 and was shortlisted by Man Asian Literary Prize in 2011 (regional awards that are judged by pan-Asian judges); etc. Moreover, Yan Lianke won the Franz Kafka Prize in 2014, becoming the only Chinese writer who has won the prize ever since the prize was set. Yan Lianke’s success on the level of awards and world influence makes it important to ask: why Yan’s works can receive so much praise? And in particular, why could his works appeal to a western readership?

Yan Lianke is not the only Chinese writer who has been awarded influential international literary prizes. Prior to him, Gao Xingjian and Mo Yan won the Nobel Prize in Literature respectively in 2000 and 2012, and Yan himself is frequently mentioned as a long-list candidate for the Nobel Prize in Literature. According to the award ceremony speech, “Mo Yan defends small individuals against all injustices—from Japanese occupation to Maoist terror and today’s production frenzy” (“Award ceremony speech”); and in Gao Xingjian’s writings, “literature is born anew from the struggle of the individual to survive the history of masses.” (“The Nobel Prize for Literature 2000”). Yan Lianke shares similar concerns for individuals surviving through Chinese history that can be found in Mo Yan and Gao Xingjian’s works. In his acceptance speech for the 2014 Franz Kafka Prize, Yan said,

No one can tell us where the nation’s speeding locomotive of economic development will end up. No one can tell us what price should be paid for human feelings, human nature and human dignity, now that money and power have replaced socialism and capitalism. What is the price for abandoning the ideals of democracy, freedom, law and morality?

[...]

China may boast of having several thousand years of civilization, but when an old man collapses in the street, everyone refrains from helping him out for fear of being implicated, even as the old man bleeds warm, red blood. What kind of society do we live in when a pregnant woman dies on the delivery table and all of the medical technicians flee in order to avoid responsibility, leaving behind a tiny soul uttering a feeble cry?

It is a writer’s job to find life within this darkness. (Yan, “Finding Light in China’s Darkness”)

Concerning all facets of humanity, Yan Lianke does not want his work to be constrained by restrictions. In Yan Lianke’s opinion, in today’s China what actually influences the creation of Chinese writers is their self-censorship rather than the official censorship (while self-censorship is also partly due to the official censorship). Many Chinese writers have gotten used to measuring the risk they must take for what they are going to write out of various reasons: to get themselves accepted by the professional institution like the Chinese Writers’ Association, or to get their works published so as to earn more money, fame, and higher social position, etc. Yan is aware of how self-censorship can damage writers and their works, and he urges Chinese writers to be brave in writing about the current reality in China. He always emphasizes that it is
the writer’s responsibility to face and write about the darkness of society and life. Under his pen, readers can find poor rural China, the repressed sexual desire, the absurd officialdom, the economic development frenzy, the destruction of nature, so on and so forth. Yet it is also noteworthy that the western readership’s preference of Yan Lianke also reflects the west-centralism: the image of China portrayed by Yan fit the western readership’s expectation of China as a problematic nation, an image which has been shaped by the western media for a long time (Zhang 2015).

POINTS FOR DISCUSSION

● How might censorship influence literature? If you were a writer facing censorship, what would you do? Would you self-censor your work in order to get it published?
● As an American reader, do you consider yourself to have the prejudice against China? If yes, does Dream of Ding Village cater to your impression of China?
● How do you understand the “darkness” in Yan Lianke’s speech above? Could you find similar “darkness” in the U.S.? What would you do with the “darkness” if you were a writer? How would you present it in your works?
● What sort of self-censorship do we experience in the western world? How does the rapid nature of social media and cancel culture possibly play a role in our self-censorship?

WORK CITED


ASSIGNMENTS, ACTIVITIES & PROJECT IDEAS

- Have students prepare a brief script for interviewing writer Yan Lianke. Encourage students to consider the following questions before they compose their script:
  - What part of Yan Lianke’s life experience interests you most? Why do you find it interesting? What might it influence his novels?
  - What are Yan Lianke’s opinions about the role of writers and literature in the current world? Do you agree with his opinions? Why or why not?
  - How do you understand Yan Lianke’s “mythorealism”? What questions do you have regarding the term?
  - Do you like the style of Dream of Ding Village? Why or why not?
  - What do you find interesting about Dream of Ding Village? In particular, consider aspects like plot structure, characterization, language--even the novel’s politics.
  - Pick one sentence or paragraph from the text that stands out to you. What about it interests you? What kind of an author would write such a sentence?
Based on responses to these questions, students can compose their script for a preliminary interview. The questions should be brief and to the point, limited to one or two short sentences. One thing worth mentioning to the student is to be careful when they want to draw parallels between Yan Lianke’s works and Yan’s personal life: though the personal life provides inspiration and writing materials for the author, personal experiences do not determine his/her literary works. Yan is “not in the novel,” in other words. It is better not to analyse the author’s psychology of writing a novel; think more about how the novel itself looks like, what issues of humanity/society it deals with, etc.
3. DEVELOPMENTALISM AND CHINA’S ROARING 1990s

OBJECTIVE

● To appreciate the complexity and impact of China’s economic reforms since late 1970s;
● To understand the role of this economic transformation as a backdrop to the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Henan province in the 1990s shown in Dream of Ding Village;
● and Yan Lianke’s motivation for authoring the novel.

HANDBOOK

● “A Timeline of HIV and AIDS,” HIV. gov
● “Division of geographic and economic regions in mainland China,” Beijing Review (8 Dec 1986)

PREPARATORY & RECOMMENDED READING


ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

HIV/AIDS scandal in Henan province:


China in Mao Era:


Post-Mao Chinese economy:

UNIT ORGANIZATION
This unit gives critical historical background to *Dream of Ding Village* and serves as the third and final of the contextualizing units. It is divided into four subsections: “Opening Questions,” “Post-Socialist China & Socialism with Chinese Characteristics: Top-down View,” “Post-Mao Chinese Society: A Bottom-up View,” and “Writing *Dream of Ding Village*.” Opening questions are offered before the first subsection. The second subsection includes three parts: China’s party-state and central-local political relations under it, a grassroots view of Chinese developmentalism, and the plasma economy in Henan province.

OPENING QUESTIONS
In 1992, Liu Quanxi, who was newly appointed as the director of the Henan Provincial Health Department, was eager to make some reforms. Taking advantage of the power of Henan Provincial Health Department to issue licenses related to medical trades, Liu put forward a suggestion to develop Henan’s economy: to use advantage of Henan’s demography (Henan was the second most populous of mainland China’s 29 provinces by 1991) to develop a so-called “plasma economy” [we will address more on “plasma economy” in the second subsection of this unit]:

Henan has a population of 90 million people, 80 percent of whom are farmers. One to three percent of them would be willing to sell blood. They could do that once or twice a year. We can collect that blood and sell it to a biological products company. We can create products worth hundreds of millions of RMB, which at the same time could be considered to be helping the farmers escape from poverty. [...] We can bring in foreign capital. China doesn’t have HIV and so its blood is very clean so the foreigners will certainly want it. We need to assemble the capital and mobilize all of society to set up blood collection stations. (He Aifang, “Revealing ‘Blood Wound’ of Spread of HIV/AIDS in Henan Province”)

Under Liu’s governance, countless governmental blood collection stations and disorganized blood collectors were established in Henan province during the early-to-mid 1990s. Based on Liu’s speech, consider raising the following questions with your students:

- Why would Chinese officials in Henan province link blood trade to local prosperity in the 1990s?
- China has entered a post-socialist period since the late 1970s. What is post-socialism that could create the conditions for this dynamic?
- Why would Liu emphasize that most of Henan’s population were farmers? How did farmers instead of urban dwellers become the target of local officials to develop plasma economy?
- Why would Liu mention that “foreigners will certainly want it (farmers’ blood)”? What benefits could foreigners bring to the local economy in Henan officials’ views?

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6 RMB, short for Renminbi, the currency of China.
could such a foreigner-oriented strategy of local development link to the macroscopic trend of economic reforms in the 1990s China?

POST-SOCIALIST CHINA & SOCIALISM WITH CHINESE CHARACTERISTICS: A TOP-DOWN VIEW

_Dream of Ding Village_ tells the story of Ding villagers getting infected with HIV because of blood-selling in rural Henan of China in the 1990s. The HIV/AIDS epidemic represents not just a crisis in public health. Instead, like most public health issues, it must also be understood through an economic lens. At the very outset lie basic questions regarding the financial reasons behind the crisis: why did farmers sell their blood at that time and place? Was the exchange of blood for money voluntary, or was it forced by circumstances? To address these questions, one can approach the historical context from one of two perspectives: a top-down view, which looks at developments from national-level reforms and discussions, and a bottom-up view, which foregrounds the world of the local village and its residents. This subsection offers the top-down view of the economic background of _Dream of Ding Village_.

The late 1970s is a watershed in the history of the People's Republic of China: China gradually transitioned from a society of high socialism to the so-called “post-Mao” time. Mao Zedong, who had been the chairman of CCP from the foundation year of the PRC in 1949 until his death in 1976, provides a crucial lens for understanding the social development of Chinese society in the late 1970s. Mao’s leadership, especially his belief in collectivization, industrialization, political education, and mass movements reshaped Chinese society from the 1940s onward. The mid-1950s entered a period characterized by “high socialism” lasting through the late 1970s. This period saw major transformations to every facet of the state and its society in China, including “state ownership of property, Party-state fusion, the politicization of everyday life, and a planned economy that privileged heavy urban industry by extracting grain from the countryside and restricting internal migration” (Brown & Johnson, 6).

By the time the CCP came to power in the 1940s, China had been ravaged by global forces and wars for a century, beginning with the first Opium War (1839–1842) and leading up through the War Against Japanese Aggression (1837–1945), the Chinese name for its struggle against imperial Japan’s invasion, itself an important part of the eastern theatre of World War II. When the CCP proclaimed the birth of PRC in Oct 1949, it met an economy in ruins: commerce and industrial sites were destroyed by warfare and rampant inflation, and industrial production only accounted for 12.6 percent of national income; 89.4 percent of the population lived in rural areas, where roaming bandits, a series of natural disasters, and generations of crippling taxes kept the quality of life very low. Post-WWII and at the onset of the Cold War, the U.S. and its global allies all cut off relations with the PRC. To ward off further crises, Mao went to Moscow and met with Stalin, searching for an ally in the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union, the birthplace of Marxist-Leninist ideology, became China’s closest ally since the early 1950s. It sent thousands of Soviet technological advisors and workers to China and assisted China to build its modern industry, and it also agreed to loan China credits amounting to $300 U.S. million dollars in five successive years. The close relationship between the Soviet Union and China in the 1950s facilitated China’s industrialization. Moreover, as the Soviet model was the only existing socialist model, China chose to develop the Soviet-style planned economy, which organized
state-owned and collective enterprises as well as let the state allocate and distribute resources. The permanent workforce in state-owned industries ate from the so-called “iron rice bowl” (tiefanwan). They could enjoy job security as well as the associated benefits of a comprehensive social welfare program. The “work unit” (danwei) became the basic structure of labor in urban China, organizing urban residents and providing them with housing, education, and medical care.

In addition to the Stalinist heavy-industry-oriented development strategy in the early 1950s, rural collectivization was underway. Aiming to increase production in both agricultural and industrial sectors, collectivization was considered an important step towards socialism and, ultimately, communism (posed by Marx as a more refined and pure form of socialism). Collectivization changed the social structures in rural China: peasants who had only recently received individual farming plots during the Land Reforms of the early 1950s, were now organized first into mutual-aid teams, and then several teams would be merged into agricultural producers’ cooperatives, and finally, those cooperatives would be transformed into collective farms, which were named as “communes.” In the forms of higher-level collectivization, division of labor and distribution of production would be conducted on a more centralized basis, and in the final stage of collectivization, private ownership would be replaced by joint ownership of the consolidated farmland. Mao believed the large-scale collective methods would increase agricultural production significantly, which could support the industrialization of China.

Unlike the urban population who were entitled to various social welfare, the rural population rarely had such benefits. By classifying citizens with an agricultural or non-agricultural household registration (hukou), which made choosing to move from the countryside to the city difficult, China gradually developed a stark urban-rural division. The urban society could extract resources from rural areas: not only did urban citizens enjoy rural products at a low price, but the cities used natural resources extracted from rural areas to develop heavy urban industry. Though changed in many way, this urban-rural divide has continued after the high socialism Maoist era until today, which accounts for one of the important and common desires in Ding Village: their wish to get away from poverty, to enjoy life like the urban residents or even move to cities.

If Mao Zedong is the figure who most influenced Chinese society from 1949 to 1976, then Deng Xiaoping is the leader who most changed Chinese society from the late 1970s on. A decade younger than Mao, Deng was also an experienced CCP member who had been an insider of the high echelons of power since the 1950s, and played an instrumental role in recovering China’s economy after the devastating Great Leap Forward (1958-1962) [See Unit 2 “Biography of Yan Lianke” subsection for more information about the Great Leap Forward]. Though demoted from the center of power for seven years during most time of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), Deng returned to political prominence in 1973 and became the new paramount leader of China in December 1978, two years after Mao’s death in 1976.
Unlike Mao’s using the economy to serve the social revolution, the Deng-centered upper leadership of China attached higher importance to economic growth than political revolution. In Mao’s era (1949-1976), despite the intermittent attention to the economy, revolution was always the primary task. The Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) was the climax of the revolutionary ideology, when revolutionary fervor spread nationwide and pit itself against the “capitalist road.” Mao claimed, “Who are against the great Cultural Revolution? American imperialism, Russian revisionism, Japanese revisionism, and the reactionaries.” Faced with these enemies, China would “depend on the masses, trust the masses, and fight to the end.” (Spence 605) [See Unit 2 “Biography of Yan Lianke” subsection for more information about the Cultural Revolution]

But the “capitalist road” that stood in such stark opposition to Mao’s methods has since become the main economic path of the post-Mao era. Following the tumultuous decade of the Cultural Revolution, Deng changed the course of Chinese economic and social development in a number of ways.

The official normalization of PRC-U.S. relations
The U.S. imposed an embargo on the PRC since 1949, and the Cold War’s ideological tensions kept the PRC isolated from most of the western world, including the United States, for decades. Though Mao warmed relations with the U.S. in the early 1970s when the Sino-Soviet relations deteriorated, the PRC and the U.S. still could not reach consensus on certain military and political issues. Therefore the two nations failed to establish official diplomatic relations for a long time. Deng resumed PRC-U.S. relations in January 1979 by promoting bilateral interchanges between the two nations in fields of science, technology, culture, and trade. The normalization of PRC-U.S. relations also improved China’s diplomatic relations with other western countries, which prepared China to join the coming global market.

Decollectivization in agriculture and privatization in industry
In the agricultural sector, collective communes were scaled back to individual households, while the state maintained collective ownership of the land on paper. In mainstream media, the collective agricultural structure of the high-socialism period was now condemned, and a system of small-producers was praised and encouraged. In the industrial sector, similar incentive systems began: enterprises were allowed to keep a portion of the profits for themselves rather than hand everything over to the state, and factory directors and managers took responsibility for production rather than state agencies. In addition, the opening-up practiced in special economic zones and coastal cities made foreign and domestic trade and investment possible without the authorization of the central government. In Dream of Ding Village, the breakdown of the local primary school reflects the impact of decollectivization on local education: without effective support from the government as well as local communities, local education could find no way to go.

Rejecting political liberalization and forging China’s economic reforms
China’s many social and economic reforms brought uncertainty to the generation who lived through the transitional period from late 1970s to mid-1980s. At the same time, scandals
including government officials’ corruption, drawbacks of the economic reforms, and the lack of genuine democratization and mass participation in recent reforms all led to a growing malaise in Chinese society. The social anxiety accumulated during mid-to-late 1980s and culminated in the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests, in which tens of thousands of student demonstrators protested in Beijing for anti-corruption and mass democratization and ended with the intervention of the People’s Liberation Army. The political liberalization demanded by the protests was rejected by the CCP leaders, and only economic liberalization escalated instead. An all-out market-based economy spread to more areas in China after Deng Xiaoping’s “southern tour” in 1992, which indicated the complete termination of the previous state-controlled planned economy of the Mao era.

These wide-ranging reforms helped China to transform from a centrally-planned economy to a market-oriented one in the post-Mao era. Yet this is a mixed model containing numerous contradictions and tensions: the CCP’s emphasis on prioritizing rapid economic development had many side effects for the generation living in the transitional period since late 1970s to 1990s. For instance, the breakup of communes and “iron rice bowl” in rural and urban areas also deprived villagers and urban workers of social welfare programs like health care and education, which used to be associated with rural communes and the urban “iron rice bowl.” The post-socialist China touted a national philosophy of “Socialism with Chinese characteristics,” including developing market economy and modernization, managing state affairs according to the law, developing socialist democracy under the party’s leadership, and using Marxism to guide Chinese people.

CLOSE READING

Extract I: The Rich New Street in Ding Village

My family lived on New Street, south of the village. Built during the blood boom, New Street was the newest street in the village. If you got rich from buying or selling blood, you moved your family from the village centre to New Street and built a brand new two-storey house, which was as high as local building regulations with a house at one end and brick walls enclosing the other three sides. Every house was covered in white ceramic tiles, and the walls were built from machine-made red brick. Red and white: the colours of joy and sorrow. All year round, the neighbourhood gave off the smell of newness and wealth. There was also a tinge of gold and a whiff of sulphur. The whole street smelled of sulphur, brick and mortar.

In the midst of all this stood our house. Night and day, the stench of sulphur filled our nostrils, stung our eyes and provoked people to envy. Everyone wanted a house on New Street, and those who couldn’t afford one were willing to sell their blood to get it. That’s how they got the fever. (18-19)

Extract II: Tour to Model Blood-selling Village (Cottonwood)

The county director escorted his visitors on a house-to-house tour of Cottonwood. No one from Ding Village had imagined that another village could look so much like a big city. Even the streets had grand-sounding names such as Sunshine Boulevard, Harmony
Avenue, Prosperity Lane and Happiness Road. Each door had a placard with the street name and house number clearly marked. Pigsties and chicken coops that had once cluttered courtyards were now concentrated in the centre of the village and surrounded by a low wall of clean red brick.

Inside the houses, even the household appliances and furnishings seemed standardized: refrigerators were to the left of the entry hall, televisions in the living room opposite the sofa, and washing machines in the bathroom next to the kitchen. Door and window frames were shiny new aluminum alloy; chests, wardrobes and cabinets were red lacquer adorned with gold leaf. The beds were heaped with silk and satin quilts and woollen blankets, and every room smelled nice.

[...] (my father was shocked by the abundance of vegetables, fish and meat that Cottonwood Villagers had, and he asked a woman on the road why they could make it)

By way of an answer, the woman pushed up her sleeve, revealing a patch of needle-marks on her forearm. They were about the same size and colour of small red sesame seeds. ‘If you’re here for a tour, then you must already know,’ she said, with a sidelong glance at my father. ‘We’re the model blood-selling village for the whole county, for the entire province. Don’t you know that everyone here sells blood?’

[...]

The visitors from Ding Village looked down at their smooth, unscarred arms and exclaimed: ‘What fools we’ve been, to waste all this!’ They patted their untapped veins and muttered: ‘What the hell, let’s sell our blood. What do we have to lose?’ (35-38)

Guide of Close Reading & Points for Discussion:

- Ding Village built New Street since people started to become rich. What were the features of New Street? Have students pointed out the typical words and expressions that Yan Lianke uses to describe New Street. By finding out how Yan portrays New Street, students can notice how Chinese farmers in the 1990s felt about modernity.

- Read the context of Extract I in the novel. Remind the students to pay attention to the role of “my father” as a local bloodhead, or to be more specifically, a “blood kingpin” (10). Could all farmers of Ding Village live on New Street? If not, who could live on that street? Why could only a small number of Ding villagers live on New Street?

- Connect Extract I and II to the economic reforms around China in the 1990s. Why did villagers of Ding Village choose to chase wealth via selling their own blood? What motivated/stimulated the farmers to prefer selling their blood to doing farmwork?

- In the novel, the local primary school in Ding Village no longer had teachers and students. Have students considered the following questions: How did people’s eagerness to become rich changed people’s attitude towards education? Thinking of the education atmosphere of Wisconsin, how do people in your community treat education? Do they attach much importance to children’s education? Imagine if the local schools were shut down because parents value money over children’s education. What impacts would that bring to the society of Wisconsin?
POST-SOCIALIST CHINESE SOCIETY: A BOTTOM-UP VIEW

Party-state relationship & Central-local relationship
In this section, let us move from the decision-making of the central government to more local contexts in order to get a closer look at the developmentalism illustrated in Dream of Ding Village. Though China has become market-oriented due to various economic reforms beginning in late 1970s, China’s economy should be called a semi-market economy rather than a complete free-market economy: the decisions of local governments in China should be endorsed by the CCP, and the market serves as a means to improve the GDP (Gross Domestic Product), which is considered the most important index in assessing the local government officials’ political performance. But at the same time, since China is such a large country, there are considerable regional differences in economic development, which complicates the relationship between the central government and local governments.

Here is the role of the party-state in the local HIV/AIDS crisis in Henan province: due to their investment in developmentalism, the central government put the economic burden on local bureaucrats, who would then try every means possible to develop the local economy in order to be personally promoted. What is the impact on the people when the success of the national economy falls upon the lowest rung of bureaucracy? The answer to this question reveals the conundrum that the Ding Village faced. And to answer this question, the relationship between the central government and local governments should be addressed.

Despite there being a top-down command system for the central government to instruct the local governments, the interests of central government and local officials are not usually in sync. The central government aims to propel the wholesale progress of development and to serve the nationwide public, while the local governments are supposed to serve the local public and to find their own concrete route to develop the local economy. As different regions have different advantages and disadvantages, it was understood that their economic policies would vary considerably. Central Chinese provinces like Henan do not have the geographical advantages of the coastal provinces, including their access to the ocean and foreign investment. [See the handout “Division of geographic and economic regions in mainland China” for the geographical position of Henan province in China] Nor do they have the natural resources of the northeastern Chinese provinces to develop industry. With the promotion system in mind, local bureaucrats had to figure out how to push for local growth using local resources to serve their own interests as well as contribute to the nation’s development plan.

Grassroots’ View: Henan Farmers in the 1990s
Since the initiation of economic reforms in the late 1970s, Chinese society has experienced enormous changes. Reforms have benefited specific social groups and contributed to the rise of new social groups like the urban middle class, while also hindering the interests of certain groups including the poor rural Chinese farmers. And among farmers themselves, there was a further division of wealth and class during national economic reforms in the 1990s. In Dream of Ding Village, “my parents” and heroine Yang Lingling respectively represent two kinds of villagers: the former had become very rich compared to other villagers, while the latter became
one of the victims in the 1990s developmentalism fever, who sacrificed their own health for financial prosperity. Despite differing from each other on wealth and social status, these villagers share the same eagerness for a better life, embodied in modern living conditions and urban commodities. The following two excerpts from the novel provide useful information on rural people’s mentality regarding developmentalism:

I. My Parents’ Attitude towards Modern Appliances

Like most people in the village, we had a pig pen and a chicken coop in our courtyard. But they seemed out of place, they didn’t match the architecture of our house. Even the pigeon cages beneath the eaves seemed out of place. In designing our house, my father had tried to copy the fancy western-style homes that he’d seen in the big city of Kaifeng. He ordered pink-and-white marble tiles for the floors and paved the courtyard with square slabs of concrete. Instead of a tried and true outdoor squat toilet of the sort that Chinese people had been using successfully for hundreds, even thousands of years, we had an indoor toilet made of white porcelain. But my parents, unable to adapt to shitting while sitting down, ended up building a squat latrine behind the house, anyway.

We also had a washing machine and a laundry room, but my mother preferred to take her basin out into the courtyard to do the washing there.

The toilet and the washing machine were just for show. Ditto for the freezer and the refrigerator, the dining room and dining table. We had these things in our house, but only to show that we could afford them. None of us actually used them. (20)

II. Lingling’s Motivation to Sell Blood

‘Why did you sell your blood in the first place?’
‘So I could buy a bottle of nice shampoo. There was a girl in our village who used a certain kind of shampoo that made her hair as smooth as silk. I wanted to try it, too, but it was expensive. The girl told me that she had paid for the shampoo by selling blood, so I decided to do the same.’ (75)

Excerpt I offers a vivid depiction of the contradictions encountered by farmers who had realized their dream of living like an urban dweller, while also not being able to acclimate to the material life of the urban lifestyle. “My parents” could afford the expensive appliances which were common in cities but very rare in the countryside in the 1990s in places such as Ding Village. The appliances could only serve their desire to show off their wealth while providing no actual utility. It was a common phenomenon in rural China in the transitional 1990s that many rural people tried hard to dress like the urban people, live like the urban people, but could not give up the rural habits and behaviors that they have been so accustomed to for decades.

Excerpt II shows the true motivation of an ordinary villager to sell his/her blood: to buy something expensive. In this case, blood becomes capital, which can be exchanged for commercial goods. The transition of Chinese economic system from planned economy to market-oriented economy made it possible for people to buy things they wanted using cash instead of the coupons allotted by the state. In other words, as long as one has money, one can
buy anything. While this sounds natural to a typical American, Chinese society had only recently become a consumer society: people were not only encouraged to get rich and create wealth through their own ways, but were also encouraged to spend their income and enjoy the fruits of their labor. Under this new paradigm, selling blood had no moral risk. Local governments endorsed the sale of blood and encouraged villagers to follow each other’s example to develop the local economy. However, as we know, Lingling’s choice has a real cost to her personal health, and all for a bottle of shampoo.

**Plasma Economy in Henan province**

This economic system, together with farmers’ longing for affluence, are the keys to understanding the development of the blood-selling trade in 1990s Henan. In terms of accountability of the state-party, it was the general goal of improving the national GDP and capitalism that drove the local governments to find the resources to develop the local economy. In Henan province, one of the most populous and impoverished provinces in China, the blood of the rural villagers in the late 1980s became seen by local officials as an attractive “resource” for extraction. On the other hand, in terms of local governments, the high developmentalism in late 1980s China made it urgent for the Henan officials to find an efficient way to develop the local economy. Therefore, local officials took advantage of local farmers’ wish to improve their living conditions and mobilized them to join the blood-selling trades.

Limits on imported blood products also provided favorable conditions for a blood-selling industry. In the mid-1980s, HIV had just emerged in China. [For a global timeline of HIV/AIDS pandemic, see the handout “A Timeline of HIV and AIDS”] To prevent HIV from further spreading via imported blood products, the central Chinese government issued notices to ban these imports in 1984 and 1985. The prohibition of importing overseas blood products reduced the supply of available blood products, while the large market demand for blood products in China remained. This situation required a more robust blood source from local Chinese people. There were two ways to improve local blood supply: one was through remunerated blood collection, and the other was through non-remunerated/voluntary blood donation. Without strong invention of the state to solve the imbalance between the blood supply and demand in China, remunerated blood collection soon became a lucrative business which attracted both individual traders and government officials from the mid-1980s to early-1990s. Commercial blood trade was regulated by the central government until the HIV/AIDS scandal was discovered in the mid-1990s. The event drove the central government to launch the Blood Donation Law in 1998, which prohibited the commercial provision of blood and aimed to foster people’s sense of voluntarily donating blood out of a sense of social responsibility (Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress, et al.).

However, before the public realized the peril of commercial blood collection and the central government took action to ban the blood trade, tens of thousands of blood donors and blood receivers were infected with HIV through unauthorized, unscreened, and tainted blood collection and transfusion. The government-approved “plasma economy” (xuejiang jingji) in central Chinese provinces was most accountable for this man-made epidemic. Henan province, with 90 million people and 80 percent of the population working as farmers in the 1990s, were
regarded as a clean blood collection region by businessmen and local officials. Provincial officials conceived of the plasma economy and brought it to reality. *Dream of Ding Village* depicts how the local officials use an economic discourse of development to convince poor peasants to sell their blood:

After taking control of the meeting, he [the county director] made a personal appeal to the villagers to sell their blood. He talked at length about the past, the future, the development of a ‘plasma economy’ and the need for a ‘strong and prosperous China’.

(26)

‘You can get rich or stay poor,’ the director continued, kicking at the bowl lying in the sand. ‘It’s up to you. You can travel the golden road to wealth and prosperity, or you can stay on the same dirt path and live like paupers. Ding Village is the poorest village in the province. You haven’t got two coins to rub together. Rich or poor, it’s your decision. Go home and think about that.’

‘Think it over,’ he continued. ‘Other places in the province are selling blood like crazy. In other villages, they’re putting up rows of multi-storey buildings. But decades after liberation, after decades of socialism and Communist Party leadership, all Ding Village has to show for itself is a bunch of thatched huts.’ (31)

According to traditional beliefs that most Chinese peasants live by, it is immoral to harm one’s own body, not to mention exchanging part of one’s own body for cash [we will address this further in Unit 4]. But the nationwide developmentalism fever swayed their beliefs. The government’s support of selling blood removed people’s moral guilt for exchanging one’s own body for money; and when they found that selling blood was actually an easier and much more profitable way to earn money compared with doing farm work, they relaxed their traditions and enjoyed selling their blood for money. Yan Lianke uses irony to depict this change in thinking: the shrine of the traditional god of wealth, Guan Yu, is torn down by the villagers after they become rich from selling blood: “They didn’t believe in Guan Yu any more: they believed in selling blood.” (24)

But the plasma economy did not really help the villagers to get rich—the bigger profit was taken by other governmental or private traders while the villagers were actually being exploited by those traders. As implied by the term “plasma economy,” only blood plasma was taken from a blood donor while the remaining blood constituents (like red blood cells) were returned to the donor, so the donor could soon recover his/her energy. To save cost, many blood collectors did not collect plasma hygienically in the plasmapheresis, and blood donors were exposed to the risk of being infected with HIV. For example, when removing the blood plasma from the blood, some blood collectors used the same centrifuge to separate the blood collected from different people and then transfuse the blood remains back to those donors, which caused large-scale blood contamination and cross infection. Using non-sterile medical tools, such as needles and scissors which directly contact the blood also brought the danger of infection. These unsanitary operations made it easy for HIV/AIDS to spread among blood donors. In *Dream of Ding Village*, Yan Lianke puts the accountability on “my father” Ding Hui, who is then
blamed by his father, “my Grandpa”: “You think I don’t know that when you drew blood, you used the same cotton swabs on three or four different people? God only knows how many times you reused those needles.” (45)

“My father” Ding Hui in the novel is called bloodhead (xuētou), who was the local blood merchant. These bloodheads were critical in developing the plasma economy: a bloodhead extracted more blood than promised from the peasant donors—for example, a bloodhead might extract a 700cc bag of blood using a bag marked as 500cc, while only paying the blood donor the price of a 500cc bag of blood. The bloodhead could then sell the blood to other blood collectors like government-run blood stations and biomedical companies with a price valued for 700cc, and thus made a further profit on the price difference. Moreover, by cutting cost through insanitary blood-collecting methods, the bloodhead made even more profit. Blood collecting thus became a very lucrative business that farmer-born individuals and also local officials and hospital directors participated in. *Dream of Ding Village* shows the collusion between bloodheads and government officials: as the local blood kingpin, “my father” could build a three-storeys high house while other villagers could only build a house of at most two-storeys high (19). The higher-up officials originally intended to make “my father” the mayor of Ding Village, hoping him to set up more blood-collection stations and foster more successful blood merchants like himself (82). “My father” was even appointed as the “vice-chairman of the Wei county task force on HIV and AIDS” (187), who was a county-level official that had a higher rank than even the village-level chairman of Ding Village.

But in the rapidly-developing plasma economy, the blood donors—those innocent peasants who had no idea about HIV/AIDS and would never imagine themselves being infected with HIV/AIDS—finally became the victims of other profit-chasers and a vision of superficial regional prosperity. This is representative of the countless human sacrifices of the developmentalism-oriented economic reforms of post-Mao China.

**WRITING DREAM OF DING VILLAGE**

The image of a harmonious society was taken up by China’s central government as propaganda to sustain social stability and to cover-up the local HIV/AIDS scandals. Medical experts and social activists were discouraged from revealing the true story to the general public, and some were punished for their work documenting it. This did not change until the 2003 nationwide SARS crisis, when the party-state paid a high price of lives and public credibility for suppressing the coverage of the infectious disease, and discussion on HIV/AIDS villages in central Chinese provinces became more open in the following two years. The short-lived open climate for public discussion on HIV/AIDS scandals in central Chinese provinces that happened in the 1990s, especially in 2004 and 2005, provided Yan Lianke with a good chance to write *Dream of Ding Village*, which would center on a theme that he had wanted to write about for a long time.

Many of Yan Lianke’s personal experiences contributed to the creation of *Dream of Ding Village*. Yan received an anonymous mail about the “HIV/AIDS villages” in Henan province in 2001, and he then pretended to be the assistant of an anthropologist from Peking University, entering a HIV/AIDS village to tell people methods of prevention and treatment for HIV/AIDS.
infection. About that experience, Yan says, “I never wrote any diary, took any photo or interviewed people about the disease. I just went to villagers’ homes, sat down and ate together with them. They would tell you everything.” (Yang, “Yan Lianke on Humor and Tragedy”) Yan visited HIV/AIDS villages seven times with the anthropologist; after *Dream of Ding Village* was banned in mainland China and Yan received no royalties from the publication, he donated his own money to support children in the HIV/AIDS villages in Henan province.

Moreover, Yan Lianke had a personal relationship with these villages before he realized they had undergone this collective trauma of HIV/AIDS. One of the areas with a high prevalence of AIDS is in eastern Henan province, which is the hometown of Yan’s wife and the place where Yan had been working as a soldier for more than ten years. When he was a secretary in the army hospital, he witnessed long lines of farmers who came to the hospital to sell their blood, hoping to become rich along the way. These experiences also served as inspiration for the novel.

Yan Lianke once told a Chinese interviewer that the original reason of writing *Dream of Ding Village* was a meeting with Gao Yaojie in 1996, a specialist in epidemics and an activist famous for disclosing the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Henan Province and improving the general public’s understanding of how to prevent HIV/AIDS infection in the 1990s. During the meeting, Gao told Yan an astonishing thing that had actually happened in the blood-selling villages of Henan province in the 1990s, that the local bloodheads would sometimes turn the blood donors upside down so as to release the donors’ dizziness after collecting their blood. Yan was shocked by this story and felt that he had to write something for those villagers, who were ignorant of how badly they had been exploited by bloodheads and local governments.

*Dream of Ding Village* is the first novel that Yan Lianke wrote after he was forced to leave the army and started to work in the Beijing Writers Association in 2004. After assuming his new position, Yan decided to write a novel in a gesture of atonement for some of his previous work, which were officially judged as ideologically wrong. He hoped to win honors for his new workplace by offering a “mainstream” novel. Therefore, he wrote *Dream of Ding Village*. Yan conducted much self-censorship to make it able to be published. Yan considers this novel to be the purest and warmest of all his novels. In the postscript of the Chinese version, Yan says he has placed much love for life and understanding for others in this novel. However, the novel was not considered at all to be mainstream in the eyes of Chinese authorities. Shortly after publication, the book was recalled and has been banned in mainland China ever since.

*Dream of Ding Village* was later adapted into a movie in 2011, *Love for Life* (Zui’ai), which was played by top actors/actresses in China, including Zhang Ziyi. Unfortunately, the movie also encountered censorship and was forced to be revised from an originally 150-minute movie into a 100-minute one. [Online resource of the 100-minute movie: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=260EjPMhTM8. Online resource of the official trailer: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XwLh0wMiPV8] The movie focuses mainly on the love affair between two AIDS patients. The abridged version does not present the blood-selling
scandal as a man-made disaster and the details of the local government’s complicity in the tragedy.

**POINTS FOR DISCUSSION**

Yan Lianke’s meeting with Gao Yaojie contributes to some appalling details in *Dream of Ding Village*, which describes how the blood donors were turned upside down by blood collectors or made the gesture themselves:

> He [Li Sanren] lay back down on the ground and allowed Dad and Uncle to grasp his legs and lift him into the air until he was hanging upside down. They let him dangle there for a while, gently shaking his legs to get the blood moving towards his head, as though he were a pair of just-washed trousers they were trying to shake the excess water from. (89)

> Dad and Uncle turned to smile at him [Li Sanren] and continued on their way. When they reached the entrance to the village, they noticed that there seemed to be a lot of villagers lying about in the sunshine, on every small slope or bit of slanted ground. They had their feet elevated and heads pointed downhill, as was their practice when they’d just given blood and felt dizzy. Other villagers had taken wooden doors from their courtyards and propped them up on two differently sized stools, to form a slanted platform on which they could recline. Some of the younger men stood on their heads with their heels resting against walls, a pastime known as ‘irrigating the brain’. (90)

Read the above two excerpts from *Dream of Ding Village*. Have the students consider the following questions:

- If you were to write a novel in response to a local crisis, would you conduct ethnographic research before writing? If yes, what kinds of research strategies would you employ?
- How would you depict a detail in real life in your novel? Think about a case that you may want to write about at first, and then consider if there is any impressive detail that really shocks you about that case. Conversely, what kind of details might you withhold or change? Share your thoughts with the class.

**WORK CITED**

ASSIGNMENTS, ACTIVITIES & PROJECT IDEAS

Considering the Emergence of Consumerism in Post-Socialist China

Ask students to look closely at the series of photographs of the facade of a shopping center located in Northeastern China. See https://everydaylifeinmaoistchina.org/2015/04/04/the-changing-of-the-changchun-shopping-mall-1938-2008/. These photos document three different eras: 1) the 1930s period when this area was under colonial rule by Japan (as much of Northeastern China was, until the end of war in 1945); 2) the 1950s period of “high socialism” when China was under the rule of Mao Zedong; and 3) the 1980s and 2000s period of “post-socialism,” marked by a partial embrace of capitalism and the invigorated pursuit of material wealth (consumerism).

- Ask students to review these images closely, identifying and listing as many differences between them (e.g. the flags on top of the building, or other signifying markings) as they can.
- Now interpret the differences: what does the progression show? In particular, how do the 1980s and 2000s images differ from the earlier ones?
- Finally, ask students to conduct a Google image search of “shopping mall in Changchun” and explore some of the images. What do they notice about these malls? Are these images surprising? How do they compare with the student’s own experience of malls (if they have had any) and shopping?

Considering Texts, Film, and Audience in Dream of Ding Village

The film adaptation of Dream of Ding Village with English subtitles is available freely on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=260EjPMhTM8. While the film is of dubious creative merit, it does offer several instructive points of comparison. The following activity guides a comparison of the opening scenes of the novel and the film, but it can be adapted to compare and contrast any analogous pair of scenes in the two works. Working alone or in groups, have students follow the below prompts:

- Review the first chapter of Dream, and then watch the first ten minutes of the film.
- What differences do you notice? What does the film focus on? Conversely, what does the film fail to capture? What is the effect of these changes? Which do you prefer?
- Consider the fact that the book remains largely unavailable in China, while the 2011 film was a big-budget production by an established director (Gu Changwei) and featuring many famous actors such as Zhang Ziyi—household names of popular culture. Why do you think the film was allowed to be produced and shown? Can you identify any aspects where the film “whitewashes” or otherwise lessens the critical message of the novel? (The contrast becomes more obvious if you watch the film in its entirety.)
**Debating the Origins of the “Plasma Economy”**

Although AIDS is a global health problem, its particular manifestations differ greatly by region. The AIDS Villages Crisis in Henan was the result of a distinctive “plasma economy” that is complex in its origin. This activity asks students to consider the complexity of the plasma economy by learning more about it and then engaging in a debate between three positions.

- Next, either ask students to pick, or assign to them, one of the following three positions regarding the most important factor that contributed to the AIDS Villages Crisis: 1) regulation and Western companies that sold contaminated blood in China, along with a lack of regulation of such imports; 2) widespread poverty in the Henanese countryside and the greed of the “bloodheads”; 3) the Ministry of Health and other government agencies who did not respond adequately to the plasma trade. (**As a fourth option, students may develop their own position.)
- Have the student write a short “position-paper,” a few paragraphs in length, outlining why their selected factor is the most important. The paper should employ facts and information from the Wiki article, as well as weigh the selected factor against the others.
- Students may share their positions within a larger group, and debate over one or more rounds of exchange.

**Early Stages of the Epidemic in China**

The first recorded death in China due to AIDS was a tourist and California resident who died in Beijing on 6 June 1985. The Chinese government focused initially on preventing foreigners from transmitting the disease to its citizens, viewing it primarily as a consequence of a Western lifestyle.

By 1998, HIV/AIDS was present in all 31 provinces and administrative regions of China, and government statistics indicated between 60% and 70% of those infected were drug users. Other major modes of transmission included infected blood spread through blood donation clinics across the country. A handful of people also contracted HIV after receiving transfusions of contaminated hemophilia blood products from the United States.

**Contaminated blood imports**

Through the early 1980s, multiple American pharmaceutical firms exported medical blood products contaminated with HIV to East Asia. Bayer Corporation exported plasma knowing the risks of HIV transmission, resulting in over one hundred infections in Taiwan and Hong Kong. Factorate, a Factor VIII product of Armour Pharmaceuticals Company, was imported to China and used in blood transfusions in 19 people in Zhejiang province between 1983 and 1985. Four of the recipients, all hemophiliacs, were infected with HIV, making them at the time the first identified cases of native Chinese infected within the country's borders. Armour had been aware that original sterilization methods for Factorate were inadequate since at least 1985.
The Chinese government reacted to the threat of HIV in the blood supply before any confirmed cases of infection had occurred. In September 1984, the Chinese Ministry of Health, in conjunction with the Ministry of Foreign Economic Relations and Trade (now the Ministry of Commerce) and the General Administration of Customs, issued a notice restricting imports on foreign blood products, including a complete ban on blood coagulation factors, specifically to prevent HIV/AIDS from entering the country. The bans were poorly enforced by some local governments, prompting central authorities in August 1985 to issue another notice nationwide, reiterating the ban and ordering all sub-national governments to comply. On 30 January 1986, all blood products, with the sole exception of human serum albumin, were banned from import into China for both organizational and personal use.

Bloodhead controversy

Unique to China was the large-scale transmission of HIV through blood donation centers in the early to mid-1990s. The ban on blood product imports from the preceding decade restricted China's blood supply, making blood donation more lucrative, particularly for inadequately funded rural healthcare systems already weakened by privatization. Additionally, medicines containing blood plasma became popular among Chinese consumers, also contributing to demand for blood. By 1990, thousands of public and commercial blood and blood plasma collection centers had been established across China, attracting donors with payments that could equal over a month's worth of income for some farmers. A significant grey market of poorly regulated "bloodheads" (Simplified Chinese: 血头, Traditional: 血頭, xuètóu, coll. xiětóu) concurrently arose.

The unsanitary practices in the blood market led to massive propagation of the HIV virus among rural populations. Donation centers frequently recycled needles, mixed blood donations without screening, and failed to adequately sterilize equipment, spreading blood-borne disease to both donors and recipients. For plasma donations, blood was often mixed with other donors' samples and reinjected after plasma extraction. In 2004, official estimates put the range of people infected via unsafe blood donation practices across the most heavily impacted provinces——Henan, Hebei, Anhui, Shaanxi, and Shanxi——between 200,000 and 300,000. Gansu and Qinghai also reported infections stemming from the commercial blood trade during the same time period. Overall, 24% of all HIV/AIDS cases in China in 2004 had been attributed to blood donation and related activities.

The phenomenon was especially prevalent in Henan, where it was promoted by local officials, including Henan Ministry of Health director Liu Quanxi and provincial Communist Party Secretary Li Changchun, to promote economic growth. An internal report compiled in August 2002 by the Henan Ministry of Health, leaked by prominent AIDS activist Wan Yanhai, estimated that 35-45% of blood donors in some areas of the province had been infected due to poor safety precautions in clinics.
4. MEDICINE, AFTERLIFE, AND KINSHIP

OBJECTIVE
● To comprehend the role of China’s traditional views of medicine, afterlife, and kinship in *Dream of Ding Village*, and how these practices and concepts have shaped people’s lives while evolving significantly in the reform era since the late 1970s
● To examine the complexity of the relationship between disease and body.

HANDOUTS
● “Five Elements (Wuxing),” *Natures Across Cultures*, pp.396-398 “The Practice of Correlativity”
● “Materia medica: Ginseng,” *Compendium of Materia Medica*

PREPARATORY & RECOMMENDED READING

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES
*Chinese Medicine:*

*Chinese Concepts’ of Afterlife:*
**Chinese Family and Kinship:**

**Videos:**
- Custom of afterlife marriages in Asia:
  - [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uj740fy4pcM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uj740fy4pcM) (China, 3 minutes)
  - [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E0JvJKvbVaw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E0JvJKvbVaw) (Malaysia, 15 minutes)
- Confucian Teaching: [http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/at/conf_teaching/ct01.html](http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/at/conf_teaching/ct01.html)

**Link of Materials on Chinese Cosmology (Religions, Afterlife, Kinship, etc.):**

**UNIT ORGANIZATION**
This unit is divided into four subsections: “Concepts of Medicine,” “Death Ritual and Afterlife,” “Chinese Family and Kinship,” “Love & Sexual Desire: Sincerity of Life.”

**CONCEPTS OF MEDICINE: A MIX OF TRADITION AND MODERN**

**Dual System of Medicines in China**
After the outbreak of the AIDS crisis in Henan during the 1990s, two kinds of medicines were used in response to the disease, or the so-called “fever” in *Dream of Ding Village*: traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), including cosmological views of health and a complex network of herbs and other homeopathic techniques; and, in contrast, “new medicine,” which was associated with the modernization and scientific beliefs of the upper-level government. This subsection outlines aspects of TCM and its hybridization with the modern medical practices of the West as embodied by the Ding villagers. The aim is to help readers better understand the perceptions of and responses to disease in *Dream of Ding Village*.
One prominent feature of Chinese culture—the oldest continuous surviving tradition in the world—is its developed medical system. Much of early Chinese medicine was closely connected with supernatural beliefs. In later centuries, the traditional Chinese medical system became more empirical, but it still maintained a theoretical system that is based on a cosmological philosophy of the universe as a system of opposing and complementary forces. Famously, the central concept of Chinese cosmology is the dual forces of yin and yang, whose continuous interaction explains all natural phenomena, including the constitution and functioning of the human body. TCM takes the maintenance of the proper balance of yin and yang within the body as essential for good health (Croizier 17). Another important constituent of the traditional Chinese medical system is the “five elements” (wuxing 五行), which refers to a system of numerical concordances between various items in nature: the five elements—wood (mu 木), fire (huo 火), earth (tu 土), metal (jin 金), and water (shui 水)—are linked to natural physiological processes and to specific internal organs (Croizier 17-18). For instance, the heart provides power for the flow of blood and provides heat to the body. The heart is believed to embody the element of “fire,” which has the properties of heat, rising up, and brightness. Therefore, medicine with a bitter taste, which is considered to be related to the function of cooling something, is often used to counteract an excess of “fire,” including diseases centered on the heart. [See the handout “Five Elements” for a explanation of the relations among “five elements”]

The early twentieth century saw enormous transformations in China with the fall of the final imperial dynasty, the Qing, in power from 1644-1911. In this era of revolution, a new generation of Chinese modernizers promoted Western fields of knowledge, including concepts about society and politics, science and technology, and education. However, traditional Chinese medicine did not disappear during this process of modernization. It survived not only in the countryside where new intellectual currents were weak, but also maintained numerous supporters among modern Chinese intellectuals. The reasons for the survival of the traditional medical system in modern China is complex. In many cases, Chinese medicine has real therapeutic value: for example the case of Tu Youyou, who won a Nobel prize for expanding on TCM techniques to treat malaria in the 1970s. Moreover, traditional medical treatment is taken as a practical and less expensive method of health care as providing the large rural population with modern medical care could be very difficult. TCM’s durability is further explained by its importance as a bulwark for preserving a sense of unique national or cultural identity: indeed, the PRC government today encourages TCM as a form of pride and features it as a tourist attraction for visiting foreigners.

For all these reasons, TCM was successfully sustained and is still active in today’s China. Though traditional Chinese medicine had raised many debates among intellectuals in Republican China (1911-1949), the Guomindang government attempted to regulate the Chinese medicine on a national level, allowing practitioners with both modern and TCM educational backgrounds to serve. The foundation of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and the inauguration of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) did not put an end to the traditional medicine; instead, the new Ministry of Health in the PRC promoted traditional medicine by broadening knowledge of it
among modern physicians and by increasing the number of formally educated practitioners in the 1950s (Chen 124). By the mid-1970s, in the countryside, traditional medical practitioners worked together in the same rural clinics with modern-trained medical school graduates; and there were not only traditional medical hospitals in the cities, but traditional medical consultations would also be provided in specific areas in some modern urban hospitals (Chen 132). Such practices remained in the post-socialist China since the late 1970s, even though the central leadership was determined to realize the goal of “four modernizations,” namely China should realize the modernizations in agriculture, industry, science and technology, and defense by the end of the twentieth century.

In present-day China, traditional medicine is seen as equal to scientific medicine within the Chinese health care system. In 1991, this point of view was incorporated into one of the five guidelines in China’s health system, which was again reaffirmed in 2012. In 2016, the State Council issued the Outline of the Strategic Plan on the Development of Traditional Chinese Medicine (2016-2030), which created a national strategy for TCM development. By 2015, there were 3,966 TCM hospitals across China, including 446 hospitals of integrated Chinese and Western medicine; and there were 42,528 TCM clinics, including 7,706 for integrated medicine. In terms of medical education, by 2015 there were 42 institutions of higher learning in TCM (including 25 TCM colleges) and more than 200 Western medicine institutions of higher learning or non-medical higher learning institutions offering programs in TCM, enrolling up to 752,000 students (The State Council of People’s Republic of China, Traditional Chinese Medicine in China). TCM also plays an important role in today’s global market: for example, Wisconsin is a major producer of ginseng, and most of the ginseng is exported to Asia, especially China, which is the largest consumer of ginseng in the world. TCM is not simply a Chinese cultural or folk tradition any longer—it has been incorporated into many facets of global production and now works in tandem with Western medicine worldwide.

“*New Medicine*” in *Dream of Ding Village*

Keeping the dual system of traditional and modern medicines in China in mind, let us now take a look at the role of medicine in the lives of the novel’s characters. When the “fever,” i.e. HIV/AIDS, broke out in Ding Village, Ding villagers felt scared and hopeless. They did not know how the disease was spread, and they did not know how the disease could be treated. Rumors started to grow and spread: “Some said that the government was planning to send trucks and soldiers to round up people with the fever and bury them alive in the Gobi Desert, like they used to do with plague victims long ago. Although everyone knew that this was just a rumour, somewhere in their hearts they believed it.” (14-15) Just as any bad news related to the “fever” (e.g. rumors, sounds of coffin-making) could be scary, any good news could also easily bring hope. Grandpa told villagers that the disease could be cured by the “new medicine” distributed by the government. What did the “new medicine” mean? Why could the news of the coming “new medicine” cheer villagers up?

In the first volume of *Dream of Ding Village*, Grandpa comforted villagers infected with AIDS with the hope of getting the new medicine offered by the government that could cure their disease. Hearing that the new medicine would soon be sent to treat the sick, Ma Xianglin, an
amateur singer and storyteller in Ding Village who was near death, felt immediately cheered up and urged Grandpa to hold a village concert to celebrate the coming of the new medicine. News about the new medicine soon spread among villagers and a sense of hope was infectious. But on the day of the concert, an unexpected thing happened: “my dad” Ding Hui came to the concert and told the villagers there was actually no new medicine at all. Grandpa and dad fought with each other then and Grandpa finally admitted that he had cheated villagers: the new medicine did not exist, as AIDS was a fatal contagious disease. Knowing that there weren’t any new medicines, Ma Xianglin suddenly collapsed and died on the stage.

Though we shouldn’t necessarily try to find the exact real-life reference of something occurring in a fictional story, why the “new medicine” brought the sick villagers hope for life is worth considering. Despite not necessarily referring to western medicine, the “new medicine” is likely to be a western one or a synthesis of TCM and Western medicine, which should be quite different from the traditional Chinese herbs that we will address later. One explanation about the magical function of “new medicine” lies in the village’s relationship with the government: for the villagers, the existence of information from the “higher-ups” was highly significant, as it showed evidence that the administration was invested in their lives and fates. As the country recovered from the disaster of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), post-socialist China re-embraced the importance of intellectuals and specialists. In the villagers’ point of view, the existence of a “new medicine” from the government was legitimized by their trust of specialists, unlike the traditional medicines they found for themselves.

On the other hand, this acute hope gained from news of a “new medicine” also reveals the gap between TCM treatments, usually more familiar for rural people in poor Chinese villages, and other modern treatments, given the vague name of “new medicine” by Grandpa in the novel. For a modern disease like AIDS, there is in fact no medical treatment provided by TCM. But Ding villagers knew nothing of this. Because of their lack of knowledge in both TCM and Western medicine, they would believe anything, including the “new medicine” fabricated by Grandpa or the rumor of a cure involving Chinese herbs. The credibility of “new medicine” reveals the knowledge gap between the two medical systems: they preferred the familiar TCM, which stayed in their present knowledge system, but they were also not sure whether the traditional treatments could work for a new disease that they had never encountered before. Not knowing what to believe, they became willing to give everything a try. This accounts for why we can see various traditional Chinese medical treatments (herbs, ginseng, etc.) in the later chapters of *Dream of Ding Village*.

**Herbs in Traditional Chinese Medical System**

After the HIV-positive villagers move into the local elementary school to quarantine, boiling herbs then became a routine of the collective school life: “When someone found a herbal remedy said to cure the fever, the herbs were boiled in a large cauldron and ladled into bowls

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7 Even if a treatment for HIV/AIDS uses some traditional Chinese medicinal materials, the treatment itself could not belong to TCM, but rather be viewed as a modern medicine using traditional medicinal materials.
for everyone to drink.” (70) But did the herbs really help cure AIDS? The novel offers a negative answer: “The first, the fifth, the fifteenth...each day had been and gone, but nothing much had changed. The sun shone warm, the winds blew cold. Medicinal herbs were boiled and drunk. People sickened, died and were buried.” (127)

What is the use of herbs in the traditional Chinese medical system? Why did sick Ding villagers keep taking herb-made medical soups even though they appeared to be useless? Chinese people have used medicinal herbs for thousands of years, and herbs can be considered as one of the main features of Chinese medical practice. The earliest surviving pharmacopoeia attributed to Shennong—the *Bencao jing* [Classic of Herbal Medicine]—was probably compiled in the first century B.C. It contains 365 drugs (the number corresponding to the days of a year which coincides with the numerical system of the Han Dynasty, 202 B.C.-220 A.D.), and about two thirds of which are of plant origin. The pharmacopoeia has been enlarged in succeeding Chinese dynasties and culminated in Li Shizhen’s *Bencao gangmu* [Compendium of Materia Medica] which was written in Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) and a majority of the ingredients are still of plant origin, while also containing elements of animal or mineral extraction. [For how *Bencao gangmu* looks like, see the Handout “Materia medica: Ginseng”] Until today, many of the drugs in traditional Chinese pharmacopoeias have been proven to be highly effective, and Chinese physicians who have received the training of traditional Chinese medicine still prescribe herbs to patients.

The reason why herbs can be effective in treating some illnesses is hard to tell. Herbs can function partly because they are indeed sorted out by generations of Chinese physicians based on their abundant empirical knowledge. Some researchers also think that Chinese herbs also contain a special ability to infect a patient’s spirit. For instance, Edward Hume (1876-1957), a pioneering missionary doctor working on Chinese medicine, noted Shennong, who was believed to compile the first Chinese pharmacopoeia, represents “almost universal acceptance of the idea that medicaments are potent not only because they produce measurable pharmacological effects, but because they correspond, in some mysterious way, to the patient’s affected organs, and possess some magic power to drive harmful spirits away.” (Hume 124)

The medicinal plant root *ginseng*, which occurs in *Dream of Ding Village* as an expensive gift, is a good example of how its functions mostly come from people’s belief rather than its scientific compositions. In Chapter 3 of Volume 7, Grandpa offered two villagers the wild ginseng and told them that it might cure AIDS. He first told Yuejin: “You can boil it to make ginseng tea. This is wild ginseng from the north-west. It takes decades for the roots to grow this thick. It’s supposed to be a good tonic for strengthening the body, and will probably fight the fever better than any medicine.” (317) And then he came to Genzhu and said: “You really ought to try it, son. People have been taking ginseng since ancient times. Why, even the emperors used it to treat illnesses that their doctors couldn’t cure. It will relieve your symptoms, and if you keep taking it, you might even get cured.” (319) In Grandpa’s words, *ginseng* became a nearly omnipotent medicine that could cure imperial illness which even great doctors could not cure. One reason why *ginseng* has been believed to be so effective and powerful over the centuries is
because its shape resembles a human figure, thus people believed it could cure the whole human body no matter which part of the body went wrong.

Despite the dual system of TCM and Western medicine, the official medical system did not work as expected in rural China. Just as *Dream of Ding Village* shows, the common belief in traditional Chinese herbs among Chinese farmers was and is still prominent in these parts of the country. We are not denying the function and efficacy of TCM here: as mentioned above, TCM is not just a set of long-standing superstitions. Not only does it have actual therapeutic effects, the system also helps people treasure their bodies and maintain a healthy lifestyle. On the other hand, sudden outbreaks of infectious disease does reveal the disadvantages of TCM, especially in the context of deeply rooted rural communities. When faced with a disease one has never seen, a farmer who has been infected will find it difficult to change what they believe about medicine and disease as medical practitioners are trained to do. In addition, the farmer must live through both the physical disease as well as discrimination and possibly exile from the community. What needs to be cured is not only the body but also the mind. Therefore, a close reading of medicine in *Dream of Ding Village* here in this subsection aims to provide more than background knowledge of TCM and Western medicine in China: similar to TCM’s philosophy of maintaining the harmony and balance of various body organs, this close reading deals with the human body as a whole—not just the medicine used to treat human body, but also people’s beliefs about medicine.

**DEATH RITUAL AND AFTERLIFE**

*Traditional Chinese Popular Beliefs of Afterlife*

It is appalling how many deaths were happening in Ding Village:

> So many people were dying, so many were dead. In one household, a family might weep for a day before burying their relative in a black wooden coffin that had cost their life savings. In another household, there might be sighs instead of tears, a family gathering around the corpse in silent vigil before the burial.

> The three elderly village carpenters worked all day long building coffins. Two of them came down with backaches from overwork. The paulownia trees used to make the coffins were all chopped down. There was no timber left in the village. (14)

The coffin serves as one of the most important synecdoche (where a part, a box, is made to represent the whole of the event, a burial of the corpse) of the numerous HIV/AIDS-related deaths depicted by *Dream of Ding Village*. In later volumes of the novel, the coffins, which were originally provided by the government to the villagers but were actually controlled by “my Dad” to resell and earn profit, becomes another trigger of conflicts between the villagers and Dad, which also implicates Grandpa. Why did the coffin matter so much for Ding villagers? Starting from this question, let us take a look at the death ritual and Chinese people’s traditional concepts of afterlife in this subsection.
Volume 5 and 6 depicts many funerals, culminating in the glorious funeral of “my Uncle” Ding Liang and his second wife Lingling arranged by “my Dad” Ding Hui. When Ding Liang and Lingling were still alive, Lingling was always concerned whether she could be buried together with Ding Liang or not. In her opinion, being buried with “my Uncle” side by side meant they could keep each other company after death (206). She wanted to get married with Ding Liang not only because she loved him, but also because she was eager to earn herself a legitimate position in the village and so someone would take care of her funeral. Lingling’s worry reached its climax during her conversation with her ex-husband Ding Xiaoming:

‘Did you come to help with the burial?’ she called out.
Ding Xiaoming stared at her. ‘Xiuqin’s [another AIDS patient of Ding Village] dead, and she had family and friends and people that cared about her. But you’ve got no one, you’re living out here like an outcast. It should have been you!’ He raised his voice. ‘You should have been dead a long time ago!’
Xiaoming’s angry words hit Lingling like a burst of gunfire. [...] Lingling’s eyes filled with tears. ‘Let’s really do it,’ she said, a sob in her voice. ‘Let’s get married as soon as we can. And let’s move back to the village, okay? Just once before we die, I want us to be a respectable couple. You have to promise me, Daddy [Ding Liang].’” (224)

To better understand Lingling’s worry, an introduction of Chinese people’s traditional concepts of afterlife is in order. The Chinese conception of the afterlife has been influenced by various traditions, particularly the three main traditions in China:

- **Confucianism**: This tradition began with Confucius (551 b.c.—479 b.c.) and his proponents. Confucius’ well-known teachings include: 1) the ideal ruler, who can exercise ethical suasion and had the ability to influence others by the power of his moral example; 2) ritual (li), which incorporate both people’s ability to act appropriately in any given social situation and the specific rituals people are supposed to perform (e.g. rites of mourning in the family ritual). Confucius’ teachings were developed and founded as Confucianism during the Han Dynasty (202 b.c.—220), and was made into an orthodoxy sponsored by the state since then. (Asia for Educators, “Confucius and the ‘Confucian Tradition’”)

- **Buddhism**: Buddhism was the first major religious tradition in China that was imported from abroad, while it had become a natural part of the Chinese religious landscape. The main propositions of Buddhism include: 1) Reincarnation and the forms of life, that all human beings are destined to be reborn in other forms (human and nonhuman), and the process of reincarnation is without beginning or end; and life takes six forms, following in a hierarchical order as here: gods, demigods, human beings, animals, hungry ghosts, and hell beings. 2) Gods of Buddhism, who reside in the heavens and lead lives of immense worldly pleasure. 3) Karma, the logic that determines where one will be reborn. 4) The cycle of existence, which is marked by impermanence,
unsatisfactoriness, and lack of a permanent self. 5) The path to salvation, which depends on one’s morality. [For more critical opinions on the Chinese Buddhist history, see more in “The History of Buddhism in China” part on Asia for Educators provided by Columbia University: http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/cosmos/ort/buddhism.htm.]

- Daoism: The dao in Daoism, literally “the way,” is the spontaneous process regulating all beings and manifested at all levels. Though having rich diversity, Daoism takes pursuing immortality as its basic proposition. It is believed that the greatest immortals are still alive in the heavens, and they may achieve this through various means: 1) following a regimen of gymnastics and observed a form of macrobiotic diet; 2) practicing the art of alchemy, assembling secret ingredients and using laboratory techniques to make elixir and to roll back time; 3) recovering the state of health and wholeness and obtaining the beginning of time via personalized rites of curing and communal feasts. (Asia for Educators, “Defining ‘Daoism’: A Complex History”)

It is worth noticing that the Chinese popular beliefs draw upon all three of these traditions without strict adherence to any one of the three. For example, both the Buddhist belief in reincarnation and the Daoist belief in immortality contribute to Chinese people’s envision of the afterlife: life will not end in one’s death, but continue to go on in the underworld waiting for reincarnation back to the secular world, or in the heaven gaining immortality as a god. Moreover, the Confucian rule in hierarchy also influences people’s concept of the underworld, e.g. there are also magistrates of hierarchical ranks in the underworld taking charge of the dead people; and the filial piety (which will be mentioned soon in later discussions) is also connected with the Confucianism. We also need to keep in mind that Chinese popular beliefs are not static and unchanging: popular beliefs vary across time and places, and also differ among different groups of people. In our following discussion, we take popular beliefs as the common beliefs shared by most people in general, across social boundaries as well as limits of time and space.

According to popular religious beliefs in traditional China, there are three domains in the cosmos: Heaven, Earth, and Underworld. The Earth is considered to be the world that living people are residing in, and the Underworld is thought to be a vast duplicate version of the Earth, that there are houses and furniture, streets and gardens, etc. Most souls of the deceased receive their “final judgment” in the Underworld, where the Underworld magistrates would assess the souls’ actions in life and decide how they would be reincarnated: some would be reincarnated as animals as punishment for their bad behaviors, while others were reincarnated as human beings whose social position might differ with their past life, depending on how virtuous they had been in that life. The rare souls that have lived an exemplary life could immediately gain release from the Underworld and go either to the “Pure Land of the West” (jingtu), which is inhabited by wise teachers of Buddhist Dharma and is a place complete
released from the cycle of birth and rebirth; or to the Heaven, which is populated by gods and heavenly officials, and the soul entering into Heaven would be reborn as a god as well.⁸

For ordinary Chinese people, the Underworld is the decisive place in their afterlife. They believe the souls of deceased family members remain the same as what they were like when they were alive, that the souls of the deceased will continue to live on in another world (namely the Underworld, where souls await judgment). The Underworld is believed to mirror the Earth, that there are officials dealing with dead people’s affairs, and the deceased would need similar things they needed when they were alive on the Earth. For instance, burning paper money for the deceased family members has been a lasting tradition for centuries, which aims to provide the deceased with enough money to spend in the underworld; and in contemporary China, people also burn more modern items, such as paper houses, paper cars, paper cosmetics, etc.

[To get a visual impression of the paper money, real paper money could be used as the teaching tool] For the souls, the quality of afterlife care provided by their living family members would decide the living condition of the souls in the Underworld. Such concept helps to explain why the grave and coffin of “my Uncle” and Lingling were so extravagantly built and decorated: Uncle’s casket was engraved with images of big-city life, and the appliances and electronics were all labelled with Ding Liang’s name (267), while the engravings of Lingling’s casket were more feminine:

Engravings on the inside of the casket showed silks and satins, clothing and jewellery, dressing tables, make-up boxes and other feminine items. There was also a handy assortment of kitchen items that no woman should be without: sideboards filled with bowls and plates, cups and glasses, modern cooking ranges with exhaust fans, aprons and bamboo steamers. There were potted plants and flowering bushes, grapevines and a pomegranate tree, a symbol of fertility. The engraving even included a miniature Lingling, hanging Uncle’s freshly washed shirts and trousers to dry under the pomegranate tree. (268)

The strong feminine markers of Lingling’s casket engravings reflect some traditional Confucianism concepts of gender, which also represents an important part of Chinese people’s concepts of afterlife. The traditional inequity between men and women was much more common among rural Chinese people than urban dwellers, and it continues to be taken for granted in some remote areas of China in present day. Since the end of the Han Dynasty (202 B.C.-220 A.D.), the Confucian discourse defined the different roles of men and women as patrilineal, patrilocal, and patriarchal. After marriage, a woman had to move from the household of her father to that of her husband’s parents, and in terms of afterlife care, a wife’s standing within her family of marriage depended largely on her birth of male descendants. Moreover, in their lifetime, women had to take full care of domestic work, such as weaving and embroidering, laundry, etc., but were not allowed to take part in public affairs. As the Underworld is considered to be mirroring the Earth to a large extent, the gender hierarchy

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⁸ The famous historical hero during the Three Kingdoms period (220-280), Guan Yu, is an example of the soul who was considered to become a god in Heaven.
between men and women is also thought to be preserved by the Underworld. Lingling’s casket engravings like kitchen utensils and the scene of hanging her husband’s clothes, were portrayals of women’s role within a family in traditional rural Chinese’s beliefs.

In Chinese popular beliefs about afterlife, there are also some souls who failed to reach their afterlife and thereby became ghosts, remaining on the Earth, harassing and causing trouble for the living. Reasons for this include the lack of a proper send off by living relatives on the Earth, or tragic circumstances surrounding their life or death. Ghosts are full of mischief and never enjoy a peaceful afterlife nor are they reincarnated. As for Lingling’s concern for her afterlife, it is now easier to understand why her ex-husband Ding Xiaoming’s words would hurt her deeply: if she did not marry Ding Liang, she would have no legal position in the village, and no one would take care of her afterlife, and she would not only be an outcast when she was alive but also become a miserable and lonely ghost after she was dead.

**Modern Version of Afterlife-related Beliefs**

We also need to caution that the traditional Chinese popular concepts of afterlife cannot fully cover the scenes of death rituals in *Dream of Ding Village*. Similar to the dual system of traditional medicine and modern medicine in present China, the death rituals in *Dream of Ding Village* were also mixed with both traditional and modern concepts. The modern part is mainly represented by the engravings of Uncle and Lingling’s his-and-her coffins:

In the past, his-and-her coffins had been engraved with classical scenes such as images of piety from *The Twenty-Four Filial Exemplars*; the legend of Meng Jiangnu, the loyal wife who cried down a section of the Great Wall while mourning her husband; and the legend of Liang and Zhu, the ‘Butterfly Lovers,’ a Chinese Romeo and Juliet. But the engravings on Uncle and Lingling’s caskets were mostly big-city scenes depicting famous landmarks: Beijing’s Tiananmen Square, Shanghai’s Oriental Pearl television tower, Guangzhou’s high-rise hotels, and various bustling commercial districts, department stores, suspension bridges, fountains, parks and public squares. Needless to say, whoever had done the engravings must have been well travelled, in order to depict these cosmopolitan scenes so realistically. (266-7)

But perhaps most important of all was the building engraved at the foot of Uncle’s coffin. A sign above the entrance to the building identified as the “People’s Bank of China’. In this way, the accumulated wealth of an entire nation, the fruit of decades of Chinese economic development, would accompany Uncle into the afterlife. All the power and glory and prosperity of the world, stuffed into one casket. (267-8)

As we have discussed in Unit 3, Chinese farmers experienced the fervor of developmentalism during the late 1980s to mid-1990s. Individuals were encouraged by the government to improve their life standards and become rich through creativity and entrepreneurship. For villagers living in poor villages of rural China, cities were the site of their dreams. Poor villagers from Henan province in the 1980s and 1990s had no chance in their entire lifetimes to visit metropolises like Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou. The engraving of “People’s Bank of China,”
which functions as the central bank of China and is in charge of the monetary policy to safeguard the overall financial stability of Chinese economy in today’s China, seems to be too much for an ordinary young peasant-couple to have on their casket. By offering such an incredible treasure to the deceased family member, the novel provides an irony of the farmers’ vanity and greed for wealth, which was stimulated by consumerism, a central value in reform-era China.

In addition to the modern version of coffin engravings depicting the deceased family members’ afterlife, Volume 7 of Dream of Ding Village presents another important issue of afterlife—the marriages between dead people. “My Dad” Ding Hui, who was an astute businessman becoming rich firstly via blood trade and then via selling coffins, now took on the role of matchmaker for the growing number of the dead, and he made a huge profit from this trade in Volume 7. It is interesting how people of Ding Village and people from outside the village see Ding Hui’s business differently. For the Ding villagers, “my Dad” was like a demon:

‘[…] But do you know what’s been happening in the village? Over the last two weeks, they’ve been digging up the bodies of girls who died of the fever, and marrying them off to dead boys in other villages. They’re selling our girls, digging up their bones and giving them to outsiders. My cousin Hongli was supposed to be married to Zhao Xiuqin’s niece Jade after he died, but yesterday we heard she’d been promised to some family from Willow Hamlet, the Ma family. When they came to dig up her body yesterday, they told us it was Ding Hui who arranged the match, and that he’s making money on both ends. He charged both families a fee of one hundred yuan, and Jade’s family got 3,000 for the dowry.’ (292)

On the other hand, those from outside the village viewed things completely differently. According to them, Ding Hui was a great man, as he provided a wonderful matchmaking service for the local people:

Now he was giving solace to the living with his matchmaking service for the dead. The families of Cottonwood would never again have to worry about their unmarried relatives being lonely in the afterworld. My father had even found a match for the village idiot, a man who had sold a lot of blood while he was alive but never managed to hook a wife. Now that he was in his grave, my father had paired him with an eighteen-year-old city girl who had died in a car accident. For a dowry of only 5,000 yuan, the man’s mother was able to bury her son with a fever-free, virgin bride. (298)

The marriage between a deceased male and female is termed as “afterlife marriage” (minghun) in China, which is very common around China’s Loess Plateau and nearby areas, where the custom is believed to be most prevalent. Several aspects of traditional Chinese concepts of afterlife can help explain this folk custom. Firstly, as we have mentioned in the above section,

9 The Loess Plateau includes most part of the Shaanxi and Shanxi provinces and parts of Henan, Gansu, Ningxia, and Inner Mongolia, shaped by the Yellow River and its tributaries.
Chinese popular religions believe that people continue to exist in the Underworld after their deaths in a form different from the living people, that they would keep aging and have the similar material needs as when they were alive. Secondly, traditional Confucian beliefs hold that an unmarried life is incomplete, and if someone died of a young age without getting married in his or her lifetime, he or she would become a ghost haunting the living family members and bring misfortune to the whole family. An unmarried deceased person could also not be acknowledged with a proper position in the family tree: for a male died as a bachelor, passing away without continuing the family line (i.e., getting married and having children to carry the family kinship) would make him unworthy to rest alongside his ancestors. An unmarried woman’s situation is even worse as a female is considered to belong to her husband’s family in China’s patriarchal tradition, a female who died single would never be allowed to be formally buried anywhere after her death, and might become a restless wandering ghost. Therefore, for the sake of both the deceased people and their living family members, finding a proper husband or wife for the deceased becomes a popular way to keep the deceased accompanied by a companion in his or her afterlife. Such hope can be found in a Chinese prayer for afterlife weddings:

“So and so, I hereby inform you: You died at young age and thus did not realize the great principle of marriage. You sleep alone in the dark world and lack the intimacy of man and woman. Just as living people long for companionship, the dead fear loneliness as well. Unexpectedly, so and so’s family had a daughter who just passed away like an autumn leaf. We sent a betrothal for you so your souls might meet. We selected this auspicious day for the rite of your union. We also set out an offering next to your shrine tablet, furnished with all kinds of food. Please send your spirit down to the banquet and eat the meal.” (qtd. in Xu and Xiao)

The question comes: if the afterlife marriage can comfort both the deceased and their living family members, why would “my Dad” be detested by his own countrymen? This should be attributed to the involvement of commercial purposes in post-socialist China, especially the related offensive actions to achieve such purposes. Afterlife marriage has been practiced by Chinese people since ancient times, dating to as early as the Zhou Dynasty (ca. 1050 B.C. -235 B.C.). A famous example of afterlife marriage is famed warlord and poet Cao Cao’s (155-220) quest to find a proper bride for his youngest son Cao Chong, who died in 207. Emphasis on equal family backgrounds for marital couples as a basic principle for marriage has been passed on from Six Dynasties (222-589) and has also been applied to deceased couples practiced in afterlife marriages. Such belief keeps influencing the modern Chinese people, that we can also find such a concept be taken by the rural villagers of Henan province in Dream of Ding Village (for example, “my Dad” was a county cadre, and “my wife” Lingzi was the daughter of a county governor, so “me” and “my wife” share similar family background).

Though the traditional beliefs concerning the afterlife marriage have not changed significantly, the extent of commercial influences on afterlife marriages has changed. Because afterlife marriages in central China’s rural areas require the corpse of the bride to be removed and then reburied with the corpse of her newly-found deceased husband, some dead-bride sellers would
make a profit by ransacking graves. In addition to grave robbing, there were also incidents in which sick or disabled single women were murdered by their relatives so as to sell their bodies to dead-bride sellers for a profit. There is currently no specific regulation outlawing afterlife marriages in China, and as many trades are conducted by families voluntarily, a huge underground market for female corpses has developed since the beginning of the market economy and continued to develop today. In the 1990s, it could cost around 5,000 RMB (approximately 714 USD today) to buy a female corpse for an afterlife marriage. Around 2008 to 2010, the price had raised from 30,000 to 50,000 RMB (4,286 to 7,143 USD). By 2016, the price had further increased to no less than 150,000 RMB (21,428 USD). Corpse-selling for afterlife marriages has become such a lucrative business that many people are willing to join.

But for the victims who were murdered and for villagers whose deceased family members’ bones/corpses were stolen by grave robbers, it is the businessmen involved in this corpse trade who are to be blamed. For the villagers, “my Dad” was a merciless killer, not only bringing HIV/AIDS to the village, but always making a profit from his sick fellow villagers, exploiting and destroying his own hometown. Such exploitation is widely embedded in the current bureaucratic system of China. “My Dad” was promoted by the higher-ups to become the “vice-chairman of the Wei county task force on HIV and AIDS.” Dad’s official position in the county not only earned him a position in the government, but provided him more advantages to find commercial opportunities and extend his business. Dad is representative of the collusion between local governments and businessmen.

HIV/AIDS brought death to Ding Village, and afterlife-related death rituals continued to be practiced. In some way, the death ritual practices became the one of the most important affairs that could bring the whole village to life—otherwise, the whole village would be as silent and dark as usual since young healthy people were leaving the village, many families were broken, and the land was idle. But in Dream of Ding Village, the death ritual, which was supposed to be sacred and solemn as the family members and friends of the dead person should pay respect to the deceased, turns out to be absurd: it became a game operated by the dual function of power and capital, and became a show for families to compare with each other for their social position or wealth. On the one hand, people were obeying the same rituals according to the popular beliefs, preparing things for the deceased to use in the Underworld. However, on the other hand, though the rites had stayed the same, people’s minds to conducting these rites had changed dramatically: sincerity and love had gone, replaced by a hunger for capital and power. Funerals became hypocritical: shocked by the great wealth and power of “my Dad,” Ding villagers would hurry to help Dad and Grandpa with Uncle and Lingling’s funeral even though they all hated Dad from the bottom of their heart. Death and death rituals became arenas for people and families to fight with each other. In the following section, we will address more about how HIV/AIDS had resulted in the irrevocable rupture of family relations, changing and corrupting the traditional Chinese consanguinity.

CHINESE FAMILY AND KINSHIP
Blood not only refers to the biological blood—in Dream of Ding Village, the symbolic meanings of blood worth further notice. In Chinese vocabulary, the blood is always related to family and
kinship: for instance, the lineage between family members is called “blood lineage” (xueyuan 血缘). Connected by blood lineage, an ideal family should be united, that family members would respect and love each other, and each family member could play his or her own role in the family properly. However, in *Dream of Ding Village*, the relationship between family members was complicated, full of conflicts and tensions: the father wanted to kill his own son (“my Grandpa” Ding Shuiyang & “my father” Ding Hui), the husband wanted to pass the infectious disease to his wife (“my Uncle” Ding Liang & Liang’s ex-wife Song Tingting), one could have an adulterous relationship with his cousin’s wife (Ding Liang had extramarital love affair with his cousin Ding Xiaoming’s wife Yang Lingling), etc. How to understand such familial conflicts in this novel? A brief introduction of the past and present of Chinese family and kinship in rural China could be helpful here.

For a long time in Chinese history, family had always been seen as the basic unit of society. Therefore, in order to keep the stability of the whole society, it was necessary to maintain the stability of a family. In Confucian concepts (which had been settled as the official dominating ideology by Chinese emperors to rule the whole society since Han Dynasty, 206 B.C.-220 A.D.), both the family and society should follow a certain hierarchy among people. The “Five Human Relationships” (wulun) deal with the following relationships: between the ruler and minister, between parents and their children, between husband and wife, among siblings, and among friends. According to the Confucian tradition, most of these relationships requires a hierarchical order: the minister should obey the rulers, the children should respect and take care of their aged parents (i.e. filial piety), the wife should follow her husband, younger siblings should respect the older ones and all siblings must help each other.

Confucianism's social structure dictates that people can behave properly by obeying this order of priorities, e.g. the son should always obey his father, the wife should always obey her husband, there would be little conflict within the family group as well as in the Chinese society. Among the good behaviors for people to follow, filial piety (xiao), namely a virtue of respect for one’s parents and ancestors, was one of the key guidelines for one’s behavior, which could be embodied by taking care of one’s own parents, behaving well to bring good name to one’s family, etc. The influence of Confucianism is far-reaching. It had not only been the dominant principle of social organization in Chinese society for thousands of years, but was also an influential philosophy in all of East Asia. It stressed social harmony, collective orientation, respect for elders and so on, still important principles guiding society and behaviors in Japan and Korea, amongst others.

However, in *Dream of Ding Village*, much tension and conflict can be found in the kinship relationship. As a virtuous elder in the village, when faced with the dilemma between the interest of the whole village and the interest of his own family, Grandpa seemed to tend to place the interest of the whole village prior to that of his own family. That could be shown in at least two plots: 1) Because “my father” Ding Hui was the bloodhead who brought HIV/AIDS to the villagers and was also Grandpa’s son, Grandpa always felt that Ding Hui’s sin was his own sin too; 2) Grandpa wanted Hui (as the last name of many members of Ding family including
Grandpa is Ding, we refer “my father” using his first name Hui here) to apologize to the villagers, and if Hui declined to do so, Grandpa decided to atone for Hui’s sin himself firstly by apologizing to the villagers and finally by killing Hui, despite Hui was Grandpa’s own son.

The dilemma between one’s family and the welfare of a bigger community that Grandpa faced here was actually quite common for traditional Chinese people. In Confucian classics, we can read stories spelling out the possible conflict between the loyalty to a ruler and filial piety to one’s father, and that there was no absolute correct solution to the conflict. In one story, when Confucius was told that a man named Zhi Gong testified that his father stole a sheep, Confucius judged Zhi Gong to have failed to be truly upright: “In my Circle, being upright differs from this. A father would conceal such a thing on behalf of his son, and a son would conceal it on behalf of his father. Uprightness is found in this.” (Analects 13.18) While in another story, Cai Zhong’s father as Emperor Wu’s brother betrayed the Emperor Wu and got punished, while Cai Zhong maintained good virtue and got appointed by Emperor Wu’s another brother and important courtier Duke Zhou. Despite his father’s mistake, Cai Zhong was trusted by the new Emperor Cheng and was taught to be loyal to the Emperor (Classic of Documents, “Cai Zhong zhi ming” 蔡仲之命). The complex relationship between the family kinship and the state in the Confucian ideology made it possible for one’s family role to conflict with one’s state role, and created dilemmas for the individual to make one’s own choice.

CLOSE READING
The most astonishing example illustrating the internal fractures within a family is the filicide (killing one’s son or daughter) conducted by “my Grandpa,” who had wanted to kill his own eldest son “my father” from the beginning of the novel and finally finished the murder by the end of the novel:

When Grandpa thought about my death, he wanted to force my father, the blood kingpin, to go down on his knee and kowtow to every family in the village. And when that was done, my father could throw himself into a well, swallow some poison, or hang himself. Any method would do, as long as he died. And the sooner, the better, so that everyone in the village could witness his death.

It was a shocking thought to imagine my father groveling before the villagers and then being made to commit suicide, a thought Grandpa hadn’t thought himself capable of. But when the shock had passed, Grandpa began walking into the village in the direction of our house.

He was really going to do it. He was going to ask my father to apologize to everyone and then to kill himself.

Because the sooner my father died, the better. (12-13)

The idea struck Grandpa 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. (331-2)

On the other side, when hearing Grandpa’s words which hoped father to apologize to the Ding villagers, “my father” threatened Grandpa that if he said similar words one more time, he would no longer be his son (22-23). “My father” was also aware of Grandpa’s murderous intent: “Dad, as long as you don’t plan on killing me, I’ll always be safe. There’s not a person in any village on this plain who would dare to mess with me now.” (330) The antagonism between father and son here in Dream of Ding Village is worth close reading. Students may discuss the following questions:

- Being so hostile towards each other, why could Grandpa and father collaborate in some other cases, especially on the funeral of “my Uncle” and Lingling?
- Why would Grandpa turn to father for help when he met some troublesome situations with the other villagers, e.g. when someone cheated others using four bricks to replace the flour he or she was supposed to hand in for collective use (132-8), when the villagers declined to help Grandpa with burying Uncle and Lingling (260-70)?

In the following extract, Grandpa even pleaded with his own son (when Hui found Uncle and Lingling’s tomb as well as his own house on the New Street had been stolen and damaged), which would be considered as impossible in traditional Confucian concept that father should always be superior to son:

My dad’s face was pale, twitching with anger. Grandpa, afraid his son might do something rash, suddenly dropped to his knees and began pleading with him.

‘Hui, if you want to blame anyone, blame me, okay? Let’s just say I’m the one who stole the doors and furniture and urinated in the courtyard. If you have to punish someone, punish me.’

Grandpa looked up at his son like a little boy pleading with his father. My dad looked down at Grandpa with disdain, like a father who has lost patience with a misbehaving child.

After a few moments, my dad turned on his heel and left without a word. He didn’t look back. (314)

Raise some questions for students to discuss based on this extract. For example,

- The relationship between father and son in traditional Confucianism is completely reversed in this situation, in that “my dad” appears like a father while “my Grandpa” looks like a child. How to understand the role reversal here?
- If you were Grandpa, would you ever take similar actions like him? If differently, what would you do in this situation?
If you were Grandpa, how would you deal with the conflict between the interest of the village and the interest of your own family? Why?

LOVE & SEXUAL DESIRE: SINCERITY OF LIFE
Since the outbreak of HIV/AIDS in Ding Village, deaths became so common; and the family as well as kinship relationship went worse and worse because of the hatred and jealousy which were produced by gaps of life/death, rich/poor, and powerful/powerless. But there remained some kindness and hopefulness in Ding Village: love affair and sexual desire, was one of the noteworthy ways for the HIV infected patients to enjoy the pleasure of living. The extramarital affair between “my Uncle” and Lingling occupies much length of the novel, and is also the main story presented by the movie Love for Life, which is adapted from Dream of Ding Village. In this section, we will provide some close readings of this love affair, which was the place where human body, disease, morality and kinship are intertwined with each other intricately.

In Dream of Ding Village, extramarital love affairs become not only moving but also justified: as HIV-infected people, both Uncle and Lingling were alienated by their own spouses, in that their respective wife and husband refused to have bodily contact with them. As young energetic people, Uncle and Lingling’s sexual desire could not be satisfied in their legal marriage; in Lingling’s words, “After my husband found out I was sick, he never touched me again. I was only twenty-four, and only married a few months. We were newlyweds.” (77) The disease brought discrimination from their closest partners, expelling the patients from their homes and sending them to the school. The discrimination and hatred makes their extramarital affair justified, as framed by the narrator. When Uncle and Lingling were caught having stolen relationship in the school storeroom, Uncle’s words convinced the outside bystanders that locking them was a wrong thing:

There was a moment of silence before Uncle spoke again. ‘So what if they did?’ He sounded peevish. ‘You could take me out and shoot me and I wouldn’t care. A lot of us have died already. I cheat death every day… what do I care if I get caught cheating with someone else’s wife?’

The crowd darkening the door fell silent. There was really nothing they could say. Whoever had locked Uncle and Lingling in the storeroom had made a mistake. A big mistake. Uncle and Lingling’s stolen pleasures now seemed justified. Legitimate, even. The residents crowded outside the storeroom stared at one another and wondered what they ought to do next. (138-139)

Disease and the threat of death provided shelter for Uncle and Lingling’s love affair. They finally got divorced as they wished and became a legal couple, living together openly and happily. But that did not mean they were not afraid of death: in fact, each of them could not help to think how long they could live and who might die first. One case is that Uncle told Lingling that his deceased mother occurred in his dream frequently, calling him to come and stay with her, which was an inauspicious omen in Chinese popular beliefs as that suggested the person who had such a dream would die in near future. Lingling was shocked by Uncle’s dream, that she decided to play the role of Uncle’s mom so as to prevent him from dying early; as Uncle would
call Lingling Mummy, Lingling would call Uncle Daddy accordingly. These strange salutations brought the following scene:

‘Mummy... I want to do it.’

Lingling froze, as if she hadn’t expected Uncle to really use that word. Mummy. She seemed shocked that he’d said it, and maybe a little frightened. She raised her head to look at him, searching his face to see if he’d really meant it, or if his words were false. But Uncle wore the same easy smile he always had. The same lazy, foolish grin. Rascally, but with a touch of sincerity. Lingling wasn’t certain she liked what she saw there; when Uncle reached out to touch her, she gently moved his hand away. Uncle couldn’t stand it—he had to have her. His smile faded, and his expression grew serious. He gazed at her for a while, then opened his mouth and said it again.

‘Mummy...’

At first, Lingling didn’t respond. Her eyes filled with tears, but she wouldn’t allow herself to cry. After a few moments, she reached silently for Uncle’s hand, the hand she had just pushed away, and placed it softly on her breast. It was a reward of sorts. For a long time after that, the room was silent, but for the sounds they made. Sighs and moans. The rhythmic creaking of the bed, and the wood groaning under their weight, as if the bed had broken a leg, or was about to collapse. Neither worried about the bed collapsing. They were each immersed in their own mad passion. Making love with abandon.

Covers got kicked off the bed; clothes got scattered to the floor. They didn’t care, or even notice. By the time it was over, everything was on the floor. (221-222)

By having Uncle calling herself Mummy, Lingling wanted to enjoy the happy life with Uncle as long as possible. When reading sexual scenes in this novel, we can find most of them are shrouded by either death or disease. In another scene, the sick body was endowed with the aura of beauty:

There, in the tall grass, they did what men and women do. They did it with a frenzy. They were mad for each other, their sickness forgotten, as if they’d never been unwell. In the sunlight that played across their bodies, Uncle saw that the spots on Lingling’s skin were swollen with blood, glowing like plump red agates. The lumps on her buttocks and back were bright-red dots, like twinkling lights along a big city street. In her excitement, Lingling’s face took on a rosy hue, a faint red glow that drove away the shadows underneath. In that moment, Uncle discovered that Lingling had not just youth, but beauty: her large eyes, moist and dark; the bridge of her nose as straight and tall as a chopstick standing at attention. When they had first lain down in the tall grass, sheltered from the wind and prying eyes, she had seemed as withered and dry as the grass around her, but now she was radiant. The spots that covered her body only seemed to highlight the tenderness of her youth, the pale softness of her skin. Looking at her, Uncle was once again sent into a frenzy. He was mad for her. She rose to his desire, embracing his lust like the tender young grass on the plain welcomes the warmth of spring. (129-130)
Unlike other sick villagers who were tired and listless, Uncle and Lingling showed high spirit, energy and youth. The pustule-filled bodies became the sight of beauty here, that the spots on the skin were like “red agates,” lumps were like “twinkling lights along a big city street.” The love story of Uncle and Lingling not only offers an aesthetics of sick bodies, but also provides the most bright and sincere emotions to the whole novel. By using colorful and cheerful language to describe the body impaired and changed by disease, the novel itself became a weapon to fight against the real-life discrimination towards HIV/AIDS patients.

WORK CITED

ASSIGNMENTS, ACTIVITIES & PROJECT IDEAS
● Organize a class debate over what position individual students would take when the interests of the family and the interests of the community conflict with each other. Students can draw lots to choose a side: one side would value family interests over community interests, while the other side would do contrariwise. Encourage students to do group work outside of class to prepare, finding compelling examples to support their own arguments. Hold the debate in the next class and summarize the debate in the end.
● Ask students to write a short essay sharing their thoughts about a convention/custom (for example, regarding the afterlife) that they hold. Is the belief mainstream or a minority one in today’s American society? What is the history of this belief? What are
the customs related to this belief? The essays can be collected into a compendium and shared amongst the class.

Concepts of Medicine

Today, we tend to speak of “medicine” as synonymous with the scientific institution of medicine that has arisen in the West. But its boundaries aren’t necessarily as clear-cut as they might seem. This activity asks students to reflect upon and clarify what constitutes “medicine” in order to appreciate how, to a degree, it is defined culturally.

- Working alone, list as many words as you can that you associate with the word “medicine”; once you have come up with a satisfactory list, try to construct a definition of “medicine” that would fit all (or most) of your lists’ items.
- Are there words on the list that seem related to medicine, but aren’t really a part of it? What about things like ‘vitamins,’ ‘food,’ ‘exercise,’ ‘stretching,’ or ‘sleep’? Are these examples of medicine? If not, why not?
- Do you know of any “home remedies” for common ailments such as “curing” hiccups, or relieving an upset stomach? (If not, you may want to ask your parents!) How do you think this remedy was invented?
- What’s the difference between home remedies and scientific medicine? If it seems to work, is a home remedy less “valid” or “real” than a scientifically-researched approach?
- Visit the following page for a list of “alternative” medicines, including Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM). Which items have you heard of? Choose one and read the provided information. How does this approach conceive of the physical body, and health? What do you think attracts people to this approach? Would you ever try it? [https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/drugs-and-treatments/complementary-and-alternative-therapies/list-of-complementary-alternative-therapies/](https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/drugs-and-treatments/complementary-and-alternative-therapies/list-of-complementary-alternative-therapies/)
5. LIFE IN THE COUNTRYSIDE: UTOPIA OR DYSTOPIA?

OBJECTIVE
● To provide students with four typical visions of utopias (in literary works, theory, or practice) in Chinese culture;
● To read the dystopian countryside in Yan Lianke’s novels in contrast to typical Chinese utopias.

HANDOUTS
● “Artworks of Peach Blossom Spring”
● “Peach Blossom Spring by Tao Qian”
● “Chinese posters (Mao era)”

PREPARATORY & RECOMMENDED READING

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES
Chinese Utopia & Dystopia (Theory, Practice, Literature, etc.):

Online Videos:
UNIT ORGANIZATION
Beginning with “Opening Questions & Activities,” this unit is then divided into five subsections, two on utopia and three on dystopia: “Visions of Utopia I: Literary Utopias”, “Visions of Utopia II: Utopian Social Theories & Practices “; Dystopia I: Ding Family, Ding Village”, “Dystopia II: Change of Rural Governance,” and “Dystopia III: Change of Local Elite’s Role”. The unit finally ends with sections “Works Cited” and “Assignments, Activities & Project Ideas.”

OPENING QUESTIONS & ACTIVITIES
Encourage students to do some research on the origin/history of the word “utopia” before class. In class, ask students to consider the following questions:

- Consider the usage of the word “utopia” in our daily life. What does the word mean in everyday language? Try to provide some example sentences of the everyday usage of utopia.
- Can utopia be a place in existing reality? Or is it necessarily an imagined space? What images of utopias have you seen, perhaps in literature or film or elsewhere? What motivated the construction of these utopias? Do different cultures have different visions of utopia?
- What is the time and the space of a utopia? 1) Time: Does a given utopia exist in the past, the present, or the future? What is the relationship between a utopia and the present? Did different eras have different versions of utopia? 2) Space: Where might a utopia be found (or built)?
- What is the relationship between utopia and current society? Does a utopia mirror the concerns and struggles of contemporary society?
- If you were to design a utopia, what would you hope it be like? Consider from various perspectives, including but not limited to politics & government, economy, social organization, moralities, interpersonal relationships, environment, technology, health
care, and entertainment. For example, in terms of social organization, what could the relationship between family and society be in a utopia?

- Could utopias be achieved in reality? If yes, give examples; if not, explain why.
- What is dystopia? What kind(s) of description/presentation of dystopia have you seen, perhaps in literary works or films? What features does dystopia have? [See the handout “Dystopia/Dystopian/Dystopianism & Dystopian Novels” for the definition of dystopia/dystopian/dystopianism and a list of major dystopian novels]
- Is dystopia an inverted form of utopia? If not, what is the relationship between utopia and dystopia?
- Does dystopia exist in reality? What factors might make a dystopia?

Exploring the questions above, students should define “utopia” in their own words. Draw a table on the blackboard, filling the traits of utopia that the students offer inside the table (and categorizing the traits at the same time). Encourage students to think backward and forward about the words/terms they use to define utopia, so as to figure out specifics of how they define it and imagine it; in the meantime, pay special attention to where disagreement occurs among students when coming up with their versions of utopias.

UTOPIA: Etymology and Significance

The word ‘utopia’ was coined by Thomas More (1478–1535) as the name of the imaginary country described in his short 1516 book, published as Concerning the Best State of a Commonwealth and the New Island of Utopia. A Truly Golden Handbook No Less Beneficial Than Entertaining (the original Latin title: Libellus vere aureus nec minus salutaris quam festivus de optimo reip[ublicae] statu, deq[ue] noua Insula Vtopia). Today the book is simply known as Utopia. The word is based on the Greek word topos, meaning place, or where, and ‘u’ from the prefix ‘ou’ meaning no or not. But in ‘Six Lines on the Island of Utopia,’ More gives the reader a poem that calls Utopia ‘Eutopia’ (Happy Land, or good place). As a result, the word ‘utopia,’ which simply means no place or nowhere, has come to refer to a non-existent good place. […]

While the word ‘utopia’ appeared in the 16th century, the idea behind it already had a long and complex history, including a wide variety of imagined worlds. And new words have been added to describe different types of utopias, including ‘dystopia,’ meaning bad place, which, as far as we know, was first used in 1747 by Henry Lewis Younge (b. 1694) in his Utopia: or, Apollo’s Golden Days and has entered standard usage. And to call something ‘utopian’ has, from very early on, been a way of dismissing it as unrealistic. […]

All utopias ask questions. They ask whether or not the way we live could be improved and answer that it could. Most utopias compare life in the present and life in the utopia and point out what is wrong with the way we now live, thus suggesting what needs to be done to improve things. (adopted from Sargent, “Introduction”)

Teaching Dream of Ding Village in Wisconsin
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VISIONS OF UTOPIA I: LITERARY UTOPIAS

A discussion about the definition and boundaries of the term “utopia” can prepare students to better understand one of the key subjects of the novel and in China today, namely, the relation between utopia and countryside in Dream of Ding Village. Why does utopia matter in this novel? What does utopia have to do with Ding Village, and moreover, the broader Chinese countryside? Yan Lianke’s literary countryside in Dream of Ding Village could hardly be called a utopia; on the contrary, it looks more like a dystopia—a bad place where disease has spread, destitution is widespread, and from which local residents wish to escape. Ding Village is one of the cases of Chinese countryside that overturns a popular imagination in China of viewing a remote village as a possible utopian place.

There are three faces of utopianism: the literary utopia, utopian practice, and utopian social theory (Sargent, “Introduction”). All constitute what we call “utopia” in this unit, and are crucial for understanding utopia in China’s cultural and social contexts: China has a very long and rich history of utopian imagination, and this tradition is key for understanding literature and politics, both in premodern times and in the revolutionary turmoil of the last century. Let us first take a look at some famous literary utopias in pre-modern as well as in modern China. In Chinese history the countryside has been viewed as the proper site to place utopian imagination for a long time. The most famous example of literary utopia in classical Chinese literature is created by Tao Qian (365-427). His short story, “Peach Blossom Spring” (Taohuayuan ji), depicts a village sealed off from the outside world where the people live in ideal harmony with nature, knowing nothing about the changes of dynasties or other current events, and ultimately living a simple, pastoral existence of self-reliance. The peach blossom spring has subsequently become a popular symbol of utopia in Chinese culture, echoed by generations of artists and writers in China, chasing after the idealized and worldly paradise in their artworks and literary works based on this theme. [See the handout “Artworks of Peach Blossom Spring” for paintings created by pre-modern Chinese artists; if you want to prepare an in-class discussion on Tao Qian’s piece, see the handout “Peach Blossom Spring by Tao Qian” for the translation of “Peach Blossom Spring” and discussion questions. For a vivid synopsis of Tao Qian’s utopian fable, see the videos provided in “Additional Resources.”] Tao Qian’s utopian village is not a reflection of any religious heaven on Earth, but a wonderful place that might exist in reality but also not in reality: as the ending of the “Peach Blossom Spring” shows, the utopian village was never discovered by anyone out of a fisherman, thereby the words of the fisherman—the only witness—became indemonstrable, which made the existence of the peach blossom spring a mystery.

Since late nineteenth and twentieth-century China, various trends of westernization, modernization and urbanization have greatly changed the landscape and interpersonal relationships of China’s countryside. For Chinese people living in those fluctuant eras (including today), the countryside usually becomes the embodiment of people’s nostalgia. Shen Congwen, one of modern China’s foremost writers best-known for his countryside works, depicted many western Hunan villages in his short stories and novellas, where both ideal moral virtues and peaceful human-nature relationships maintained well. As the scholar Jeffrey C. Kinkley argues, “Pastoral, idyllic, and lyric are the words most often used to sum up Shen Congwen’s literary
achievement, both in praise and in disparagement. Those who love Shen’s works are overwhelmed by the beauty of his style and the purity of his representations of human nature. Others, however, have criticized Shen of depicting the Chinese countryside as a paradise in order to disguise social oppression in the old society.” (Kinkley 5) For example, in Shen’s most famous novella *Border Town* (1934), readers can find such a depiction of the countryside circumstance:

The river was the famous You Shui of history, [...] Households near the water appeared among peach and apricot blossoms. Come spring, one had only to look: wherever there were peach blossoms there was sure to be a home, and wherever there were people, you could stop for a drink. In the summer, purple cotton-print tunics and trousers that dazzled the eye as they dried in the sunlight became ensigns of human habitation. When autumn and winter arrived, dwellings on the cliffs and by the water came clearly into view—not one could escape notice. Walls of yellow earth and pitch-black tiles, neatly placed there for all time and in harmony with the surroundings on every side, brought the viewer a sense of extraordinary joy. A traveler with the slightest interest in poetry or painting could sail this narrow river curled up in a little boat for a whole month without ever getting tired of it. Miracles could be discovered everywhere. The boldness, the exquisiteness of nature, at every place and every time, led one inescapably into rapture. (Shen, Chapter Two)

In many ways, Shen's literary native villages bridges premodern and preindustrial visions of utopia with our modern era, celebrating the countryside as a place where simple human relationships prevail. Shen's celebration of the countryside as a utopia offers a perfect counterbalance to the dystopian representation in Yan Lianke's novel. Shen’s portray of both the beautiful nature sceneries and local people’s hospitality in this extract (especially in the underlined sentences above), remind us of Tao Qian’s utopian village in the “Peach Blossom Spring”:

One day, as he [a fisherman] followed the course of a stream, he became unconscious of the distance he had travelled. All at once he came upon a grove of blossoming peach trees which lined either bank for hundreds of paces. [...] Linking paths led everywhere, and the fowls and dogs of one farm could be heard from the next. People were coming and going and working in the fields. Both the men and the women dressed in exactly the same manner as people outside; white-haired elders and tufted children alike were cheerful and contented. (Tao, “Peach Blossom Spring”)

Embracing similar peach blossoms, similar river route to the village, and similar rustic villagers, Shen’s border town in West Hunan echoes Tao’s classical literary utopia created thousands of years ago. In Tao and Shen’s works, their literary remote villages, far away from the crowded and busy cities and surrounded by hills and rivers, had nurtured kind-hearted people who symbolized the perfectibility of human life.
The idyllic and lyrical literary villages depicted by Tao Qian and Shen Congwen form a core of Chinese utopian imaginations of the countryside. Yet literature is not the only site to view these literary utopias. As Sargent argues, all utopias contain a comparison: by comparing life in the present and life in the utopia and believing that life in the present could be improved (Sargent, “Introduction”)—which indicates that an utopia could not be envisioned without an understanding of the current life. Therefore, a more complex picture underlies the representative literary utopias of China’s countryside: especially in modern China, diverse utopian social theories and practices provide the necessary political discourse for us to better understand the literary utopia/dystopia of China’s countryside.

VISIONS OF UTOPIA II: UTOPIAN SOCIAL THEORIES & PRACTICES
One of the most influential utopian theories in twentieth-century China is anarchism, which had occupied the central position in Chinese revolutionary theories in the early part of the century (1905-1930) and had left a lasting imprint on the Chinese revolution in later decades. The propositions of Chinese anarchism—despite Chinese anarchism consisting of diverse schools and groups—meets all requisites of anarchism argued by John P. Clark: 1) a view of an ideal, noncoercive, non-authoritarian society; 2) a criticism of existing society and its institutions, based on this antiauthoritarian ideal; 3) a view of human nature that justifies the hope for significant progress toward the ideal; and 4) a strategy for change, involving immediate institution of noncoercive, non-authoritarian, and decentralist alternatives. (Clark, “What is Anarchism?”) In addition to these basic arguments, what needs to be discussed further in this section is how Chinese anarchism views rural issues, such as agrarian policy and production, the role of peasants, social organization in the village, etc.

One unique feature of Chinese anarchism is its belief in the goodness of human nature: unlike the concepts of people’s original sin in the West, Chinese anarchism inherits early Confucian’s philosophy of human goodness and Daoism philosophy of governing by non-interference. Believing all people are born kind, Chinese anarchists consider people’s tendency to mutual aid as innate, and individuals are capable of self-governing and self-ruling. When applying such belief to the rural issues of Chinese society, Chinese anarchists think Chinese peasants need to conduct mutual aid, and the government should be kept out of the village. Another important argument is related but not limited to Chinese peasants: chasing equality and dignity of all people, Chinese anarchism seeks to dignify all people with freedom and equality, which would ultimately lead to a community without hierarchical/authoritarian institutions, where people themselves have the capacity to run their own lives.

Since the 1920s, Maoism—namely Mao Zedong’s theories of Chinese revolutions—had gradually grown and developed, and it culminated by becoming the dominant official ideology during Mao-era (1949-1976). In many ways, Maoism in both its early and mature forms shared some motifs with anarchism. In Mao’s early propositions, he emphasized unity over class struggle: he promoted the vision of a great unity founded on small associations of like-minded individuals, which are just like the free associations promoted by anarchists which would provide the fundamental building blocks of the new society. Yet when it came to the 1930s and 1940s, Mao turned to a stricter class analysis and a more radical revolutionary faith: recognizing
Marxism and Leninism’s revolutionary basement—the urban working class—was not applicable to Chinese contexts, Mao developed a theory of rural and peasant-based revolution. Moreover, such revolution relied on voluntarism, essentially the people’s spontaneous reaction against oppression, which was also taken by anarchists as the fundamental motive of revolution.

Underscoring the position of countryside and peasants in Chinese revolutions, Mao Zedong makes China’s countryside the key arena of various utopian practices. In the high socialism Maoist China (1949-1976), Chinese authorities were pursuing the communist utopia, which brought many political and social movements, such as the Great Leap Forward which aimed to improve Chinese economy and people’s living standard in a short period, the Cultural Revolution which required a highly unified pure socialist (in contrast with capitalist) ideology, etc. [To get a more vivid impression of the communist utopia during Mao era, see the handout “Chinese posters (Mao era);” also, see Unit 3 “Post-Socialist China & Socialism with Chinese Characteristics: Top-down View” section for more information on the Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution]

One of the most representative utopian practices in Maoist China is the People’s Commune, which was established during the Great Leap Forward, changed its forms and features in later decades and was finally replaced by townships in 1983. At its peak in 1958, a gigantic commune could contain an average of more than fifty villages. A commune was like a large-scale collective farm, where all production and consumption were conducted collectively: agricultural production was organized in a military fashion, while individual families were not allowed to have personal possessions; people could eat whatever they needed in the collective canteens, as well as enjoying the healthcare and education provided by the commune. While the gigantic People’s Commune turned out to be unsustainable— as a result, despite keeping the name of “People’s Commune” which still functions as a kind of social unit in rural China, those massively enlarged communes were divided into more manageable units. Originally designed to complete the building of socialism ahead of time and carry out the gradual transition to communism, People’s Commune during the Great Leap Forward period is representative of an attempt at high modernization, different from the traditional rural life in many ways. For instance, traditional villages were replaced by modern residential clusters, previous focal points for rural life (ancestral halls, temples, local markets, etc.) gave way to modern institutions (collective canteens, nurseries, schools, co-op shops, etc.) (Lu, 44) [See the handout “Designs of People’s Communes” to get a visual sense of the modern utopia presented by People’s Communes in 1958]

In more recent reform-era China (1978 to present), the communism utopia has taken a back seat, while a more obvious and paramount utopia seems to become a capitalist one, that people are restlessly chasing wealth and practicing consumerism. A general hunger for wealth is what we commonly associate with contemporary Chinese society, but in Chinese official discourse, the government would never admit that Chinese society has been driven by a capitalist utopia since the late 1970s. Instead, they emphasize improving social morality in addition to economic development. Keeping in mind the more recent popular utopian slogan “Chinese Dream” (Zhongguo meng) shows, China is chasing a comprehensive vision of utopia—
which includes economic, political, scientific, military, cultural, social, and environmental goals. But in this picture of a full utopia, much more troubled realities and contradictions are concealed. For example, where should China's countryside go? In the current fast-developing urbanization, despite some villages finding their own ways to prosperity, more and more villages are being abandoned with a loss of population, environment, economy, etc. The declining countryside, instead of the utopian countryside in Tao Qian and Shen Congwen’s literary world or in anarchist Liu Shipei’s rural utopianism, has become the more real scenery in a number of contemporary Chinese writers’ eyes (e.g. Liu Zhenyun, Chen Zhongshi, Yu Hua)—and such a dystopian countryside is where our discussion about the utopia in Yan Lianke’s *Dream of Ding Village* should begin.

**DYSTOPIA I: DING FAMILY, DING VILLAGE**

One feature of the dystopian countryside presented by Yan Lianke’s novels is the break-up of kinship relationships and human virtues. As depicted by Tao Qian, Shen Congwen, and some modern anarchists, rural society could be much closer to the ideal utopia than the city. On the one hand, the countryside was considered to be more economically self-sufficient and thereby far away from the commodity economy—one of the most accountable factors for the degeneration of morality. People living in the countryside were usually deemed bearing many human virtues such as simplicity, honesty, sincerity, frugality, etc. On the other hand, the countryside with little urbanization maintained a better natural environment where people were more able to enjoy a healthy and uncontaminated life in an idealized communion with nature. In such a vision, both the interpersonal relationship and the human-nature relationship were harmonious, representing the ideal lifestyle.

Yan Lianke still holds a sense of nostalgia towards China’s countryside, especially his native village in central China. To some extent, he is like some early Chinese anarchists—different from western utopias looking forward to a future, they tend to believe that utopia lies in a golden age, a distant past. Therefore, in *Dream of Ding Village*, the collapse of families and the weakening of kinship relations all bring a sorrowful atmosphere: in Yan’s visions of the rural utopia, countryside should be the last clean land to keep the Chinese traditional values and moralities, despite some of the traditions may seem outdated. A reading in the Chinese family and family-village relationship could thereby help us better perceive the dystopian vision in Yan Lianke’s literary countryside.

Family has always taken a crucial part in Chinese people’s minds for thousands of years. Despite the Confucianism regulations of people’s behaviors and hierarchy within their families *[For an introduction of the Confucianism familism, see more in Unit 4]* had been attacked heavily since the early 1900s by various social revolutions, family maintains an unshakable position in most people’s concepts in today’s China. Two kinds of family are both important in contemporary Chinese people’s minds: one is the simple/nuclear family, which is founded by the marriage of a couple and enlarged by their children; the other is the extended family, which includes several generations as well as several simple/nuclear family bound by blood kinship.
The name of “Ding Village” indicates the close relation between the Ding family and the village. As the naming of the village—“Ding Village”—shows, the majority of the villagers had the common surname “Ding,” which suggested that they belonged to a big Ding family in a broad sense, stemming from the same ancestors with the surname Ding. The reason why one family might form a village was because of lineage: according to Chinese popular tradition, when the children of a simple/nuclear family got married, sons among the children could bring their wives and children to the original simple/nuclear family, living with their parents (while daughters usually left the parental home on marriage), which would enlarge the original family. As long as this process continued, the lineage could go on getting bigger as it was able to do on its available land, and finally formed its own village surrounded by its own land.

Ideally, a village-family should look inward for cohesion and cooperation, and outward for antagonism so as to protect the interests of itself. Moreover, in Chinese traditional utopian visions of villages, people are supposed to cooperate rather than compete with each other; in other words, a village is like a big family where people are used to mutual aid. However, we can find it is not the case of what was happening in Ding Village. For contemporary Chinese people, even for the relatively more traditional rural Chinese, the divergence of an extended family becomes a much more common situation. Rather than living with their parents, sons prefer to set up their own new simple/nuclear families independently, and sons of the same parents would usually take the responsibility of taking care of their parents together. [About how a huge Ding family could split into smaller Ding families, see the handout “Chinese Family and Kinship”] For example, the parents might often live together with one son and other sons would provide money to support their parents’ living; or the parents might live independently (in their own house or in the retirement home), that all sons would afford their parents’ daily expense together.¹⁰

That is what we can see in Dream of Ding Village: though “my Grandpa” and Ding Xiaoming’s father were brothers, Grandpa’s family and Ding Xiaoming’s family did not live together; similarly, in the next generation of Grandpa, “my Dad” and “my Uncle” also lived independently after each got married. Moreover, the degree of intimacy between simple/nuclear families with the same ancestors would also vary within the same generation: the families of brothers/sisters would be more intimate than families of cousins. Take this novel as an example, the relationship between “my family” (including my parents and my sister) and “my Uncle’s family” (including my uncle, his wife and child) would be closer than the relationship between “my Uncle’s family” and Ding Xiaoming’s family (including Ding Xiaoming and his wife).

Yet in addition to the difference of intimacy depending on blood kinship, a more direct reason to explain the estrangement between “my family” and “my Father/Uncle’s cousin” Ding Xiaoming’s family in this novel was the wealth gap between these two families. Because of blood-selling and growing income difference, two Ding families, despite holding the same surname Ding, would cut off all relationships between each other:

¹⁰ Note: According to the newest Chinese law, both sons and daughters have the responsibility to take care of their parents, while in many rural villages, lots of people still consider daughters to belong to their husbands’ families rather than their born families.
Grandpa, of course, knew Ding Xiaoming well: the man was his nephew. Xiaoming’s father had been Grandpa’s brother, younger by just two years. After the blood-selling started, the two families had become estranged by wealth: my father had built a two storey house with a white-tiled exterior and my uncle had built a house with a tiled roof. Xiaoming’s family, on the other hand, was still living in a mud-brick house with a thatched roof. After Xiaoming’s father suddenly passed away, things got even worse. One day, his mother had pointed to my uncle’s house and said: ‘That’s not a tile-roofed house. It’s the village blood bank!’ Then, pointing to our house: ‘Those walls aren’t white tiles. They’re made with our bones!’ Once these words reached my father and uncle’s ears, the families kept their distance, meeting only at gravesides of their common ancestors.

After the fever hit and I was poisoned, word of my death spread quickly throughout the village. When Xiaoming’s mother heard the news, she said: ‘It’s retribution, that’s what it is, divine retribution.’ Of course, this got back to my mother, who rushed over to their house and caused such a scene that our families broke off all contact.

After that, our two families were as strangers. Not like relatives at all. (141-2)

Similar case also occurs in Chapter 3 of Volume 5, which is about “my Uncle” Ding Liang and Lingling’s funeral. The funeral here was no longer a situation when the family members were to show their concern and love for the deceased together; instead, the funeral became a competitive arena where different simple/nuclear families were showing off their wealth and position in the village: “Funerals were all about keeping up appearances. Sometimes they were a way of rehabilitating one’s reputation, or settling old scores.” (260) Relationships among villagers of the same village (and even the same Ding family) were full of tension and conflict—in such relationships, we could not find the understanding and kind-hearted villagers envisioned by the past rural utopianism anymore. Disease, wealth, and power all had led to the deterioration of interpersonal relationships in the countryside, which presented the dark side of human nature, an important feature of dystopia.

DYSTOPIA II: CHANGE OF RURAL GOVERNANCE
We have mentioned the communist utopia in the first subsection, that People’s Commune was one of the representative utopian practices of the Mao era (1949-1976). Yan Lianke seems to be nostalgic of a similar form of commune: in some of his novels, people in a commune-like village/organization, which was regulated by a reputable rural elite and maintained by the other villagers together, usually lived a satisfying life before the intervention of the outside world. The collective school life of HIV/AIDS-infected villagers in Dream of Ding Village is a good example of such utopian commune. Sick Ding villagers viewed the school life as something better than paradise:

After the snow had melted, the sick villagers found that life in the school was better than they had imagined. Even paradise couldn’t measure up to this. When Grandpa shouted that the food was ready, everyone would gather around with their bowls in
their hands. You could pick and choose whatever you wanted to eat, and take as much food as you liked. There were many dishes to choose from: savoury or sweet, hearty or light, thick soups or thin, vegetarian stir-fry, fish or meat. When you had finished eating, you rinsed your bowl in the sink and returned it to your assigned shelf, or stored it in one of the many bags that hung everywhere, even from the branches of trees. When someone found a herbal remedy said to cure the fever, the herbs were boiled in a large cauldron and ladled into bowls for everyone to drink. When someone got a treat from home—dumplings, say, or steamed pork buns—they would be divided among the whole group.

Apart from meals and medicine, there wasn’t much to do. You could bask in the sun or watch television, or round up a foursome for a few hands of poker. Some immersed themselves in two-man games of Chinese chess or Go.

There was nothing to think about, nothing to worry about. You could take long walks in the courtyard or stay in bed all day if you liked. No one would bother you or boss you around. You were as free as a dandelion in a field.

If you got homesick, you could visit your family in the village. If you missed your corps, you could go and check on your fields. If there was something you needed, you could send a message to your family and they would bring it to the school. (69-70)

However, as the novel shows, this paradise life did not last for long. It was first interrupted by thieves among the sick villagers, then worsened by the adultery between “my Uncle” and Lingling, and finally broken by the power shift in the school and the stepping down of “my Grandpa.” Two younger men Ding Yuejin and Jia Genzhu threatened Grandpa and stripped off Grandpa’s leadership in the school, and thereby established a new social order. What is worth notice is how such upheaval is presented in the novel. By posting officially-sealed announcements (which are in bold type in the novel) several times, a new regime was established and consolidated in Ding village. One of the most alarming announcements was the poster exhibiting a list of rules and regulations for the school residents:

1. Every month, all residents of the school must contribute a certain quota to the communal food supply. Anyone who tries to cheat or comes up short can go fuck their grandmother, and may their whole family die of the fever.
2. All government donations of grain, rice, cooking oil and medicine will be administered by the school. Anyone who gets greedy or takes more than their share can go fuck their ancestors, and may all their descendants die of the fever.
3. Jia Genzhu and Ding Yuejin will be in charge of distributing coffins donated by the government, whenever we get them. Anyone who doesn’t follow orders will not receive a coffin, plus we will tell the whole village to go fuck that person’s ancestors and curse their descendants.
4. No one is allowed to embezzle school property or take it for their personal use without the express permission of Jia Genzhu and Ding Yuejin. Thieves and embezzlers will die a horrible death and their graves will be plundered.
5. All matters, big or small, pertaining to the common welfare must first be approved by Jia Genzhu and Ding Yuejin. Any business conducted without their written permission or without a stamp from the village party committee will be considered null and void. Anyone who disobeys will die young, lose their parents and have their kids crippled in car accidents.

6. Extra-marital sex, hanky-panky and lewd behavior will not be tolerated in the school. Anyone caught engaging in immoral acts or corrupting public values will be marched through the village with a sign around their neck and a tall paper hat, and have fever-infected blood poured all over them.

7. Anyone who disagrees or does not comply with the above regulations will be cursed for life, having nightmares about dying and pass the fever to all their family, friends and relatives. Plus, he or she will be sent home immediately and never allowed back in the school. If said person does try to come back, his (or her) fever will become full-blown. (152-154)

The announcement aimed to set up new, strict regulations to the school residents, but as shown by the underlined endings of each article, this announcement used the most abusive words to curse the rule-violators. We can also find that several articles in this announcement were directed against the exemplary notorious cases that happened during Grandpa’s administrative period, including the thief incident and the adultery incident. But unlike Grandpa’s charitable and forgiving resolutions to the previous incidents, Ding Yuejin and Jia Genzhu were much more violent and ruthless. What worked here under the leadership of new administrators of Ding Village was no longer moral consciousness, but a frightening authority who would carry out punishment (including curse and humiliation).

However, for many Ding villagers, these methods look not frightening at all. They even enjoyed reading these regulations, “all wore smug smiles, as if they’d just given someone a good, well deserved cursing”; moreover, “Everyone agreed that the rules were very well written, acceptable and satisfying.” (154) These villagers, who were indifferent to possible violence brought by the new local authority, are quite different from the inherently good and kind villagers visioned by people who consider the countryside to be a site of utopia. Chinese countryside utopia is based on the good human nature of villagers, while a great amount of stolid, selfish, shortsighted villagers in Dream of Ding Village overturn the basis of a rural utopia. From this aspect, the change of rural governance in Ding Village—from mostly moral regulation and self-governing to a hierarchical and powerful authorization—indicates the dystopian feature of Ding Village.

DYSTOPIA III: CHANGE OF LOCAL ELITE’S ROLE
Following the first announcement made by Jia Genzhu and Ding Yuejin, the paradise-like commune life in school also declared its ending. Yet the dystopian turn of the countryside did not stop here. The dismantling of school facilities, together with the official dismissal of Grandpa from school, stripped out all the hope and future for Ding Village:
After a thorough investigation into the matter, we hereby revoke Ding Shuiyang’s credentials as a teacher and caretaker of stuff at Ding Village Elementary School. From this day forward, Comrade Ding Shuiyang is not an employee of Ding Village Elementary School, and may not meddle in any matter to do with the school. (165-166)

In modern Chinese utopian theories, much emphasis is put on the role of school, teacher, and education. For example, major groups of early Chinese anarchism consider that social change would come through schools, which provide individuals with the education necessary for moral transformation. In other words, to build a utopian society without authority and coercive social institutions, cultivating individuals of high morality and the ability to self-governing is necessary; and elites and intellectuals would function as teachers to help with the education of ideal individuals.

This vision of utopia reminds us to pay attention to the role of Grandpa in Dream of Ding Village. As one of the eldest and most educated men of Ding Village, Grandpa was a representative rural elite. Therefore, keeping the school and keeping the only teacher of the school—Grandpa—to some extent meant that the village still held the hope that one day kids, who symbolized the future of the whole Ding Village, would come back to school for education one day. However, by removing both the school and Grandpa, the new village authority pushed Ding village into a dead end. Moreover, the legality of Grandpa to keep his position as a rural elite was also called into question after a series of incidents: because of Grandpa’s cheating the villagers into waiting for new medicine, his elder son Ding Hui’s (“my father”) nasty businesses, and his younger son Ding Liang’s (“my Uncle”) adultery with his cousin’s wife, his credibility in Ding Village was gradually debased.

Using trick and menace, the younger generation easily replaced Grandpa’s position in the school and the village. However, accompanying Grandpa’s abdication, the morality of Ding Village also eroded rapidly: the young generation of “elites” who were in the power center of Ding Village, such as Jia Genzhu, Ding Yuejin, and “my Dad” Ding Hui, all lacked the responsibility they were supposed to have as local officials/leaders—all they cared about was how to extract the resources of Ding Village, and how to gain interests for themselves as well as their own families.

The change of rural elite’s role in Dream of Ding Village and its influence on the manifestation of a dystopian Chinese countryside reminds us of Yan Lianke’s another famous novel Lenin’s Kisses (2003), which tells a story about a remote village of Liven, where was full of disabled villagers who used to live a content life with enough food and leisure, had been changed by a county official and his plan of utilizing Liven villagers to earn the money for building a local tourist attraction as his own career achievement. This novel similarly explores the issue of the changing status and position of rural elite: Grandma Mao Zhi, who was treated as “a bona fide revolutionary leader” (Yan, Book 1, Chapter 1) by the Liven villagers, had been playing a crucial role in the village inner matters as well as the diplomatic matters between Liven Village and
outside world for a long time. In the beginning of the novel, she was the symbol of the village’s dignity and pride as well as the most venerable person in Liven:

Grandma Mao Zhi’s crutches not only were attractive and durable but also granted her a sense of dignity and authority. Whenever there was a crisis, all she had to do was tap the ground with her crutch and everything would immediately be resolved. (Yan, Book 1, Chapter 3)

Actually, Liven didn’t have any village cadres. In fact, it hadn’t had a village cadre since Liberation, and instead it was loosely structured like a large family. [...] no brigade was willing to accept a village consisting of more than two hundred disabled residents. [...] In the end, they weren’t considered either a large or a small brigade, but rather were merely a village in Boshuzi. Since they had all been brought to this township and county by Grandma Mao Zhi after Liberation, it was therefore only natural that she should take charge of village affairs. For instance, she was responsible for holding meetings, distributing grain, selling cotton, and helping relay urgent political announcements from the higher-ups. When two neighbors quarreled or a mother- and daughter-in-law got into a spat, Grandma Mao Zhi would need to resolve the rifts. Had Grandma Mao Zhi not agreed to settle down in Liven, by this point she probably would have already become a township or county chief. But given that she merely wanted to pass her days in Liven, she naturally became the village’s director. (Yan, Book 3, Chapter 5)

However, Grandma Mao Zhi’s authority position in Liven was also changed through a series of incidents: firstly by her leading the Liven to join the communist utopia pursued by the Maoist China, and then by a new county official in the post-Mao China, who enrolled the disabled Liven villagers into a travelling performance troupe and providing them with salaries much higher than their farmwork earnings. In such a huge transformation, Grandma Mao Zhi, who strongly objected to the performance troupe and villagers’ living their native land, was thereby viewed by villagers as old and useless, hindering the whole village’s bright future of getting rich and living a better life. For the younger villagers, the new life supported by the market economy of a new era could provide a paradise-like life better than the “Heavenly fields” they used to eager for (explained by two entries in the novel):

3) Heavenly fields. A heavenly field is not a field that is literally in heaven, but rather a field that is as attractive as heaven. Many years earlier, the valley in which Liven was located had fertile soil and abundant water. There were flat fields that could be easily irrigated in times of drought, and hilly ones that could be drained in periods of flood. Regardless of what disability people had, as long as they worked on their family’s land, they would always have something to harvest. All year around, the people of Liven had more grain than they could eat, so they sowed and harvested broadly, and didn’t fear natural disasters. The villagers could always be found in fields, either busily sowing or leisurely harvesting, and in this way one year followed another. Everything changed, however, in the gengyin Year of the Tiger, 1950, when the land was collectivized and this leisurely pattern of existence finally came to an end. As a result, a family’s land was no
longer managed in such a leisurely and abundant manner, and the residents of Liven lost a way of life, a dream, and a fantasy. It became one of Grandma Mao Zhi’s goals to continue farming these heavenly fields, and this became a source of direction and sustenance for the entire village.

5) Overturned days. Refers to a kind of nostalgia that is closely related to heaven. This is a special mode of existence that only the residents of Liven have experienced or can understand. Its uniqueness lies in its freedom, relaxation, substance, lack of competition, and leisure. The residents of Liven call this sort of halcyon age “overturned days,” “lost days,” or “fallen days.” (Yan, Book 5, Chapter 1)

As a comparison, the monthly net income of Liven villagers in the performance troupe could amount to more than ten thousand yuan (about 1,428 US dollars today), a number which “was so astounding that it was enough to make their ancestors turn over in their graves:”

What can you do with ten thousand yuan? If you are building a dwelling, ten thousand yuan is more or less enough to build a three-room house. If you are getting married, it is more or less enough to pay the fiancée’s family her bride’s price, in return for permission to marry her. If you spend ten thousand yuan on someone’s funeral, this would be enough to transform an ordinary earthen grave into an imperial tomb. (Yan, Book 9, Chapter 1)

In a new era chasing after capitalist utopia dominated by desire and money, the rural elite Grandma Mao Zhi who used to be the pillar of Liven village was now considered to be an obstacle. But in the eyes of author Yan Lianke, Grandma Mao Zhi embodies his sense of nostalgia towards a golden past.

Rural elite Grandma Mao Zhi was shaped as a prophet in the ending of Lenin’s Kisses: her insisting on exiting both the communist utopia and the capitalist utopia brought Liven Village back to the original isolated village, a rural utopia similar to Tao Yuanming’s literary Peach Blossom Spring, which recovered its “heavenly fields” and “overturned days.” Both Grandma Mao Zhi and Grandpa Ding Shuiyang in Yan’s novels represent the sages who are indispensable parts in the vision of rural utopia, who are also the witnesses and sacrifices of the dystopian countryside: the history of Liven Village had gone with Grandma Mao Zhi’s death (Yan, Book 15, Chapter 1), and the Ding Village had gradually become a wasteland after Grandpa’s resign. Their failure to save the village seems to show Yan’s pessimism of the existence of utopia—dystopia might be the fate of China’s countryside today, where the humanistic ideals are irredeemably fading along with the passing away of the elder local elites.

WORK CITED


**ASSIGNMENTS, ACTIVITIES & PROJECT IDEAS**

- Students are encouraged to look over the recommended reading: *The A to Z of Utopianism*, and pick out an entry that looks interesting. Ask students to bring the entry to the class and share it with other students: why do you find it interesting?
- Page 306 of *The A to Z of Utopianism* offers an entry “Utilitarian Association of United Interests,” which has direct relation with Wisconsin:

  UTILITARIAN ASSOCIATION OF UNITED INTERESTS. This Owenite colony was begun in 1845 in Waukesha County, Wisconsin, just west of Milwaukee by a group of 16 London mechanics and their families on 200 acres of land some 13 miles from Hunt’s Experiment of Equality. Their cooperative venture failed after only three years and, facing starvation, they moved to Milwaukee in 1848. (306)

  Have students divided into different groups and encourage them to conduct group work and find out more information based on this entry. Consider the following questions:

  - Why might such utopian practice happen in Wisconsin? Find out the broader historical background of this utopian practice. *[For example, students might find more interesting utopian practices in Wisconsin during the same time period, such as Ceresco, a commune founded in Ripon, Wisconsin in 1844 by followers of the communitarian socialist ideas of Charles Fourier.]*
  - What were the goals of this utopian community? What were the participants pursuing through such practice?
  - To what extent had this utopian practice or other utopian practices in Wisconsin succeeded or failed?

Let each group prepare a ten-minute in-class presentation and share their work with the whole class. Encourage other students to ask questions to the presenting group and think about American’s attitudes toward the countryside, and see if there was something in common between the American and Chinese visions of the rural utopia.
Envisioning Utopias

- Split students into groups of 3-4. In each group, each student comes up with an idealized principle, philosophy, or phenomenon. It can be realistic (e.g. equal pay for everyone) or entirely fantastic (e.g. everyone lives to be 150 years old). How is each achieved? Can the different principles be balanced? Students can iron out differences to come up with a cohesive and unique utopia.
- Next, have each group write up an inviting and enticing description of their community. Consider adding an illustration component.
- Have each group share their utopia and field a few peer questions about it. At end of session, have students vote anonymously for which community (other than their own) they would most like to join.
- Lead reflection on how the elected utopia differs from other utopias, including the agrarian utopias from the Chinese tradition.
6. WIND, WATER, TREES, SOIL: THE CHANGING NATURE OF HUMAN-ENVIRONMENT RELATIONS IN MODERN CHINA

OBJECTIVES
- To focus on the philosophy of ecology in *Dream of Ding Village*, and to consider the complex relationship between humans and nature;
- To understand why the HIV/AIDS epidemic happened where it did, and unfolded in the way it did through exploring the human-nature connections, which are crucial to reading this novel.

HANDOUT
- “The Four Seasons”

PREPARATORY & RECOMMENDED READINGS

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

UNIT ORGANIZATION

OPENING QUESTIONS: NATURE, ENVIRONMENT, ECOLOGY
Nature, environment, ecology are three interrelated while different terms. For the sake of not abusing these terms without distinction, before we emphasize their interrelationships in our
following sections, it is important to first figure out a little bit about their differences. The following questions may be helpful to open the discussion:

- How would you define nature? Is nature something outside of humans? How should people get along with nature?
- What is the significance of the environment to humans? Do you consider the environment to be a background/context for people?
- When mentioning ecology, what would come to your mind first? What is ecology about? List some keywords that jump into your mind now without checking any other resources. [*Since ecology is probably the most academic term among these three terms, for a clear definition, see below: “ECOLOGY: A Short Definition”*]

There are no certain answers to the above questions, while students’ responses to those questions can reflect to what extent they perceive the human-nature interactions as well as human-environment interactions. In this unit, we want to emphasize their strong interactions: both nature and environment should not be considered as something outside of humans. Like American writer Joys Williams argues, it is important to caution the tendency to objectify the environment:

> And the word *environment*. Such a bloodless word. A flat-footed word with a shrunken heart. A word increasingly disengaged from its association with the natural world. Urban planners, industrialists, economists, developers use it. It’s a lost word, really. A cold word, mechanistic, suited strangely to the coldness generally felt toward *Nature*. It’s their word now. (Williams, “Save the Whales, Screw the Shrimp”; underline added)

Environment is so commonly used in various discourses today—political, economic, technological, etc.—but by referring to the environment, many discourses are making the environment something passive, awaiting signification and influences from human beings. However, a reading of the environment should avoid such simplicity and objectification of the environment: we want to retrieve its flesh and blood, its complex interactions and relations, its materiality not just outside but within human beings as well.

**ECOLOGY: A Short Definition**

Ecology is the study of the relationships between living organisms, including humans, and their physical environment; it seeks to understand the vital connections between plants and animals and the world around them. Ecology also provides information about the benefits of ecosystems and how we can use Earth’s resources in ways that leave the environment healthy for future generations. (The Ecological Society of America, “What Is Ecology?”)
TRADITIONAL CHINESE CONCEPTS OF ENVIRONMENT

Preface: Close Reading of a Drought

In the late 1990s and early 2000s—the time period in which Dream of Ding Village sets its background—the environment in China was suffering from much damage. The fever of developmentalism made many people unaware of—or turn a blind eye to—environmental devastation. Fast industrialization and urbanization greatly changed the landscape of rural China. But while people overlooked nature, nature did not simply go away. Instead, it reasserts its importance with a vengeance. In Dream of Ding Village, after all the big trees in the village are cut down, a six-month extreme drought happens in Ding Village:

Summer had passed without a drop of rain. Now it was midway through autumn, and there hadn’t been a rainstorm for more than six months. The dry spell had lasted for 180 days. It was the worst drought seen on this plain in nearly a century. All the grasses and crops had died.

The trees were gone, too. Unable to resist the drought, the paulownia, scholar trees, chinaberries, elms, toons and rare honey locusts quietly passed away. The big trees had all been chopped down, and the smaller ones had been lost to drought. There were no more trees.

Ponds congealed. Rivers stopped. Wells ran dry.

When the water disappeared, so did the mosquitoes.

Cicadas shed their skin and left before it was time. Their golden yellow corpses littered the trunks, branches and forks of dead trees, and clung to the shady side of walls and fences.

But the sun survived. The wind lived on. The sun and moon, stars and planets were alive and well.

A few days after my father’s funeral, they came to arrest Grandpa. He was a murderer, a man who had murdered his son, so they had to take him away. Three months after his arrest, in the second month of autumn, it rained for seven days and seven nights without stopping. And when the rain was over, they let my grandpa go. It was like the rain had been his salvation. They took him away at the height of the drought, when all the grasses and trees were dying, and asked him a lot of questions. They asked him about Ding Village and blood-selling and coffins and matchmaking the dead. When he had answered all their questions and the rains had ended, when the wells and ponds and rivers and ditches were no longer dry, they let him go.

They sent him home and spared his life.

When Grandpa came back to Ding Village, it was already late autumn. The dusk of a late-autumn day. The sun above the plain was a blood-red ball, making red of the earth and sky. Laughing on the horizon, cackling from the western plain. All across the silent land, there were sounds of life. Chirps and squeaks and tiny insect sounds. Normally, at this time of year, the trees would be shedding their leaves, but most of the trees were gone. The grass had all but been killed off. Almost, but not quite. In the fields and in the spaces in between, along the sand dunes of the ancient Yellow River path, there were
spots of green, pale-green patches of something still alive. Mingled with the autumn’s rotting grass was a smell as fresh as spring. The scent of something new and clean. Against the bright red sky, an occasional bird took flight. Crows and sparrows; an eagle. Their shadows flitted across the ground like wisps of smoke. It was to this that Grandpa had returned. (337-338)

Have students consider the following questions:

- What has Ding Village experienced right after Grandpa’s being arrested? What happened just before Grandpa is going to be freed? (Answer each question in one or two short sentences)
- Do you think nature in this extract is neutral? Does nature in this extract have its own emotion, preference, or judgment? Why or why not? (Support your answer using details from the extract)

By endowing nature with humanistic features, Yan Lianke seems to indicate a subtle and mysterious relation between humans and nature: six months of summer-autumn drought happens on Ding Village when Grandpa got arrested for killing his own son, making nature appear angry at other ungrateful villagers; moreover, just before Grandpa is to be freed from detention, a seven-day continuous rain saves Ding Village from drought, and brings new life to the plain, which seems to be preparing a moist, new, and clean village for Grandpa.

Nature in the above-mentioned extract seems like a person, who has its own feelings and judgment, and believes what Grandpa has done to be righteous. To better understand such personification of nature, i.e. to endow nature with humanistic feelings and moral judgment, some knowledge of traditional Chinese concepts of environment and nature should be in order.

Three Traditions about Nature and Environment

In Unit 4 where we discuss Chinese people’s popular beliefs on death ritual and afterlife, we have mentioned that the popular beliefs in China are under the influences of triple traditions: Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism. Similarly, these three traditions have shaped concepts of the environment leading up to the modern period. Here is a list of how each of the three envisions the environment (and keep in mind the important fact that each tradition contains many more diverse forms and schools than we can show here. Instead we select only the major concerns of each):

- Daoism: Compared with Confucianism and Buddhism, Daoism has much more direct discussions on nature, and many of its environmental views (principles of conservation, organic harmony, etc.) are usually adopted by modern environmentalists. Daoist cosmology understands the cosmos as a field of energies known as qi 气. The key concept of Daoism—Dao 道 or the “Way”—refers to the cosmic power and creativity; and the three basic dimensions of existence in Daoism—human, earth, and heaven—are
woven together into the spontaneously self-creating Dao. In terms of the human-nature relationship, on the one hand, humans are in a privileged position to shape their own destinies; on the other hand, the natural world is pregnant with mystery and numinous power that humans need to respect. Moreover, Daoist body is also a preeminent terrain of Daoism: Daoism considers the body to be as coextensive with the natural world and in microcosmic sympathy with the macrocosm. (Selin and Kalland, 393-407) [For more information about Daoist body, see “Concepts of Medicine” section of Unit 4 for theories of yin 阴 and yang 阳 (the ceaseless flow of activity and receptivity), wuxing 五行 (the five elements)]

- Confucianism: Confucian philosophy believes that nature itself needs careful tending just like human nature, and that intelligent management of the natural world would allow for the flourishing of both nature and humans. Some early Confucians were concerned that things were limited while human desire was infinite, and such disbalance could lead to social disharmony. (Selin and Kalland, 373-389) Unlike Daoism and Buddhism, Confucianism tends to a more ethical reading of nature than treating nature from its materiality: for example, the foundational ideology taken by most pre-modern Chinese emperors considers that the tian 天 (literally, the heaven) to have its own judgment, and if an emperor behaves badly, the tian would show its anger towards the emperor by many abnormal natural phenomena, like letting natural disasters (drought, flood, fire, etc.) happen in somewhere.

- Buddhism: Based on a belief in the interdependence of all living things, Buddhism considers that humans and natural systems would influence one another; therefore, humans should avoid any occupation that might harm other beings. Buddhism also thinks that an ideal lifestyle is to modestly satisfy people’s four basic needs—food, medicine, clothing, and shelter—and avoid being greedy for more than the basic. This theory of voluntary simplicity helps to reduce pressure on the environment including pollution and resource exploitation, and to develop a sustainable green society. (Selin and Kalland, 355-356)

The discussions of nature and environment by Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism all pay much attention to the relationship between humans and nature/environment rather than centering on nature/environment itself. Back to the personification of nature in Dream of Ding Village that we explained in the above sub-section, nature there seems to defend Grandpa against injustice by punishing the Ding Village with long-time drought, and to support and welcome Grandpa by providing him with a moist Ding Village refreshed by heavy rain. Portraying nature—or in the words of Ding villagers as well as traditional Chinese people, the “heaven”—as someone with feelings and thoughts, Yan Lianke echoes with the moral cosmos (which put constraints on emperors) stated by traditional Confucianism.
Winds and Waters: Feng shui as Environmental Belief

Though some traditional Chinese concepts on the nature/environment underlie many narratives of the novel, if we turn to the minds of Ding villagers, we may find their attitudes towards nature had changed a lot compared to the traditional beliefs. Such change reflects the conflicts between people’s modern attitudes and the traditional ones. Indeed, as we have stressed throughout this guidebook, the cultural disposition portrayed in the novel and in China today must be understood as a complex mix of traditional and modern (including socialist) ideology and practices. Despite three traditions providing different aspects of viewing nature, they have at least one thing in common: people’s respect for nature. One of the most specific is Chinese people’s stress on feng shui 风水 (translated as geomancy, namely the art of siting and aligning a building correctly based on traditional lore): from the imperial rulers in pre-modern China to ordinary people, most would concern about feng shui to some extent. In Dream of Ding Village, “my Father” uses feng shui as the advantage to selling his funeral park to Ding villagers:

So I may as well tell you about my latest venture: the county governor and I are planning to buy nearly 1,000 acres of land on the banks of the Yellow River, halfway between Kaifeng and the county seat, and turn it into a funeral park. It will be a burial site fit for an emperor, with the best location, steps away from the water, and feng shui to rival the imperial tombs of the Mang mountain range in Luoyang. [...] You’ll be getting a final resting place with a river view and auspicious feng shui practically for free. (329-330)

Chinese popular beliefs about feng shui have many deep connections with Daoist ideas about nature and environment. As the literary Chinese characters feng/wind 風 and shui/water 水 of feng shui show, feng shui does pay much attention to winds and waters. On the one hand, both the water and wind have strong influence on the natural environment in a material way: water molds the natural environments from the outside in obvious ways, and winds also shape the environment in ways less obvious than water. On the other hand, feng shui concerns more than the natural moulding functions of water and wind: water is considered to show the flows of qi (namely the cosmic/life energies in Daoist tradition) on the earth, while wind is the invisible qi (literally “breath”) of the earth.

In Chinese popular beliefs of proper burial, a site of a graveyard with good feng shui means it contains favorable qi of the earth, which has been nurtured by ancestors’ spirits underground and the nearby natural environment. Based on this principle, how to choose a best site to locate someone’s graveyard would be a very complex practice. Generally speaking, a good site is located on a higher position to better collect qi, and it would be ideal to have a mountain or even mountains beyond mountains on the rear of the graveyard, better with a stream flowing by. The reason why the feng shui of a family’s graveyards matters so much for the living people is because Chinese people’s believing that the site and orientation of their family ancestors’ graveyards would determine the quality of their influence on their living descendants, either bringing good or bad fortune to the living people. In addition to influencing the site of a graveyard, feng shui continues to be applied widely to contemporary Chinese people’s lives,
such as architecture design, landscape design, etc. The feng shui belief is a symbol of Chinese people’s respect for nature, that one has to be aware of one’s activities in relation to the natural surroundings.

But in Dream of Ding Village, people’s respect for nature is hard to find. For “my Father,” feng shui was just a marketing strategy to help him expand his business; for Ding villagers, the natural environment of Ding Village hardly seems to matter any more, given how they rush to cut the trees in the village to get wood for their coffins (see more in the next section). Traditional beliefs like the human-nature harmony, the balance between human body and cosmic principles, have nearly disappeared in Ding Village. Facing approaching death, many of the villagers seem to have neither extra interest nor energy to consider their current living environment—they could only struggle to live for one more day before AIDS randomly takes them away.

DISAPPEARING TREES: A LENS OF EXPLOITATION
In Dream of Ding Village, the breakdown of the school community in some way marks the beginning of deterioration of people’s lives in Ding Village: not only the school properties but also the trees in Ding Village are privatized, transforming what is common or communal property into an opportunity for profit by the lucky few. As the text observes: “Ding Village had changed, and life would never be the same.” (154) Supported by the new leadership of Ding Village, most villagers turn to focus on their own immediate interests rather than the welfare of the whole community (the education for children, the natural environment of Ding Village, etc.). The wood-cutting scene of the whole village appears in Grandpa’s dream:

As he [Grandpa] drew closer to the village, the dark night air was filled with the fresh scent of sawdust. At first, it was just a faint whiff coming from the direction of the light. Then the smell seemed to coalesce into something more solid: waves of it sweeping in from the west end of the village, rolling in from the north and south, washing in from the alleyways to the east. With it came a tide of sound: the buzz of saws slicing timber, the thud of axes chopping trees, the babble of human conversation. It reminded Grandpa of years long ago, when everyone in the village had laboured day and night smelting steel in backyard furnaces or constructing massive irrigation works11.

[...]

Grandpa shook his head and continued on his way. As he walked through the village, he saw that every tree large enough to be used as timber had been marked for demolition: there were notices pasted to every elm, honey locust, paulownia, toon and scholar tree he passed. In every lane and alleyway, in every corner of the village, he found people chopping down trees by the light of lanterns, kerosene lamps or candles. Some of the trees and exterior walls were strung with electric lights connected to long grey extension leads (known in the village as ‘rat-tail cords’) that snaked into nearby

11 These scenes refer to the Great Leap Forward (1958-1960) in PRC history, when the steel-making movement was carried out nationwide that people were even asked to make steels using their own steel products, and mass mobilization was used on building irrigation works.
houses. Nearly every other house was brightly lit, turning Ding Village into a blaze of light, as dazzling as the daytime sun. It looked as if every tree in the village had been served with an execution order. The night air filled with the ceaseless clamour of chopping and sawing, and the pungent scent of fresh-cut wood mingled with tree sap.

Ding Village seemed revived: the residents prowled the streets with hatchets and saws, searching for the trees they’d been given permission to chop down. The sick villagers had, of course, been given the trees most suitable for making coffins: the willows, cottonwoods and paulownia. But because the trees were public property and everyone was entitled to his or her share, even the healthy villagers were allowed to chop down trees. They had been given the toons, chinaberries and scholar trees, whose timber was prone to rot and insects, and so ill-suited for making coffins. But they were fine for making furniture, beds and tables and chairs that could be given to sons and daughters as wedding gifts.

[...]

Amidst the cacophony of trees being felled, Grandpa stood forlornly, remembering his dream of flowers on the plain and gold beneath the surface. (192-197)

Here, Grandpa’s dream is not just a dream: the felling of trees in Ding Village turns out to be the fact that all Ding villagers witness later. The villagers turn the dark night into the bright day by using artificial lights, which revives the whole village into a beautiful dream; but when the real natural sunlight comes and the long night dream ends, people suddenly realize how dramatically the village environment had been destroyed by themselves. They feel the change of climate without the sheltering of trees:

The trees of Ding Village disappeared overnight.

All the mature trees were gone. At first, it seems, there had been some discussion about only felling trees of a certain size, those with trunks as broad as a bucket, say. But when morning came, the villagers woke to find that even the smaller trees in and around the village were gone. Anything that had a trunk the size of the circumference of a bowl had been chopped down for timber. Discarded notices from the village party committee littered the streets like fallen leaves after a windy evening. The spring sun shone warm as usual, but without foliage or the shade of trees, the village felt scorching and unpleasant.

All the mature elms, scholar trees, paulownia, chinaberries, toons, cottonwoods and persimmon trees had been felled, leaving only saplings with trunks barely as thick as a man’s arm. Even these were scarce, as rare as wheat seedlings in an abandoned field. From the moment the sun rose, it began beating down upon the village, scorching people’s flesh. (198)

Activity: having students do some close reading of the above-mentioned two extracts from the novel that lead students to reflect on general environment issues, while paying specific

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12 For a fuller description of Grandpa’s dream of “flowers on the plain and gold beneath the surface,” see pp.79-81 and 91-93 in Dream of Ding Village.
attention to the connection between wood and coffins in a Chinese context. Students may consider the following questions:

- Have you observed trees being cut down? If so, why were they being cut down? How did the fact make you feel?
- For Ding villagers since the HIV/AIDS crisis, what is the main use of those woods?
- Who give(s) Ding villagers the permission to cut down the trees? Why would they do that?
- Pay attention to the underlined sentence in the second extract: “Discarded notices from the village party committee littered the streets like fallen leaves after a windy evening.” Who should be blamed for the destruction of trees in Ding Village, the party committee of the village Jia Genzhu and Ding Yuejin, or the other ordinary villagers?
- Do you think Ding villagers’ chopping down trees overnight is anything actually happening, or is it a fictional incident appearing in Grandpa’s dream?

The hyperbolic overnight wood-cutting scene happening in Ding Village is also a literary allegory about China’s long history of deforestation. According to Yan Lianke’s settings, Ding Village is a village near Kaifeng city and Yellow River, thus located on the Central Plain (Zhongyuan), the heartland of China and the cradle of ancient Chinese civilization. There was once considerable forest cover in the heartland of late-archaic China. However, many historical capitals of early dynasties and states of China were set on the Central Plain. Factors like the aggregation of population, the development of towns and cities, and so on all intensively required wood resources. In most places, trees had to be cut down to make space for fields. Wood was also important raw material for premodern Chinese people: timber was the main material to build houses, boats and carts, and machinery; logs were the most important pre-modern source of fuel for cooking, heating, and industrial processing (Elvin 84). In fact, wood still serves as fuels for heating and cooking in many rural areas, and important material to make wooden furniture in today’s China. Similar large-scale deforestation and exploitation of timber resources can also find its parallel in Wisconsin: Wisconsin was still covered in ‘old growth’ forest until the nineteenth century, while during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries forest was logged a lot for industries of paper, furniture, architecture, etc. [About the paper industry’s struggles today, see Peter Kendall’s report “A Warning from Wisconsin” (https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2020/07/30/wisconsin-paper-mill-shutdown-coronavirus/), also provided in the additional resources of this unit]

One of the most astonishing things about woods in Dream of Ding Village is its setting strong connections between coffin-making and wood-cutting. The genera of trees are classified into different grades, that the trees which are suitable to make a coffin are classified into higher grades than those which are not good materials for coffin-making. Moreover, the rarer a kind of tree is, the more precious the coffin made of that tree will be. Based on such grading, what kind

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13 In its narrow sense, the Central Plain covers modern-day Henan, the southern part of Hebei, the southern part of Shanxi, and the western part of Shandong province.
of tree the coffin used can show the power and wealth of a family: the better and rarer the tree used for a coffin is, it can be inferred that the more powerful and wealthier a family using that coffin can be. We have mentioned in Unit 4 that funerals in *Dream of Ding Village* become the arenas for families to compete their power and wealth; likewise, the specific wood genus for coffin-making has the same function. The new village leaders—Jia Genzhu and Ding Yuejin—consider the coffins they prepared for their younger brothers are expensive enough, which “were made of four-inch thick planks of paulownia wood, with three-inch-thick planks of cedar on either end.” (265) However, they would never imagine that “my Father” can prepare much more luxurious coffins for his younger brother and his brother’s wife, a pair of his-and-her caskets made of gingko, an extremely rare and expensive timber:

> With the spread of the fever, death had become commonplace on the plain. People died like falling leaves, like lamps being extinguished. Timber was in short supply, and the dead needed more coffins as badly as the living needed houses. Paulownia trees were as scarce as silver, and cedar as precious as gold. But the coffins my father had delivered were not made from paulownia or cedar, but from the finest gingko. Uncle’s coffin was slightly larger, and it even had a name: the Golden Casket. It was made from three-inch-thick planks cut from a 1,000-year-old gingko tree. The grain was flawless, the wood soft to the touch but very solid, perfect for carving or painting on. (266)

The scarcity of trees, especially the lack of good mature trees to make coffins, has turned trees into a kind of currency between powerful people to seek interests for themselves or their own families: paulownia trees are like silver, cedar are like gold, and gingko are much more valuable than gold. However, if we take a look at the history of trees in China, we would find that how a specific tree becomes so rare and precious is not a natural process, but more an anthropogenic (human-caused) one. The rarity of a gingko tree is related to its age: the older the tree is, the rarer the tree would be—so the 1,000-year-old ginkgo tree used for Uncle’s coffin in the novel should be extremely valuable. Though the growth speeds of different species of trees are not the same, it would take years, decades, and even hundreds or a thousand years for a small tree to become a valuable mature tree. Despite people could cultivate new trees, the natural climate of the Central Plain in China would not allow trees to grow as fast as trees in tropical areas: the weather of Henan province regularly drops below freezing in the winter; two-thirds or more of the precipitation occurs during the summer, and the amount varies sharply from one year to the next (Elvin 42). Wide-range deforestation without planting enough new trees in time could turn a village into a desert—the change of Ding Village can be viewed as such a tragedy resulting from over-exploitation.

The disappearance of big trees in Ding Village is also a modern allegory indicating the rapid industrialization and urbanization that has been intensifying since the early 1990s, and the consequent decline of agrarian production in many rural villages in China. Though in the novel the fast-growing death caused by AIDS is the main reason to account for Ding Village’s finally becoming a wasteland without people, urbanization is also a nonignorable factor. On the one hand, the rapid development of cities attract many rural people to leave their hometown; on the other hand, cities are absorbing the resources of the countryside and leaving the latter with
little to live on. Therefore, “my Father,” despite having the richest house on the newest street of Ding Village, decides to move his whole family to the city. The reason Father gives is that Ding Village no longer looks like a village; but the deeper reason could be his sucking the Ding Village dry through his various businesses, and he is thereby hated by every Ding villager. Father and other governmental higher-ups in the novel represent the city’s plundering the resources of the countryside: ruining the countryside through such exploitation, the beneficiaries run away from the uninhabitable village and moved to a big city, taking away the great wealth that they have earned and might continue to earn through exploiting the countryside. Yan Lianke recalled in a public speech that his hometown used to be full of poetic mountains, rivers, and peach orchards; but now most rivers, peach orchards, and ponds had disappeared due to the industrialization and urbanization during the reform era. As most resources of Ding Village have been exploited by the cities, Ding villagers have to turn to the local trees for their coffin material.

But when the local trees are gone and the consequent extreme natural disasters destroy the farmland as well, what can Ding villagers count on for livings in the future? Till the ending of Dream of Ding Village, the novel could not offer a feasible solution in reality but has to turn to the ancient Chinese legend to bring some hope—in Grandpa’s dream, new human beings are created by the legendary Chinese goddess Nü Wa on the barren Central Plain (341). The environment of Ding Village has been totally destroyed in the factual world that Grandpa lives, and only building a new village with new people might help revive the land. Such an unrealistic solution could bring no hope but despair—while on the other hand, it also sounds a heavy alarm against overexploiting nature.

WHY HIV/AIDS EPIDEMIC HAPPENS: AN ECOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Why would the HIV/AIDS crisis happen in Ding Village? We have addressed some reasons in previous units, including epidemiological and economic factors. In this section, we will turn to another important factor—the ecological factor, which is embodied by the complex internal connections between blood-collecting and the natural world in Dream of Ding Village.

The Power of Metaphor: Blood as Resource

Ding villagers are not willing to sell their blood in the very beginning—both the former village head Li Sanren and Grandpa are too surprised to respond when they hear the higher-up’s command. In order to get villagers to join in blood-collection, the higher-ups broadcast a metaphor which should be easy for farmers to understand: “blood is like a natural spring, the more you take, the more it flows.” (30) Grandpa then turns this metaphor into a visible allegory:

Dutifully, the villagers followed Grandpa to the riverbed east of the village. […]

When Grandpa reached the riverbed, he searched around for a moist patch of sand, rubbed it between his hands and began to dig a small hole. Before long, the hole was half-filled with water. Grandpa produced a chipped ceramic bowl and began ladling the water from the hole and pouring it on to the sand. Again and again he ladled, pouring one bowl of water after another on the sand. Just as if it seemed that the hole had gone
dry, Grandpa paused. In a matter of moments, the water began to seep in, and the hole was once again full of water.

The more water he took, the more it flowed. It was just like the director had said.
Grandpa threw down the bowl on the sand and dusted off his hands.
‘Did you see that?’ he asked, glancing around at the villagers. ‘Water never runs dry. The more you take, the more it flows.’

He raised his voice. ‘It’s the same with blood. Blood always replenishes itself. The more you take, the more it flows.’

[...]

The director, [...] looked first at Grandpa and then at the villagers. ‘Do you understand now?’ he barked. ‘Water never runs dry, and you can never sell too much blood. Blood is like spring water. That’s just basic science.’ (30-31)

Such blood-spring metaphor turns out to be working well among Ding villagers: as farmers, the spring out of the dry land is so visible and convincing that it becomes such an attractive reason to persuade people into believing that selling-blood will bring them benefits without any risk.

The power of the blood-spring metaphor here is worth our tension. Why would such a metaphor be so effective? What role does nature play in rural people’s minds? For rural Chinese people, natural resources such as lands, and natural conditions such as climates, are always crucial to their lives. In Dream of Ding Village, we can find that the four seasons—spring, summer, autumn, winter—seem to be not only natural seasons, but are closely related to life and death:

[...] In the silent shades of autumn, the village has withered, along with its people. They shrink and wither in tandem with the days, like corpses buried underground.

The grass upon the plain has turned brittle and dry. The trees are all bare; the crops have withered. The villagers are shrunken inside their homes, never to emerge again. (7)

Winter and summer had always been seasons of death, when freezing-cold temperatures or sweltering heat claimed the most sick and elderly lives. Old-timers on the plain said that all Qing dynasty emperors had died either in the depths of winter or the height of summer. But for those in Ding Village, those already sick with the fever, this would be the summer that they died. (283)

Beginning with the season of autumn when the Ding Village was “choked by death” (7), the chronological time in the novel comes to summer which became one of the seasons of death near the ending, and finally ends with autumn again when all the living people were either passed away or moved away from Ding Village (228-341). The same season—autumn—came, while the situation of Ding Village had completely changed. Natural seasons here not only function as the mark of the time inside the novel, but possess more metaphorical meanings: in traditional Chinese culture, the spring and summer are seasons of yang (literally the “sunny side,” which has being pure, free moving, and active as its features), while autumn and winter are seasons of yin (literally the “shady side,” which has being impure, inert, and passive as its
features). [For how the four seasons—spring, summer, autumn, and winter—are connected with the yin-yang dualistic philosophy, see the handout “The Four Seasons”] In other words, spring is when new lives emerge, summer is when lives keep growing, while autumn is when lives start to wane and winter is when many lives become dormant or even died.

Why would spring and summer be the seasons of yang, while autumn and winter be the seasons of yin? Such concepts do have their material foundation. They are shaped by China’s agrarian tradition – which had been the main way to develop Chinese economy since antiquity until the 1970s, when the contribution of industry to the national economy started to surpass agriculture. In other words, China used to be an agrarian country for thousands of years. For farmers, seasons have heavy impacts on agrarian production: in most places of Chinese civilization, spring and summer are when crops sprout and grow, while autumn is the time to harvest, and winter is the time to let the land rest. Therefore, spring and summer are seasons indicating vitality and life, while autumn and winter are seasons indicating decline and death of lives.

Back to Grandpa’s comparing blood to spring water, the connection between blood and spring water shown by Grandpa is not just a metaphorical one, but also a “scientific” one. According to the director, blood reproduction and spring water follow the same natural law, that they would be continuously and inexhaustibly self-reproducing; and if that is the case, why not make use of our own blood and make money from it? It can be found that blood here also becomes an extractable resource: just as Ding villagers exploit the timber resources of Ding Village, the blood is also something that they could exploit. But unlike trees which grow relatively slow, blood replenishes more quickly. As the novel shows, in the blood-selling trend in the 1990s Henan province, the blood-selling intervals required by the official local blood banks were as the following:

Your card stipulated how often you were allowed to sell your blood. Fortunately for the villagers, most were allowed to sell blood once a month. Some villagers between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five—by virtue of their youth and good health—were even allowed to sell one vial of blood every fortnight. A few were limited to once every two or three months. (41)

The time intervals between blood-selling here are quite medically scientific in fact. As we have already discussed in Unit 3, the type of blood collection popular in Henan province in the 1990s was mainly the plasma donation, which only collected plasma while returned the red blood cells and platelets to the blood-seller [See more in the “Plasma Economy in Henan province” part under the section “Post-socialist Chinese society: Bottom-up View” in Unit 3]. According to the information provided by American Red Cross, an eligible donor can donate every 28 days, up to 13 times per year (American Red Cross, “AB Elite Plasma Donation”); and the selling frequency followed by the official blood banks shown in Dream of Ding Village takes the same rule. The counsels offered by official doctors on how to better replenish one’s blood through food and rest shown in the following extract are also scientific, as sugar water could help recover one’s blood pressure and good rest could help blood to replenish faster:
Doctors advised the villagers to drink sugar-water after having their blood drawn. Soon all of the local shops had sold out of sugar, and people had to order supplies from other counties and provinces.

Doctors counselled the villagers to take several days of bed rest after having blood drawn. So, on sunny days, the streets, alleyways, courtyards and doorways were crowded with villagers lounging on rattan chairs, wooden beds and cots. (40)

In this sense, blood is like crops, and the human body is akin to farmland. The production and harvest of blood follows a rotation similar to planting crops: to grow, harvest, wait and rest, and finally regrow, starting a new circulation. Doctors’ advices on replenishing one’s blood and the required time intervals, together with the amount of plasma-collection limited to 500cc one time per person (88) which followed the China’s regulations on blood donation today, should have kept the ecosystem of human body in good function, as well as made the blood-farming an ecologically sustainable work. However, the blood-farming in Ding Village turned out to be an actual unsustainable one: an infectious deadly disease—HIV/AIDS—began to spread in Ding Village furtively, which badly impaired many villagers’ physical health.

Appendix: Metaphorical Reading of Spring/Water

Nature has penetrated into Chinese people’s thinking patterns—in major Chinese traditions like Confucianism, natural things are usually used as metaphors to expound the issues of human society. Here is another metaphorical use of spring/water, where two Confucians named Gaozi and Mencius find themselves arguing over the moral status of human nature—whether humans are intrinsically good, neutral (like a blank slate), or even bad (and thus in need of disciplining):

Gaozi said, ‘Nature [nature here refers to human nature rather than environmental nature] is like a bubbling spring. If you make a channel for it to the east, then it will flow eastward. If you make a channel for it to the west, then it will flow westward. Human nature is not biased toward good or bad; it is like water which is not biased toward east or west.’

Mencius said, ‘Water certainly is not partial to east or west, but is it not partial to above and below? Human nature being good is like water going downwards. Among people, there are none who have [as their nature] not being good; of water there is none which does not descend.” (qtd. Allen 1997, 42)

By comparing human nature to spring/water, both Gaozi and Mencius pick up things from the natural world as tropes while providing different explanations based on their tropes. Why could such a metaphor help explain human nature? The reason lies in people’s belief in the validity of laws of nature: as the laws of nature should be undoubted, the person who can provide a more convincing connection between human nature and the laws of spring/water will win in this debate.
Activity: Asking students about whose metaphor sounds more convincing to them can help students understand the power of Grandpa’s metaphor better in our reading of the novel.

Invisibility of HIV/AIDS: Complexity of Human-nature Interconnections
Why would such an epidemic happen? In addition to the power of agrarian metaphor, the complexity and invisibility of human-environment interrelations in modern society provide deeper reasons to account for the HIV/AIDS crisis in Ding Village. Ding villagers had little knowledge for the new disease—which can be learned from their superstition in traditional Chinese herbs which were not proved to be scientific effective to treat AIDS (see more in Unit 4); and from their naming the HIV/AIDS as “fever,” which was so mysterious and scary to the villagers as it looked like a normal fever but was actually not the same with a normal fever, but a much more lethal disease. Ding villagers also knew nothing about the transmission modes of HIV/AIDS among people:

The early days of winter brought another death to the village, this time a woman who had been infected despite never having sold a drop of blood. Wu Xiangzhi was only thirty when she died, and barely twenty-one when she’d married Ding Yuejin, a relative of ours. Wu Xiangzhi was a delicate thing, a timid sort of girl who fainted at the sight of blood. For this reason, her husband had always pampered her.

‘I’d rather die than let my wife sell blood,’ he’d say. ‘I’d sooner sell all the blood in my veins than let my woman get involved in such a dirty trade.’ Yet the husband who had sold his blood was still alive and well, while his wife was dead in her grave. Several years earlier they had lost a baby daughter to the fever, an infant who Wu Xiangzhi had nursed. The villagers could scarcely believe it. Was this the way the fever spread, was this how whole families got infected?

Fear and uncertainty brought more people flooding into the school. [...] (62)

Ding villagers were convinced that the disease had much connection with selling blood and the unsanitary process of collecting blood, but they could not understand how people who had never sold their blood could get infected. Witnessing Wu Xiangzhi and her daughter’s deaths, villagers were afraid that simply touching the HIV/AIDS patients or eating with those patients could be dangerous. Such fear quickly led to discrimination and alienation among infected and uninfected family members. But if one had some basic scientific knowledge of HIV/AIDS, one should know that HIV spreads mainly through sexual congress (which accounts for Wu Xiangzhi’s getting infected), sharing needles, blood transfusions, and during pregnancy or delivery or through breast-feeding (which accounts for Wu Xiangzhi’s baby daughter’s getting infected). In other words, one would not catch HIV/AIDS by hugging, kissing, or shaking hands with someone who has the virus.

Lacking the elementary knowledge of HIV/AIDS thereby put the human body at high risk. Ding villagers’ ignorance of HIV/AIDS represents a common situation of a high risk modern human society bearing more and more complex tensions with the environment:
 [...] the existence of distribution of risks and hazards are mediated on principle through argument. That which impairs health or destroys nature is not recognizable to one’s own feeling or eye, and even where it is seemingly in plain view, qualified expert judgment is still required to determine it ‘objectively’. Many of the newer risks (nuclear or chemical contaminations, pollutants in foodstuffs, diseases of civilization) completely escape human powers of direct perception. The focus is more and more on hazards which are neither visible nor perceptible to the victims; hazards that in some cases may not even take effect within the lifespans of those affected, but instead during those of their children; hazards in any case that require the ‘sensory organs’ of science— theories, experiments, measuring instruments—in order to become visible or interpretable as hazards at all. (Beck 27; italics in original)

Without the “‘sensory organs’ of science” that Ulrich Beck asserts, Ding villagers had no idea that the assumed sustainable blood farming was actually of high unexpected risks. But why are Ding villagers lacking the general knowledge of HIV/AIDS? In the 1990s China which was just moving further on the route of reforming and opening to the world, HIV/AIDS was a new imported epidemic, and the origin of HIV/AIDS remained unknown not only for the general public, but even for the medical experts. The same situation is also true in the recent Covid-19 pandemic, that its origin remains an unsolved mystery around the world. More and more epidemics/pandemics in the modern world in some way show the complexity of human-nature interconnectedness: how humans’ behaviors could impact nature have become so complex in modern societies that we do not know where the next great danger for human beings is, like we could not predict the appearance of the deadly new virus Covid-19.

When earning a lot of money from selling blood, Ding villagers are also paying a price for the complexity and unpredictability of human-nature interactions. It turns out that their physical bodies have gradually been domesticated and changed by blood farming. Take the previous Village Mayor Li Sanren as an example, when he sold his blood more and more frequently, his body also felt different: “Towards the end, if he had gone too long without selling blood, his veins would begin to feel swollen. It was as if they were bursting with blood. If the blood wasn’t siphoned out it would begin to seep from his pores.” (83-84) This description shows one’s intricate corporeal connections to the environment: similar to that the climate change of Ding Village resulted from the excessive exploitation of timber resources, one’s body would also be heavily influenced and even recast by the tensions between a modernizing society and nature—that more and more unknown diseases could keep appearing and spreading and weakening human beings, like all the previous and current pandemics—and in Dream of Ding Village, AIDS becomes the most dreadful exposure of the crisis of modern human-nature relations.

WORK CITED

ASSIGNMENTS, ACTIVITIES & PROJECT IDEAS

● Encourage students to interview an expert from their local communities who works on environmental issues, such as climate change, gardening, farming, landscape designing, etc. (Alternatively, a member of the Red Cross!)
  o Prepare questions: Each student could list some questions that they would like to ask the expert. The whole class can then be divided into several groups and each group decides the most interesting one or two questions they want to interview the speaker.
  o Each group chooses someone to do the interview, and form a new group of these students. This new group will conduct an interview with the expert.
  o The interview group makes an in-class presentation to share their interviewing experience; Q & A sections can be included. Other students write a short essay (200-400 words) on what they have learned, what they find interesting or inspiring, etc.
  o Or: If possible, invite the expert to visit class remotely in order to share their ideas directly with students. Collect questions from students in advance and invite the expert to respond.

● Have students think of their own school life. Is there anything that they feel is not environmentally friendly? For example, is there too much food waste, or are the lights left on all night? Is there too much paper waste? Organize a discussion section in class and encourage students to share their thoughts on conservation and offer suggestions.
7. DREAMS AND GHOSTS: EXPLORING NARRATIVE DEVICES

OBJECTIVES

- To shift perspective from the what of the story (i.e. themes and plot) to the how of its telling (i.e. consideration of narrative techniques);
- To explore the importance of dreams and ghost narrators as two main narrative devices in *Dream of Ding Village*, with an emphasis on the ways in which these two devices interact with each other;
- To compare and contrast dreams as a literary device in traditional Chinese literature and Yan Lianke’s other novels;
- To consider how *Dream of Ding Village*’s narrative voice impacts the politics, ethics, and overall “feel” of the story.

HANDOUTS

- “189. SI GAN,” *Classic of Poetry*
- “Aesthetic distance, narrator, person, viewpoint,” *A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*

PREPARATORY & RECOMMENDED READING


ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

*Dreams:*


*Narrative:*


UNIT ORGANIZATION

This unit includes five sections: “Opening Questions”; “From Psychology to Literature: Features of Dreams”; “Dreams as a Literary Device: Comparative Readings,” which includes three subsections: “Encoding Prophecies via Dreams,” “Hallucination or Reality?”, and “Dreams as
OPENING QUESTIONS: CONSIDERING THE NARRATOR

In Unit 2, we mention that Yan Lianke is quite experimental with the form of his novels. In this unit, we will address his novelistic experimentations in *Dream of Ding Village*. The following set of questions may help get into the formal and narrative techniques of the novel by recalling specific features.

- Did you notice the prevalence of italics in the pages of the novel? What do they signify? *To draw a distinction between Grandpa’s dreams and the fictional reality outside Grandpa’s dreams.*
- What is the relationship between the italicized parts and the non-italicized text? Can Grandpa’s dream be totally separated from the reality outside his dreams? Why or why not? Can you identify an example to support your opinion? *For example, recall the “Disappearing Trees” section in Unit 6, which provides extracts of Grandpa’s dream about the tree-cutting scenes happening in the village that is hard to distinguish from Ding Village’s reality. We will address further on this question in the following sections, as it is crucial for understanding the relationship between fiction and reality.*
- Overall, who tells us the story? What do we know about the narrator? *Ding Xiaoqiang, a twelve-year-old boy who has been poisoned to death in the beginning of the novel.*
- What effects on the reader does the novel’s choice of a deceased boy as narrator have? Is the boy able—or interested—in telling the whole story? Is there anywhere in the novel that makes you feel this narrator’s voice is biased, intentionally leaving things out, or otherwise unreliable? Or where it’s difficult to believe that a twelve-year-old boy could talk that way?
- How might the story feel different if told explicitly from the author’s perspective instead? Or from that of a neutral narrator?
- Have you read any other novels in American literature that use a dead person’s voice, or a child’s voice to tell the whole story? If yes, why did the writer use such a narrator?

FROM PSYCHOLOGY TO LITERATURE: FEATURES OF DREAMS

The early psychologist, Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), is famous for arguing that an individual’s dreams can represent unconscious or repressed truths. Although the technique is no longer commonly used in psychology, Freud’s work popularized dream interpretation in a broader way, inspiring countless stories and novels about dreaming. As he notes of dreams:

1. Dreams are thoughts-in-pictures, and their “language” is a visual-perceptual one;
2. Dreams are alien to our own ego in that they seem to happen to us, rather than being something that we ourselves create;
3. Dreams are hallucinatory, that in most situations, until the moment at which we awaken, we believe what we are imagining really is happening;
4. Dreams are dramatized, that they have plots, characters, and settings, and move from beginnings, middles, and ends. In this sense, they appear analogous to plays or movies, passing before the mind’s eye in sleep;
5. Dreams portray different moral standards than those characteristics of wakefulness. One may yield readily to temptations strongly resisted by the waking mind;
6. The associative processes of the state of sleep seem more fluid than those of wakefulness. Things can be connected loosely rather than logically, and are easily influenced by nearby environments. (adapted from Foulkes 31-32)

These descriptions of the features of dreams are helpful for understanding the characteristics of dreams depicted in literature. In some way, dreams in literary works share the same features as the psychological/biological dreams of humans. In Dream of Ding Village, the first and fourth features—that our dreams are usually visual-perceptual and quite dramatized—are easily found in Grandma’s dreams, which frequently feature conversations, vivid scenes with abundant details, and various descriptions of physical sensations. The second feature is embodied by the predictive functions of dreams in literature, which builds upon the common belief that dreams are a sign of what might happen to us. [See more about the predictive function of dreams in literary works in the next section of this unit] And there is also a good example in Dream of Ding Village of the sixth feature (one’s dreams can be easily influenced by his/her sleeping surroundings), that Grandpa’s sleeping circumstances are transformed into his dream scenes:

\[
\text{Sitting in the middle of the road and staring at the gold that had slipped from his grasp, Li Sanren’s little grandson began to cry. Thinking that he ought to help the boy, Grandpa walked over and stretched out his arm . . . and in that moment . . .}
\]

The dream ended. Grandpa was awake.
It was Li Sanren, standing beside his bed, who had woken him.
[...]
Grandpa noticed that his arm was lying on top of his quilt, rather than tucked warmly underneath. It was the same outstretched arm he had offered to Li Sanren’s little grandson. He could remember the scene vividly, he could still see it . . . he could see . . . (92-93, italics in original)

Yet discussing the parallels between these facets of dream-experience, and, on the other hand, their expression in Dream of Ding Village, is not to stress how well the literary works mimic our real life. Rather, building on the discussion of connections between dreams in real experience and in literature, we want to focus further on what kinds of aesthetic effects such similarities can bring to literary works.
One of the most important effects is to blur the boundaries between reality and dreams. The third feature (that we believe what happens in our dreams to be real happening to us before we wake up) and fourth feature (that dreams so dramatized that they look like fictional plays or movies) are paradoxical, because the dramatic feature of dreams should suffice to make the dreamer realize those things they “experience” is not happening in real life. But this paradox provides an inspiring cue to understand one’s confusion over whether the things in dreams are true or not: though the dramatized feature of dreams already indicates its fictionality (feature four), the dreamer would not be able to realize s/he is dreaming until s/he awakens (feature three). In other words, a dreamer could hardly distinguish the boundaries between reality and a dream.

Confusion over the boundaries between dreams and reality can be widely found in different cultures. In the Chinese tradition, one of the most well-known examples is raised by the Daoist philosopher, Zhuang Zhou (4th century BCE). Speaking of himself in the third-person, Zhuang Zhou recounts that he once dreamed himself being a butterfly; but when he waked up, “he didn’t know if he were Zhuang Zhou who had dreamed he was a butterfly or a butterfly dreaming he was Zhuang Zhou” (Watson trans., the last entry in the “Discussion on Making All things Equal”). The wavering boundary between the condition of waking and dreaming shown here is actually the most crucial and also confusing thing to think about. Are the things that happen in waking life always real and true? Are things happening in one’s dream necessarily unreal? How does one know if s/he is actually awake or not? If these questions are too metaphysical or abstract, a more recent example like the film Inception (2010) could provide a more concrete vision, in which whether one is in dream or the real life is called into questions again and again.

The fluidity between dreams and real life complicates our readings of dreams in a novel. If we agree with Freud’s psychological studies, dreams in most situations should be illusionary; however, in Dream of Ding Village, many of the actual events happening in Ding Village are revealed through Grandpa’s dreams. Dreams can even tell us something about the deeper and invisible reality that underlies events:

It was after midnight when Grandpa went to bed. Images of blood-selling filled his dreams. He saw plainly the course of the fever: its causes and effects. He felt the pulse and flow of the blood-selling business and blood-wealth. Cause and effect were clear: what you plant in spring, you harvest in the autumn. You reap what you sow.

[...]
Each night before bedtime, Grandpa put his house in order. And, each night, his dreams were as neat and orderly as the homework of a diligent student.

In his dreams, he saw so clearly the events that had led to the blood-selling. In his dreams, he finally understood. (32-33, italics in original)

But why are dreams able to reveal the deep truth of life in this novel? Is it because dreams can be the place for oracles to show us the truth, akin to a religious story? Why does Grandpa better understand the “causes and effects” of the “fever” crisis of Ding Village in his dreams?
rather than when he is awake? To figure out these questions, we need to look more into the narrative functions of dreams.

DREAMS AS A LITERARY DEVICE: COMPARATIVE READINGS

Encoding Prophecies via Dreams
José Arcadio Buendía dreamed that night that right there a noisy city with houses having mirror walls rose up. He asked what city it was and they answered him with a name that he had never heard, that had no meaning at all, but that had a supernatural echo in his dream: Macondo. On the following day he convinced his men that they would never find the sea. He ordered them to cut down the trees to make a clearing beside the river, at the coolest spot on the bank, and there they founded the village.

José Arcadio Buendía did not succeed in deciphering the dream of houses with mirror walls until the day he discovered ice. Then he thought he understood its deep meaning. He thought that in the near future they would be able to manufacture blocks of ice on a large scale from such a common material as water and with them build the new houses of the village. Macondo would no longer be a burning place, where the hinges and door knockers twisted with the heat, but would be changed into a wintry city.

( Márquez, One Hundred Years of Solitude)

In Márquez’s well-known magical realism novel One Hundred Years of Solitude (1967), dreams show the strong power of predicting and thereby occupy important positions in the history of the fictional city Macondo. As shown in the above extract: they give birth to the town Macondo. The settlement’s patriarch Buendía dreams about a great town and learns its name from his dream, so that when he wakes up, he believes this dream is an oracle that is shown to him intentionally—that not only the town should be founded, but that it will flourish through ice production.

Using dreams to encode prophecies is not unique to the magical realism works in postcolonial Latin American literature. In Chinese literature, dreams are also commonly perceived as the predictions about the future. In China’s oldest anthology of verse, Shijing (Classic of Poetry), compiled between the 11th and 7th centuries BCE, dreams are usually associated with the aristocracy: a lord reports his dream, and a diviner decipher it, explaining how each metaphor symbolizes a different kind of future. For example, one poem reads:

May he sleep and awake,
[Saying] ‘Divine for me my dreams.
What dreams are lucky?
They have been of bears and grisly bears;
They have been of cobras and [other] serpents.’

14 “He,” namely “the noble lord” in previous verses of this poem. [For the original Chinese version and English translation of the whole poem, see the handout “189. SI GAN”]
The chief diviner will divine them.  
The bears and grisly bears,  
Are the auspicious intimations of sons.  
The cobras and [other] serpents,  
Are the auspicious intimations of daughters. (Legge trans., “189. Si Gan”)

The interpreter of the lord’s dream is worth notice—he is a diviner, someone who is believed to be connected to Heaven and its deities. The interpretation of the dream thereby lies somewhere outside the dreamer, pointing to the divine power that shapes the future. In later Chinese dynasties, people’s beliefs in the predictive power of dreams were strengthened by the Daoist concept of the true cosmic law (Dao/way) along with the Buddhist concept of destiny [see more about Daoism and Buddhism in Unit 4 and Unit 6].

The later Chinese novel, one of the masterworks of world literature, Cao Xueqin’s (ca.1715-1763) Dream of the Red Chamber, also features dreams to forebode the future of the major characters in that book. As presented in the original Chinese title, “dream” is the keyword of the novel. The youthful protagonist Jia Baoyu, once falls asleep in the boudoir of a female relative and has a dream. In his dream, he enters into a divine realm, where a goddess tries to hint the future fate of his female companions through emblems, verses, and paintings. But Baoyu is yet too young to decipher those cues—he will gradually learn the meanings of this dream when he gains far greater experience.

In all the above-mentioned literary dreams, dreams provide some cues about the future; while the future is always implied in an intransparent way, which requires the dreamer’s later life experiences or an agent of the divine to interpret the real meaning of those dreams. The preordained future brings a mysterious “feeling” to the whole story, and makes telling whether an event is real or in dreams more difficult: the dreams can tell the reality of future, while the illusionary feature of dreams can also make the implied future reality look unrealistic.

**Hallucination or Reality?**

As we have mentioned above, the predictive function of dreams in some way blurs the distinctions between reality and illusions. In Márquez’s One Hundred Years of Solitude, despite the dreamed town Macondo has been founded since Buendía’s dream, after reading the whole story, we can find that Macondo is actually a place on no map and deeply rooted in the past. In some way, though being turned from fantasy to the “reality” in the novel level, it is hard to tell whether Macondo is a “real” town inhabited by so many characters, or it is still just a dream existing nowhere in the reality that Buendía lives except in the intangible memories. A similar problem also exists in Cao Xueqin’s Dream of the Red Chamber: the lesson that a dream purports to teach concerning the dreamlike impermanence of life and fortune cannot be quickly learned, for when Jia Baoyu wakes from that immediate dream, the waking reality he encounters may be for many years itself a dream, the “golden days” (Yu 138).
If life turns out to be dreamlike while dreams can also look lifelike, what might happen when people mix up dreams and reality and thus change their behaviors? In another novel *The Day the Sun Died* (*Rixi*, Chinese 2015, English translation 2019), Yan Lianke engages such confusion throughout the whole novel. The novel tells of a strange “infectious” disease—sleepwalking, or, to translate literally from the Chinese, “dreamwalking.” When people fall into dreamwalking one after another and start to behave abnormally, the whole community is gradually driven into chaos. A dreamwalker might take very different behaviors from the times when s/he is awake:

“If it hadn’t been for the somnambulism, who would have ever known that Ma Huzi was killed by his own wife, or that she was even capable of something like this? Normally, she appeared to be so good and weak, so docile and obedient, so diligent and tolerant. The second year after they got married, Ma Huzi became paralyzed, so she began caring for him, and did so for the next twelve years. But, in the end, he died at her hands. Fortunately, there had been this night of somnambulism—a once-in-a-century occurrence. While dreamwalking, she had turned herself in and confessed the truth. Had it not been for this somnambulism, who would have ever learned the truth of what happened? She herself said that it is actually better when people are dreaming, because that way they are able to do everything they wanted to do during the day, when they are awake. ‘If it had not been for this night of somnambulism, even if you killed me a hundred or a thousand times, I would never have admitted that I murdered my own husband.’

“It was very odd that she said this while dreamwalking. She added, ‘I have turned myself in, but you mustn’t wake me—because if you do, I’ll simply deny everything. Instead, you must consider who will look after my children now that I have confessed.’

“She did indeed say this. It was all very odd.

“It was exceedingly odd that even while asleep she was nevertheless aware that she was asleep and that she was dreamwalking. So, was it indeed possible for people who are asleep to know that they are sleeping? And to instruct people, while they are sleeping, not to wake them up?” (Yan, Book 7, “2.(3:11-3:31)”)

In this extract, dreams provide people with opportunities to do some “brave” things that they would not dare to do when they are awake. Moreover, dreams turn out to reveal the truth underlying the superficial: in this case, the woman who appears to be “so good and weak, so docile and obedient, so diligent and tolerant” is actually the murder of her disabled husband. But still, the irony lies in the form of dreaming: it leaves readers a question, that since dreams are always hallucinatory, how one could tell whether the woman’s confession in her dreamwalking is true or not. In *Dream of Ding Village*, such irony becomes the main concern of the novel: despite Grandpa’s dreams keep proving themselves to be the reality by being the prediction of the future, the revelation of the past, and the supplement to the present, the form of dreaming itself still calls the validity of the events shown in dreams into question.

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15 Somnambulism, namely an abnormal condition of sleep in which motor acts (as walking) are performed; in this novel, it refers to the infectious dreamwalking of many of the villagers.
**Dreams as Hope**

Dreams are not only the oracles happening on someone that come from some superhuman powers. Literally, the word *dream* (in English or Chinese, *meng 梦*) also offers a meaning of hope: it expresses one’s wish to have or achieve something, often something that is difficult to realize. The hope that dreams can express make dreams become a figure for desire, which expresses an interest in possible worlds beyond the present. In most cultures, *dream* expresses a common human interest in imagining alternate spaces and temporalities (Chan 5).

The function of delivering prophecy and the meaning of wishes that dreams have are interrelated: like in the above-mentioned *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and Shijing (Classic of Poetry), the auspicious signs (in the dream interpreter’s understandings) delivered by dreams give hope to one’s life through representing or imagining a desirable future. Though the dreams in *Dream of the Red Chamber* turn out to be indicating tragedies befalling on a family, the whole story can be viewed as possessing some hope for the nation’s future, a figural “big dream” by the Chinese nation about coming of age, freedom (especially for women) from traditional society, and about achieving a more poetic life and world (Liu 13).

Dreams’ function as an outlook for an alternative better world inspires us to reflect on *Dream of Ding Village* again. What is the big picture lying underneath the similar title structure “Dream of …”? Is it also indicating something hopeful for Ding Village despite all the crises, personal and societal and environmental, that have happened? In the following section, we will take these questions into analysing the narrative functions of dreams in this specific novel.

**NARRATIVE FUNCTIONS OF DREAMS IN DREAM OF DING VILLAGE**

**Dreams from Genesis: Prophecy & Shuffled Narrative Timings**

Now that we have established a comparative lens for thinking about dreams and literature, let us return to *Dream of Ding Village*. The novel in fact opens with its own comparative frame in the form of three separate dreams drawn from the Book of Genesis:

The Cupbearer’s Dream

*In my dream, behold, a vine was before me; and in the vine there were three branches and it was as though it budded, and her blossoms shot forth; and the clusters thereof brought forth ripe grapes: And Pharaoh’s cup was in my hand; and I took the grapes, and pressed them into Pharaoh’s cup, and I gave the cup into Pharaoh’s hand.*

The Baker’s Dream

*I also was in my dream, and, behold, I had three white baskets on my head; and in the uppermost basket there was all manner of bakemeats for Pharaoh, and the birds did eat them out of the basket upon my head.*
The Pharaoh’s Dream

Pharaoh dreamed: and, behold, he stood by the river. And, behold, there came up out of the river seven well-favoured kine and fat-fleshed, and they fed in a meadow. And behold, seven other kine came up after them out of the river, ill-favoured and lean-fleshed; and stood by the other kine upon the brink of the river. And the ill-favoured and lean-fleshed kine did eat up the seven well-favoured and fat kine. So Pharaoh awoke. And he slept and dreamed the second time; and behold, seven ears of corn came up upon one stalk, rank and good. And behold, seven thin ears and blasted with the east wind sprung up after them. And the seven thin ears devoured the seven rank and full ears. And Pharaoh awoke, and behold, it was a dream. (3, italics in original)

These three dreams are not by characters in the story but instead are drawn from the Old Testament. [For the whole story related to these three dreams, see the handout “Genesis 40-41”] In the original story where these three dreams come from, there is a crucial interpreter—Joseph, who is the spirit of God and thereby can interpret the real meaning of each person’s dream, which turns out to be the prediction of the person’s future. What does Yan Lianke mean by combining the three dreams from Genesis and putting them in the beginning of the whole novel? What is the relationship between these dreams and the others depicted in Dream of Ding Village?

Departing from these three biblical dreams, Yan Lianke moves directly to the story of Ding Village. In the whole book (excepting Volume One), there is only one dreamer: Grandpa Ding Shuiyang. Like the three dreams in Genesis which are predictions about people’s different futures, Grandpa’s dreams are also predictive in some way:

The fever hid in blood; Grandpa hid in dreams.
The fever loved its blood; Grandpa loved his dreams.

Grandpa dreamed most every night. For the last three nights, he’d had the same dream: the cities he’d visited – Kaifeng and Wei county, with their underground networks of pipes like cobwebs – running thick with blood. And from the cracks and curvatures of pipes, from the l-bends and the u-bends, blood spurts like water. A fountain of brackish rain sprays the air; a bright-red assault on the senses. And there, upon the plain, he saw the wells and rivers all turned red, rancid with the stench of blood. In every city and every township, doctors wept as the fever spread. But on the streets of Ding Village, one lone doctor sat and laughed. [...] And when the dream had ended, the county bigwigs – the higher-ups – summoned Grandpa for a meeting. Since Ding Village no longer had a mayor, it was left to Grandpa to go instead. He returned to the village with an understanding of certain facts, like a series of links in a chain. (8, italics in original)

Dreams play a two-fold role in this extract. On the one hand, they picture the large-scale blood-selling past of Ding Village in a metaphorical way, which can be viewed as flashbacks of what Ding Village had encountered before the HIV/AIDS outbursts. On the other hand, these dreams are also predictive, as they indicate that what Grandpa will learn soon is related to the pipes full
of blood in his dreams—Grandpa is going to learn that the mysterious “fever” is actually attributed to the blood-selling of the last ten years. This two-fold role of dreams is also important for the whole novel: Grandpa’s dreams, which are sometimes about Ding Village’s past and present while sometimes about its future, help produce a hybrid of prophecies, the ongoing, and flashbacks, which construct the overall narrative frame of the novel, weaving the blood-selling chronicle of Ding Village with disordered timings.

In addition to bearing similar predictive functions, there are also interconnections between the Pharaoh’s dream in Genesis and Grandpa’s dreams in terms of the dream’s meanings. According to the dream interpreter Joseph, Pharaoh’s dream forebodes there will come “seven years of great plenty throughout all the land of Egypt,” while after these seven affluent years there will arise “seven years of famine, and all the plenty will be forgotten in the land of Egypt” (Coogan et al. 41). In Dream of Ding Village, Ding Village has experienced an analogous situation: every household in the village gets rid of poverty and becomes rich by selling their blood in the early years of blood-selling, while such affluence turns out to matter nothing several years later, as almost every household has someone being infected with HIV/AIDS and will soon die. Like Pharaoh’s dream, Ding Village has enjoyed plenty of wealth for some time, while the later calamity soon deprives Ding Village of all the previous happiness and prosperity and throws it into despair and desolation—in this sense, the biblical story provides an allegory of Ding Village’s doom.

**Impacting & Reflecting on Reality**

In the novel dreams are not only prophecies for the future—even if they do not indicate anything about the future, dreams can drive Grandpa to make his own judgment and decide the future. Grandpa’s other long dreams, such as the dream of flowers and gold (79-81, 91-92), the dream of Father’s coffin factory (113-121, 174-180), and the dream in which all trees in the village are cut down (192-197), are all supplementary to the whole story: they are things that have already happened or are happening outside of Grandpa’s knowledge. If he did not dream about them, he would not know of them. For example, through dreaming, Grandpa is able to view the scenes happening in other villages and learn about Father’s villainies and thereby become catalysts for Grandpa’s actions. On other occasions, he dreams about Uncle’s death and hurries to bury Uncle and Lingling while waking up. Eventually, he kills Father after he hears his deceased grandson Ding Xiaoqiang’s crying for help in his dreams.

But why would Grandpa take action upon his dreams? Dreams’ capacity to impact Grandpa’s decisions and behaviors shows Grandpa’s belief in his dreams, that he considers what the dreams present are almost the realities—and in the world of this novel, many dreams turn out to be real things indeed (further illustrated by Father’s astonishment at how Grandpa gets to know all the details about his coffin-selling and afterlife matchmaking business). While if these things are all realities, why bother telling them through dreams?
Some reviewers are dissatisfied with Yan Lianke’s writing about the real tragedies happening in the HIV/AIDS villages in China using the form of fiction—they think it would be better to conduct a non-fiction work on that topic (Jacob, “Dream of Ding Village”). Such criticism is understandable since generally speaking, by using the form of a fictional novel, the author has already made it clear that the reader should not take what is depicted in the novel for something happening in the real world. But as we have discussed in the previous units, Dream of Ding Village has its real-life foundations—the thousands of HIV/AIDS villages like Ding Village in central China, which are factually caused by the blood-selling scandals in the 1990s China. Considering the deep connections between this novel and the realities, no wonder some reviewers would argue a direct non-fictional form would be more clear to present the work’s connection to those historical facts.

So why does Dream of Ding Village intentionally blur the boundaries between its story and the historical reality by choosing a fictional form rather than a non-fictional one? Emphasizing its fictionality, in fact, is not only employed by this novel; in its film adaptation Love for Life (2011), there are two subtitles appearing in the beginning of the film: “This film is set during the early 1990s” while “The story is purely fictional.” [For the resource of the film and more activities related to the film, see the “Assignments, Activities, and Project Ideas” part of this unit.] In Dream of Ding Village, the novel’s fictionality is strengthened by both the dreams and the ghost narrator [see more about the special narrator in the next section]. However, despite all these efforts, we still have to pay attention to its inseparable relations to the Chinese realities. The novel does not aim to deny the authenticity of what happens to a HIV/AIDS village like Ding Village. On the contrary, by blurring the lines between Grandpa’s dreams and awake realities in the novel, Yan Lianke hopes to emphasize no matter how ridiculous and dreamlike those stories look like, they are what actually happen.

Through the form of dreams, Yan Lianke indicates his wishing all these tragedies in the HIV/AIDS villages could just be dreams rather than the brutal realities. But they are actually not. Not only Yan Lianke, many contemporary Chinese writers have similar concerns: they feel that the Chinese reality for over the last century till today seems like a hallucination, because some things that have actually happened have surpassed novels and movies in their inventiveness (Ning, “Modern China is So Crazy It Needs a New Literary Genre”).

In Grandpa’s final dream, a new world of hope seems to be unfolding:

That night there was a rainstorm, a torrential downpour that transformed the plain into a vast 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 and teeming plain.
A new world danced before his eyes. (341, italics in original)
This final dream echoes the ancient Chinese legend of goddess Nüwa using mud to create human beings, which seems to provide a hopeful future for Ding Village. However, by this ending dream, the novel develops its own formal circle: it begins with Grandpa’s three-night dreaming, and now ends up with Grandpa’s another big dream. So far Grandpa’s constant dreaming status calls what Ding Village has experienced into an ontological question: do the tragedies of Ding Village really occur? In other words, could all the stories about Ding Village just be the many dreams that Grandpa has? When realizing that the HIV/AIDS crisis in central China’s countryside are truly historical realities, readers might find this “new world” appearing in Grandpa’s ending dream just a legendary good wish—which seems to make the dénouement much more painful than hopeful.

**QUESTIONABLE NARRATOR: LIMITED OR ALL-KNOWING?**

We have discussed a lot about Grandpa’s dreams. We know how the dreams can be predictive, can create disordered narrative timings, can imply the realities, can supplement Grandpa’s knowledge about the realities, and can express a doubtful hope. In this section, we will turn to exploring who tells Grandpa’s dreams: it is a deceased twelve-year boy, the grandson Ding Xiaoqiang. This ghost narrator is thereby inseparable from the various dreams in *Dream of Ding Village*. To provide a reading methodology, it is worthwhile to keep Wayne Booth’s words in mind when we analyze the narrator of the novel: “To say that a story is told in the first or the third person will tell us nothing of importance unless we become more precise and describe how the particular qualities of the narrators relate to specific effects.” (Booth 150) Paying attention to the exact aesthetic functions of narrative devices in specific contexts should always be put at first place when doing a close reading.

**Haunting Ghost: An Omniscient Narrator**

Some consider the ghost child narrator in *Dream of Ding Village* quite problematic (Jaivin, “Dream of Ding Village”). We know from the beginning of the story that our narrator is a twelve-year-old boy, Ding Xiaoqiang, who is poisoned to death by his fellow villagers because of his father Ding Hui’s villainy. As a ghost haunting the novel, this little boy tells the whole story, including how Ding Village becomes a blood-selling model village which then collapses because of HIV/AIDS, how his father Ding Hui conducts his various dirty businesses, how his uncle Ding Liang and Lingling fall in love with each other, and how his grandpa Ding Shuiyang deals with the issues related to his family as well as Ding Village, etc. In other words, the boy is an all-knowing narrator, also known as an *omniscient* narrator, who we readers assume to know everything about the story he tells. Yet omniscient narrators are usually disembodied voices rather than locatable characters (Eagleton 81), while in *Dream of Ding Village*, our omniscient narrator is not an anonymous, unidentifiable narrator, but a character of the novel, who is at the center of certain plot developments like the poisoning, and, later on, being married to another deceased girl after his death. Could a child really use these words in the following passage regarding the love between his Uncle and Lingling?

> They were like water and sand, seed and soil, yin and yang; like positive and negative magnetic poles. They were water flowing, being absorbed by sand; seed scattered by
the wind, taking root in soil; yin and yang coming together as one; two magnets clinging to each other, unable to deny their attraction. (203)

Piling image on image, the passage seems too complicated to be spoken out by a little boy who dies in his fifth year at school. However, as Terry Eagleton reminds us, novels sometimes feature hybrid narrator voices, even though a novel may give the appearance of sticking to one narrator [To better understand such hybrid narration, see appendix I to this section]. In the case of the ghost child narrator in Dream of Ding Village, the child’s voice is sometimes woven into the more sophisticated tones of the author himself, which helps to expand the styles of language by reaching beyond the narrator’s perspective and voice. [For analysis on the common conventions of child narrator, see appendix II to this section.] Moreover, Ding Xiaoqiang’s identity as a ghost makes it more convenient for him to stand at a floating position, where he can observe things happening on and around Ding Village from everywhere. He is thus not limited by the first-person “I,” who is supposed to have inadequate access to information as “I” am usually limited by “my” identity and position. [For literary terms such as “persona” to analyze narratives, see the handout “Aesthetic distance, narrator, persona, viewpoint,” as well as Unit 8] On the contrary, because Ding Xiaoqiang is a haunting ghost, even if he can access every piece information about his family and Ding Village, readers take it in stride.

Why does Yan Lianke use this narrator to tell the story? In addition to providing an omniscient perspective to view the HIV/AIDS crisis from various angles, there are several other reasons. One is related to Yan’s self-censorship in order to get this novel published. Yan considers using a ghost narrator to be a better way to talk about the HIV/AIDS villages, which remain a sensitive topic in China today, and were all the more so when he wrote the novel in the early 2000s. [See more about censorship in China in Unit 2; and Yan Lianke’s own experience related to HIV/AIDS crisis in Unit 3] Both the ghost narrator and the many writings about dreams help create a dreamlike style, which in some way lessens the risk of being censored—at least from the level of form and style, Dream of Ding Village intentionally makes itself look more fictional rather than realistic.

Ethical Position & Limited Narrator
Another aesthetic effect that the ghost narrator creates is to draw readers into an ethical relationship with the narrator. Let us recall what causes our narrator’s death:

I was only twelve, in my fifth year at the school, when I died. I died from eating a poisoned tomato I found on the way home from school. [...] Someone must have put it there, knowing I’d see it on my way home from school. [...] I died not from the fever, not from AIDS, but because my dad had run a blood-collection station in Ding Village ten years earlier. He bought blood from the villagers and resold it for a profit. I died because my dad was the biggest blood merchant not just in Ding Village but in Two-Li Village, Willow Hamlet, Yellow Creek and dozens of other villages for miles around. He wasn’t just a blood merchant: he was a blood kingpin. (10)
Our narrator reveals some limitation to his omniscience: from the beginning to the end of the novel, readers do not know who exactly has put out the poisoned tomato to murder Ding Xiaoqiang. Ding Xiaoqiang should not have died from his father’s villainy, but in fact he does, which makes him an entirely innocent character. In his narratives, he does not want to investigate who is/are the murderer(s) (while we can guess it should be a revenge on his father’s evildoings from his fellow villagers), but tries to figure out the past and present of Ding Village impacted by the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Using the deceased child Ding Xiaoqiang as the narrator not only makes it more natural to link the stories of Ding Xiaoqiang’s other close family members, but also has readers sympathize with his innocence, tending to consider him trustworthy and believe in his words.

But is Ding Xiaoqiang completely innocent or neutral? On the plot level of *Dream of Ding Village*, the ghost child narrator Ding Xiaoqiang plays a crucial role in the final murder: his plea and cry to Grandpa finally causes his father’s death. In Grandpa’s dream of himself meeting Father and sleeping at Father’s bedroom, Grandpa has another dream embedded in this dream: he dreams that his deceased grandson Ding Xiaoqiang crying to him, as Xiaoqiang does not want to leave Ding Village and be reburied to an unfamiliar place with an ugly deceased girl’s bones (309-311). In addition to this embedded dream, Ding Xiaoqiang’s screaming voice appears two more times in Grandpa’s dreams:

> When they lifted that golden coffin, I started thrashing around inside it, screaming for my grandpa. Not screaming for my father. Screaming for dear life.
> ‘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 a hole in the sky.
> ‘Save me, Grandpa, save me . . .’
> My voice filled the schoolyard and echoed through the village and across the plain.
> My cries rose to the heavens, and fell like raindrops on to the parched and blighted earth. (321, italics in original)

> My screams ripped holes in the sky.
> ‘Save me, Grandpa, save me . . .’
> The idea struck Grandpa like a thunderclap, draining the colour from his face and making his hands shake. [...] 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. (331-332, italics in original)

The narrator here strongly takes part in the development of the plot: his will is so strong that he appeals to Grandpa so many times, and his voice “shook the heavens” and “ripped a hole in the sky.” Even as a ghost, he struggles as much as he can to change the future of his afterlife. What
is the narrator’s position relative to his family members? Is he with his father, with his Grandpa, or with other sick villagers, who are the victims of his father’s blood-collecting business? The novel leaves this an open question for readers to consider.

Yet some language subtly shows Ding Xiaqiang’s attitude towards his father: as shown by the last sentence of the above extracts, Ding Xiaqiang describes his father’s blood to be blooming on the ground like “a blossom in spring.” His murdered father’s blood here becomes flowers in Ding Xiaqiang’s eyes; moreover, it is not simple flowers, but the flower of the spring, a season of life and hope [See “The Power of Metaphor” subsection in Unit 6 for the metaphorical meaning of each season]. For Ding villagers, Father is a villain; but for Ding Xiaqiang, Father is still his dad. Yet Father does not consider Xiaoqiang’s feelings and arranges his afterlife marriage with an ugly deceased girl, whom Xiaoqiang does not like at all. If the original father-son relationship between Father and Xiaoqiang still offers some room for readers to withhold final judgment on Father’s evilness, through this afterlife marriage, readers are totally aware that Father is a complete villain to all, who only cares about his own wealth and power and would achieve his own goal by tricking everyone, including his own son. By depicting his father’s death as a hopeful and beautiful scene, the narrator places himself on the righteous standpoint and invites readers to do the same. However, is Father’s death enough to make everyone happy? Is revenge on Father the final solution to all the tragedies happening in Ding Village? When thinking of these questions, the ghost child narrator seems less reliable and neutral than he appears to be.

In this sense, the ghost child narrator is both omniscient and limited: he is able to witness and present so many stories happening around the HIV/AIDS crisis on the central Chinese plain, to read and even influence Grandpa’s dreams. At the same time, he is limited to his attitudes and emotions, and to the viewpoint of a child who can notice but not interpret the complex interrelations between people and events. Therefore, the stance of Grandpa becomes a necessary supplement to the main narrator’s voice: it is Grandpa who is able to understand the intricate strings of so many events and to figure out various casualties. The ghost child provides useful information to Grandpa through Grandpa’s dreams, and Grandpa deciphers the information to guide his decisions and actions. Dreams and the ghost child narrator thereby become two indissociable narrative devices to weave the whole story—a central Chinese village’s trauma in post-socialist period, a multifaceted mirror to the collapsing countryside for which the HIV/AIDS crisis is just a beginning, but not the ending.

**Appendix: How to Read Literature (Terry Eagleton)**

I. Hybrid Narration

There are times when who exactly is doing the narrating in a piece of fiction is not entirely clear. Take, for example, this passage from Saul Bellow’s novel *Henderson the Rain King*:

Daylight came from a narrow opening above my head; this light was originally yellow but became gray by contact with stones. In the opening two iron spikes were set to keep even a child from creeping through. Examining my situation I found a small passage cut from the granite which led downward to another flight of stairs, which were of stone
too. These were narrower and ran to a greater depth, and soon I found them broken, with grass springing and soil leaking out through the cracks. ‘King’, I called, ‘King, hey, are you down there, Your Highness?’ But nothing came from below except drafts of warm air that lifted up the spider webs. ‘What’s the guy’s hurry?’, I thought . . . 

The passage is supposedly spoken by Henderson, the book’s hero. Yet Henderson is a rough-and-ready American who might well exclaim ‘King, hey’ or ‘What’s the guy’s hurry?’, but would hardly speak in poetic vein of the yellow light becoming grey by contact with the stones. Nor is he likely to write prose as relatively formal as ‘Examining my situation I found a small passage cut from the granite . . .’. This is a hybrid narration, in which Henderson’s own voice is woven into the more sophisticated tones of the author himself. The novel’s linguistic scope would be too limited if it could not reach beyond the consciousness of its main character. Yet it needs to let his own style of speaking come through as well. (82-83)

II. Child Narrator

If you tell your story from the standpoint of a specific character, it may not be easy to step outside this perspective. A literary work written from the viewpoint of a frog risks imprisoning itself in a froglike world. It is hard for it to rise above the consciousness of its own narrator. Not many narrators are frogs, but quite a few are children. This may have its charms, as with the much loved teenage narrator of *The Catcher in the Rye*, but it can also have its drawbacks. To see the world from a child’s viewpoint can make it seem revealingly unfamiliar. It may be to perceive objects with a peculiar freshness and immediacy, as Wordsworth is aware. Yet a child’s way of seeing is naturally restricted. (A notable exception to this rule is Maisie Farange of Henry James’s novel *What Maisie Knew*, a little girl who seems to be almost as omniscient as her author.) Dickens’s David Copperfield tells us that as a boy he was able to see in pieces, but not in the round. Ironically, this is the way Dickens himself tends to perceive. A child’s vision of reality may be vivid but fragmentary, and so, often enough, is Dickens’s own way of looking. There is thus something peculiarly appropriate about the fact that he so often gazes at the world through the eyes of a child.

The limited vision of child narrators means that they cannot always make coherent sense of their experience. This can lead to some amusing or alarming situations. But it also means that a character like Oliver Twist can have no understanding of the system under which he suffers. All he wants is some immediate help, an impulse with which we naturally sympathise. Yet without some sense of how the system works, and how to change it, there will be many more children gazing up past Mr Bumble’s ample belly in search of extra gruel. (85-86)

*Further Reading: The Day the Sun Died (Yan Lianke)*

Yan Lianke’s other more recent work *The Day the Sun Died* also employs a quite special narrator—an “idiot” child (the character’s own words). This novel can shed useful comparative light on *Dream of Ding Village* and its usage of a limited narrator. In the beginning of the story, the child narrator goes to the highest point of a mountain where his village stays, and prays to the spirits. We recommend sharing the following passage with students to closely read, and then considering the questions below.
Hello … Are you there? … Is anyone going to come listen to me ramble?
Hello … spirits! … If you’re not busy, then come and listen … I’m kneeling on the highest point of our Funiu Mountains, so you should definitely be able to hear me. Surely you won’t be annoyed by the shouts of a child?
Hello … I’ve come on behalf of a village … a small village … on behalf of a mountain range, and the entire world. I’m kneeling here facing the sky, and simply want to tell you one thing. I hope you’ll have the patience to listen to me, to listen to me ramble and shout. Don’t be annoyed, and don’t become anxious. This matter is as vast as the sky and the earth.

[...] It is with all honesty that I’m telling you the details of what happened on that day and night. If I make any mistakes, it’s not because I’m dishonest, but rather because I’m simply too excited. My mind constantly feels muddy and confused, which is why I always ramble on and on. I like to talk to myself, regardless of whether or not there are people around. I like to mumble one sentence after another, with each one bearing no relation to the preceding one. The villagers and townspeople call me an idiot … an idiot. Because I’m an idiot, I don’t have the patience to tease out the first strand of this jumbled mess. As a result, I have no choice but to recount everything in a halting, scattered way, thereby rendering me even more of an idiot. However, spirits … including bodhisattvas and arhats … you absolutely must not view me as a real idiot. Sometimes my mind is perfectly clear—as clear as a drop of water … as clear as the blue sky. For instance, it’s as if a skylight just opened in my mind, allowing me to see the sky and the earth, and to see that night’s developments. Each and every one of these developments is now clearly visible in my mind’s eye, and I can even find the needles and sesame seeds that fell into the darkness. (“Preface: Let Me Ramble for a Bit”)

Encourage students to consider the following questions:
● How does this speech act “feel” to you?
● Think about the intended audience. If you were one of the “spirits” (literally the deities), would you be annoyed by his words?
● Why does the narrator say that his mind “constantly feels muddy and confused” while sometimes “as clear as the blue sky”? Why does the narrator ask the “spirits” to not view him as a real idiot?
● Can we square the boy’s self-description as an idiot with the actual words of the speech act? As a reader, would you trust this “idiot” narrator and believe the story he tells? Why or why not?

WORK CITED
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ASSIGNMENTS, ACTIVITIES, AND PROJECT IDEAS
• In class, watch the beginning 0:00-3:13 and the ending 1:34:44-1:37:10 of the film adaptation of Dream of Ding Village, Love for Life [YouTube link for the film with English subtitles: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=260EjPMhTM8]. These two short fragments show the narrator of the whole story, the deceased boy Ding Xiaoqiang, who is the same as the original novel. After watching, have students share their impressions and thoughts with other classmates. Discuss the following questions:
  ○ How do you feel about this young narrator’s voice?
  ○ What effects has using a deceased boy as the narrator brought to the film? What is/are the difference(s) between the film and the original novel in terms of the narrator’s voice? [For example, in the ending of the film, Ding Xiaoqiang depicts another world where all the deceased Ding villagers keep living together happily.
While in the novel, no other Ding villager in the otherworld is mentioned except the narrator Ding Xiaoqiang.]

○ Can you think of any American novels which use a ghost narrator or child narrator?

○ What decisions may a filmmaker make in adapting the narrative into the medium of film? What special effect does the medium of film offer that is different from the form of novel, despite using the same narrator? [For example, think about the medium of the camera eyes. What is the relationship between the camera eyes shooting the scenes and the first-person narrator of the film? Are the camera eyes taking the same perspective as the first-person narrator? If not, what is/are the difference(s)?]

● Encourage students to finish watching the whole film *Love for Life* after class and write their short comments (100-200 words) based on that film. Consider the following questions:

  ○ Does the film show Grandpa’s dreaming situations as the novel does?
  ○ If you were the film director, how would you present Grandpa’s dreams?
  ○ The film has omitted several major plots of the original novel, such as cutting the village trees, Grandpa’s killing father, etc., and centers on Uncle and Lingling’s love story. How do you feel about such an adaptation? Are you satisfied with this adaptation? If not, what other plot(s) would you focus on if you were to adapt *Dream of Ding Village* for a film?
8. PREPARING TO MEET THE WRITER

Objectives
- To prepare students to make the most of the Annual Student Conference through active engagement
- To provide strategies for building student confidence, addressing concerns, and setting expectations for conference participation.

Conference Keynote Speaker: Yan Lianke
This year, the Great World Texts program will welcome author Yan Lianke to the Annual Student Conference. Students from across the state will have the opportunity to engage him in a conversation about thoughts on Chinese literature, his depiction of a Chinese health care crisis, his thoughts on the present pandemic, and other concerns that engaged them while reading his novel. This interaction is the core component of the Annual Student Conference.

On Meeting a Writer
Meeting the author of the text will be a thrilling experience for some of your students, but it might also prove a nerve-wracking one for some. To prepare students for this event, consider the following in advance of the conference: What are the expectations for students’ behavior? What kinds of questions should they ask and how will they present their work to the keynote speaker? How can they best prepare for this meeting? What should teachers do if students are nervous, disruptive or unprepared? The preparatory materials listed below will help you and your students to develop a deeper sense of Yan Lianke, as well as what to expect at the Annual Student Conference and how to prepare for it.

Points for Lecture:
- Prepare your students for meeting Yan Lianke
  Emphasize that, like all people, our keynote speaker could be nervous, excited, happy, sad, shy, in a good or bad mood, etc. Show clips of him doing interviews, and show the class his photograph so they can think of him as an individual from the start.

  - Emphasize being courteous and respectful.
  Those students designated to ask questions during the keynote should always greet and thank Mr. Yan, introduce themselves by name and school affiliation, and then ask a question. Encourage students to make eye contact, and to be polite and confident!
• Help students avoid feelings of anxiety.
Focus on the experience, not the “performance” or act of talking to Yan Lianke. Emphasize that he is coming to the conference precisely because he is interested in and excited about the ideas that students have developed as they’ve read *Dream of Ding Village*. Know that he thinks students have something to say that is worth hearing. Emphasize that this is a dialogue, meaning that student voices matter. He wants to hear from students as much as they want to hear from him.

• Encourage them to be specific.
Don’t just say: “I love this book!” or “I hate this book!” Students should be prepared to articulate what they loved most about it. In preparation, ask students to consider what was most inspiring, thought-provoking or challenging about the text.

• Tips for asking questions.
Avoid yes or no questions. Instead, ask questions that allow room for thought and interpretation. Consider, too, the “lead in” to the question. Students should give a little context to let the author know where they’re coming from. For example: “Why did you choose to write [X] this way?” would be a much more interesting question if the student first explained what about [X] is interesting or confusing to him or her.

• Be prepared.
Ask students to think about how Yan Lianke might react to a given question. Once you’ve chosen which questions to ask the keynote speaker, role-play possible answers as a class. Prepare a list of follow-up questions, too.

• On decorum.
Whether or not we meet in person, this conference will be a serious academic affair and a lot of planning has gone into this event by teachers, students, UW faculty and staff, etc. The people in attendance have spent months preparing for this event. Disruptive, discourteous or disrespectful behavior is unacceptable. Teachers whose students do not follow the decorum guidelines are expected to remove students immediately.

**Discussion Questions**

• How would you like to be treated (or not) if you were the keynote speaker? If you were a student from another school?

• What questions do you most want answered? What do you want to know about *Dream of Ding Village* and its reception in China?
Assignments, Activities, and Project Ideas

- Hold a conference dress rehearsal. If your group of participating students is small, this might consist of each student giving a brief but formal presentation of her project, followed by a question and answer session. If your group of participating students is large, split them into two groups. Have one group present their projects first and the other second. Students will alternate between presenting and viewing, just as they will on the day of the official conference.

- Role-play meeting Yan Lianke. Have students prepared with questions, and practice asking and answering them. What questions got the best (or worst) answers? Why?

- Brainstorm productive questions. In small groups, students should write down as many questions as they can think of to ask Yan Lianke. Then switch questions with other groups and select those which seem best and those which seem least effective. Use this as the basis for a discussion about how we decide if a question is “good” or “bad”? (Hint: the least effective questions are those that are too easy to answer, produce obvious answers, or could easily be answered by anyone reading the book.) You might have students revise with this discussion in mind, practicing how to construct a clear, direct and interesting question.