Dream of Ding Village in Wisconsin: A Great World Texts Conversation

This year, 25 schools across Wisconsin are participating in the Great World Texts in Wisconsin program in which students and teachers collectively read and discuss Yan Lianke’s Dream of Ding Village. Officially censored upon its Chinese publication, Dream of Ding Village is the prescient story of the public health crisis of the 1990s when rural villages selling their blood led to an AIDS outbreak. We spoke with Nuoyi Yang, the Chinese instructor at Verona Area International School (one of only a few Chinese language programs in the state), about how she’s teaching the book to her students and why it’s important to reflect on historical pandemics and the modern Chinese public health system in this critical time.

How are you introducing Dream of Ding Village to your students and how are they responding to it?

Nuoyi Yang: I use the book to support my Chinese class; students read it weekly and finish an assignment such as a bilingual double-entry note, a writing task, or a digital presentation. The tasks are related to the requirement of intermediate-level Chinese, such as introducing a character, a setting, or a problem in Chinese. My students are very interested in the content of the book. Though we just finished reading the first three chapters, they’ve asked thoughtful questions such as, how much is this novel close to the real situation in China or what is the family relationship between the major characters? In the writing assignments, many interesting and profound topics showed up, for example, is the leading character a selfish or selfless person? What is the role of the people in the upper level? What is the influence of the blood banks in short and long term?
Yang: It makes me worried. Though I am still respected as a teacher, and my audiences are the people who appreciate Chinese culture, I feel worried. I am worried about the future of Chinese programs in the U.S., and I am worried that fewer people will be interested in this language. I don’t want my students to feel devalued because they chose Chinese instead of another foreign language when they were young.

How has participating in Great World Texts shaped your teaching plans and your experience of the classroom?

Yang: Teaching in a newly established program, I have tried different curricula to find the most suitable curriculum for my students. I am grateful that I have the chance to try GWT this year. *Dream of Ding Village* made my class rooted in authentic Chinese culture, especially when we are in a more isolated world than before. My students met it at a great time; they’ve known Chinese culture for years, and now they have the chance to use the target language to express their opinions. I’ve also learned more about how western students view China. Last but not least, I have gained pedagogical improvement. I worked with the counselor of the Seal of Biliteracy and the English curriculum specialist to fit this book in my language course. I felt much more confident when handling challenging materials.

*Stay tuned! We’ll host Yan Lianke on April 19, 2021 for a virtual conversation that is free and open to the public.*

Visit the [Great World Texts website](https://greatworldtexts.org) to learn more about the program and see selections from the previous 15 years of the program.