

# **SOUND AND SILENCE**

**Yan  
Lianke**

**TRANSLATED AND WITH  
AN INTRODUCTION BY  
CARLOS ROJAS**

**MY  
EXPERIENCE  
WITH  
CHINA  
AND  
LITERATURE**



## **SOUND AND SILENCE**

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A series edited by Carlos Rojas and Eileen Cheng-yin Chow

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## **MY EXPERIENCE WITH CHINA AND LITERATURE**

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## Acknowledgments

This volume arose out of a series of lectures that the author gave during a trip to North America in the spring of 2014, thanks to an invitation by Duke University professor and scholar Carlos Rojas, who is also the author's English translator. During that trip, the author visited twelve universities, including Duke, Harvard, Yale, and Stanford, where his lectures were recorded and subsequently transcribed and edited. The first essay in this volume was initially delivered as the author's acceptance speech upon being awarded the Franz Kafka Prize in October 2014. The author is grateful to Duke University for helping to coordinate his 2014 lecture tour and to Duke University Press for making this volume available to an English-language readership.

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## Translator's Introduction

CARLOS ROJAS

Yan Lianke was born in rural Henan, in a community so remote that, to this day, he himself doesn't know his exact birth date. In lieu of the calendar date, his mother simply remembers what the wheat fields looked like on the day of his birth. Two decades later, when Yan needed to specify his birth date while filling out paperwork to join the army, he decided that his mother's description of the wheat field corresponded roughly to what one might see in August, before the late-summer harvest. As for the year, he calculated that her description probably corresponded to the summer of 1958, before the catastrophic crop failures that began to afflict much of the country in 1959.

Coincidentally, the date that Yan ultimately selected as his official birth date, August 24, 1958, happened to fall right in the middle of the 1958 Beidaihe Conference, which ran from August 17 to August 30. At this historic meeting, the Politburo passed a series of resolutions significantly raising steel and grain production targets while also supporting the establishment of people's communes throughout the country—thereby marking the high point of the Great Leap Forward Campaign that Chairman Mao had launched at the beginning of the year. Within months of this conference, however, the Party's wildly unrealistic production targets had backfired, triggering an economic crisis. The nation was subsequently plunged into a devastating famine that is estimated to have claimed tens of millions of lives during the three-year period that official historiography euphemistically calls the “three years of natural disaster,” but which

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is often described simply as the Great Famine. It is fitting that the date Yan selected as his official birth date coincided with the Beidaihe Conference because just as the Great Leap Forward's overly ambitious production goals resulted in almost unimaginable suffering for the Chinese people, many of Yan's fictional works similarly focus on the sufferings of those individuals and communities positioned on society's margins.

Yan's works are noteworthy for his careful attention to writing as a craft. Each of his works since around 1998 adopts a different narrative structure and is written in a different voice. For instance, one novel is narrated in reverse chronological order, beginning with the protagonist's death and then working its way back to his birth, whereas another is narrated mostly from "beyond the grave" in the first-person voice of a boy who had been killed shortly before the novel's fictional starting point. One work consists of four interwoven (fictional) texts, each of which is written in a completely different voice and is reproduced in the novel only in fragmentary fashion, and another interweaves a complex textual narrative with a parallel story told via a series of more than two hundred intricate paper-cut images that Yan commissioned from a paper-cut artist, who spent a year and a half designing and producing the images to meet Yan's specifications. Some of Yan's works parody Chinese socialist discourse, but he also engages dialogically with a wide range of other discourses, ranging from premodern Chinese poetry and drama to Christian religious rhetoric. The result is a remarkable body of work that distinguishes itself by its linguistic and literary innovations, even as he simultaneously uses his literature to offer a unique vision of contemporary China and its people.

In addition to his fictional works, Yan Lianke is also active as an essayist, frequently lecturing and writing on a wide range of topics relating to literature and society. In addition to his literary criticism—and most notably *Discovering Fiction*, his 2011 book-length study on different approaches to literary realism from the nineteenth century to the present—he is particularly interested in the position of authors and artists in contemporary Chinese society and their potential role in observing and reflecting on contemporary conditions. A handful of his essays have been translated into English—including two *New York Times* essays on "state-sponsored amnesia" and on "China's darkness," which were published in 2013 and 2014, respectively.<sup>1</sup>

Yan's state-sponsored-amnesia essay speaks to the phenomenon whereby recent politically sensitive incidents like the Great Famine and the June Fourth Tiananmen Square crackdown have been erased so thoroughly from public discourse in China that many young people are not even aware of their existence. Yan observes that a similar logic also applies to literature and popular culture, resulting in an array of carrot-and-stick strategies that use a combination of "soft" incentives and "hard" coercions to push literary and cultural production away from unwanted topics and toward more desirable ones. In 2013 Yan accepted an offer to teach every spring semester at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (HKUST), where he is currently IAS Sin Wai Kin Professor of Chinese Culture and Chair Professor of Humanities. As a result, for the past decade he has been dividing his time between his Hong Kong appointment and his original position at Renmin University in Beijing, where he has been serving as professor of the School of Liberal Arts since 2004. At the same time, given the growing restrictions on publishing his works in China, he has increasingly come to rely on publishing houses in Hong Kong and Taiwan to publish the Chinese-language versions of his works, and on presses around the world to publish his works in translation—and, to date, his works have been translated into more than thirty languages.

In his 2013 *New York Times* essay, Yan observes that the Chinese state regularly uses its financial and regulatory influence to encourage writers and artists to work within politically acceptable parameters. For instance, he notes that "almost all awards in China in the fields of literature, art, news and culture are administered within state-approved boundaries," and although it is true that Yan himself has won many of China's top literary prizes, including the Lu Xun Literature Prize (twice) and the Lao She Literature Prize, in the last decade or so he has primarily been recognized by numerous international literary institutions. His most prestigious international accolades include the 2013 Hua Zong World Literature Prize (from Malaysia), the 2014 Franz Kafka Prize (from the Czech Republic), the 2016 Dream of the Red Chamber Award (from Hong Kong), and the 2021 Newman Prize for Chinese Literature (from the United States). In 2021 he was named one of the twelve inaugural RSL International Writers recognized by Britain's Royal Society of Literature. Yan was also twice a finalist (in 2013 and 2016) for the Man Booker International Prize.

Yan's 2014 essay on "China's darkness" was an abbreviated version of the acceptance speech that he had delivered upon being awarded the Kafka Prize in October of that year. Established in 2001, the Franz Kafka Prize has twice, in 2004 and 2005, recognized authors who went on to win the Nobel Prize later that same year.<sup>2</sup> The Kafka Prize recognizes authors whose work is distinguished by "its humanistic character and contribution to cultural, national, language and religious tolerance, its existential, timeless character, its generally human validity and its ability to hand over a testimony about our times."<sup>3</sup>

Although Yan made no direct reference to Kafka's work in his acceptance speech for the Kafka Prize, this was certainly not for lack of familiarity. In *Discovering Fiction*, for instance, Yan includes a lengthy discussion of the formative impact that Kafka's fiction had not only on his own literary development but also on that of other major twentieth-century authors. In that earlier volume, Yan also identifies Kafka's work, and particularly "The Metamorphosis," as marking a crucial turning point between nineteenth-century realism and the twentieth-century modernist experiments that helped lay the groundwork for Yan's own current narrative style, which he calls mythorealism (*shenshizhuyi*)—he explains that this is a mode of realism wherein the work's relationship to reality "is not driven by direct causality, but instead involves a person's soul and spirit (which is to say, the connection between a person, on one hand, and the real relationship between spirit and interior objects, on the other), and an author's conjectures grounded on a real foundation."<sup>4</sup>

Rather than address Kafka directly in his acceptance speech, Yan instead proposes a Kafkaesque allegory of a blind man from Yan's hometown who always took a flashlight with him when he went out at night. As Yan explains, the function of the flashlight was not to help the blind man see his surroundings but to help *other* villagers see the blind man, and in the process hopefully see the darkness that the blind man sees. This allegory reflects a recurrent theme in Yan's work, in which he uses darkness to characterize not only the societal conditions reflected in his works but also his works' objectives and conditions of production. He believes that contemporary China is marked by metaphorical darkness, and he tries to use his writings to help his readers to perceive that same darkness. His goal, in other words, is not to help his readers see *in* the darkness but to enable them to perceive the darkness itself.

In spring of 2014, a few months before he was awarded the Franz Kafka Prize, Yan embarked on a North American lecture tour to promote the recent publication of the English translation of his 2004 novel *Shouhuo* (translated as *Lenin's Kisses*). This was the third of Yan's novels to be published in English translation, and the preceding two were both works that had been banned in China. For instance, the original version of his 2005 novella *Serve the People!* had been serialized in a mainland China literary journal but was subsequently banned before it could be released in book form. Similarly, Yan had subjected the original version of his 2006 novel *Dream of Ding Village* to a rigorous process of self-censorship to avoid a similar fate, but the mainland Chinese edition ended up being banned shortly after its initial publication anyway. Also, although *Lenin's Kisses* was published openly in China in 2004, its publication nevertheless led to Yan's being asked to leave the People's Liberation Army (PLA), which had been his employer since 1977. (Yan was subsequently able to secure a faculty position teaching literature and creative writing at Beijing's Renmin University.)

All three of the preceding works focus on dark aspects of contemporary China and its recent history. *Serve the People!* is set in the Cultural Revolution and features an adulterous affair that combines libidinal desire with political fervor, *Dream of Ding Village* reflects on contemporary China's rural HIV/AIDS epidemic and underscores the degree to which the crisis was exacerbated by local profiteering, and *Lenin's Kisses* features a plotline in which the disabled residents of a remote village are forced to travel the country performing their own disabilities for profit. At the same time, the way in which these works were subjected to a combination of external censorship and self-censorship reflects what is arguably an even darker facet of contemporary Chinese society—an issue to which Yan sometimes alludes allegorically in his fictional works, but which he addressed head-on in several of the talks he gave during his 2014 lecture tour. For instance, in the talk he gave at Duke University as part of that same tour, Yan noted that when he travels abroad he is often introduced as “China's most controversial and most censored author.” This was already true in 2014, when Yan delivered the lecture in question, and it is even more so today (currently, China's publication restrictions apply not only to Yan's most recent works but also to many of his earlier ones). Though recognizing that some readers may view this “banned in China”

label as an attractive selling point (in that it promises a view of China that the state wants to suppress), Yan says that he feels ambivalent about the designation. He notes that whereas it is true that some great works of literature have been banned, one could nevertheless also cite countless mediocre works that have similarly been banned—suggesting that there is no necessary correlation between being banned and being a great work of art. On the other hand, Yan also observes that, given contemporary China's mercurial publication policies, for a contemporary Chinese author to *never* encounter problems with the censorship apparatus would itself be grounds for suspicion.

The Kafka Prize is open to authors writing in any language, but one of the prize's eligibility requirements is that the nominees must have published at least two books that were either written in or translated into Czech. A Czech-language version of *Serve the People!* was published in 2008. The second of Yan's novels to be translated into Czech—and consequently the work that technically made him fully eligible for the Kafka Prize—was *The Four Books* (the translation was completed in 2014 and was released in 2015). First published in Chinese in 2011, not only was the novel banned in China, but furthermore it is centrally concerned with issues of literary restrictions. The novel is set in a political reeducation camp for intellectuals during the Anti-Rightist Campaign of the late 1950s. One character in the work, a mysterious figure known only as "the Child" who runs the camp, routinely confiscates and burns all the detainees' personal books—including both Chinese and foreign volumes. However, the novel concludes with the revelation that even as the Child had been routinely confiscating and burning the detainees' books, he was also secretly collecting extra copies of each of these titles for his own private collection.

The book that Yan had completed just before embarking on his 2014 North American lecture tour was his 2013 novel *The Explosion Chronicles*. The work's plot, like that of *The Four Books*, revolves around themes of censorship and book burning. In particular, the novel describes how the protagonist, a Beijing-based author named Yan Lianke, is recruited by local officials to compile a local gazetteer detailing the history of his former hometown. What had originally been a modest village undergoes explosive growth during the post-Mao Reform Era, being quickly redesignated as a town, city, and eventually a megalopolis. After the novel's



fictional Yan Lianke completes his assignment, however, the local official who had originally commissioned the work expresses his dissatisfaction with the text's portrayal of his community and retaliates by burning the manuscript as the protagonist watches in horror.

The theme of book burning is symbolically powerful in almost any context, but in a Chinese context it is particularly resonant, given that it is recorded that one of the first acts of Qin Shi Huang, China's first emperor, after unifying the Chinese nation in 221 BCE, was ordering that almost all the country's books be burned (books on medicine, divination, agriculture, and forestry were excepted). However, both *The Four Books* and *The Explosion Chronicles* introduce an intriguing twist to this theme of book burning. Just as in *The Four Books* it is revealed that the Child had been amassing a vast private collection by secretly keeping a copy of virtually every title he confiscated and burned, similarly in *The Explosion Chronicles* the disclosure that the local official burns the fictional Yan Lianke's manuscript is seemingly contravened by the suggestion that the novel is itself a version of the local historiography destroyed by the local official. In both cases, themes of destruction and censorship are inextricably intertwined with corresponding motifs of creation and appreciation, and it is precisely in the interstices of these two sets of tendencies that Yan's own contemporary work is positioned.

Although Yan's works are now available in translation to readers around the world, Yan nevertheless insists that his primary audience has always been his fellow Chinese. He knows no language other than Chinese. In this respect, the essays in *Sound and Silence* are unusual in that they were composed specifically for foreign audiences. Some of the pieces echo concerns that Yan has raised in similar fora in China, but others speak directly to the difficulties he has encountered within China and the ways he is perceived abroad. Another concern that runs through the volume involves Yan's perception of foreign society and culture, and particularly his views on foreign literature. Yan has read many foreign literary works in translation, and in several of these essays he offers detailed commentaries on literary works from Europe, North America, and Japan.

The present collection of essays opens with the full text of the acceptance speech Yan presented at the Franz Kafka Prize award ceremony in October 2014, and the other essays are based on the lectures he gave during his North American tour in the spring of that same year.

A slightly different version of this volume was published in Chinese in Taiwan in August 2014, but without the Kafka Prize acceptance speech. Many of the lectures on which the essays in this volume are based were rather colloquial, and here we have retained some of these conversational elements while also lightly editing the essays for concision and clarity. For instance, Yan, who is known for his self-deprecating humor, frequently alternates the point of view in these essays, referring to himself in the first, second, and third person—sometimes shifting from one usage to another even in the same sentence. In this volume we have retained some of these pronoun shifts where the referent was clear from the context (such as when Yan refers to himself in the third person to describe what other people are saying about him), but we have silently modified others where they seemed potentially confusing to readers. We have refrained from adding editorial footnotes to preserve the feel of the original essays and have adopted a very light hand in silently adding minor supplementary material to the translated essays (for instance, Yan refers to many Western authors only by their last name, but we have often added their first name, in accordance with English-language academic conventions). Above all, we have attempted to retain the powerful storytelling qualities of the original talks.

Indeed, one of Yan Lianke's strengths is his skill as a storyteller, and his most recent novel was released in 2021 in China under the title *Central Plains* (*Zhongyuan*) but in Taiwan under the title *A Chinese Story* (*Zhongguo gushi*). Yan Lianke wrote the first draft of the work between January and April of 2020, as China was facing its first wave of COVID-19 infections, and although the novel—which features a cycle of stories by a husband, wife, and son, who fantasize about killing one another—does not directly address the pandemic, it nevertheless reflects on issues of life, death, narrative orientation, and geographic constraint that played a critical role during the crisis. Coincidentally, it was also in the first months of 2020 that President Xi Jinping took the “tell the good China story” slogan he had first introduced in 2013 and retooled it to urge the Chinese people “to tell the good China story of fighting the pandemic.” In so doing, Xi was concerned not only with shaping how China would be viewed by the rest of the world but also how the Chinese people would view the biopolitical measures that the state was enacting in response to the crisis.



Just months after publishing the Taiwan edition of *A Chinese Story*, meanwhile, Yan had the opportunity to offer his own story on the pandemic itself. On February 21, 2022, he delivered the first lecture for an online class he was teaching at HKUST (like many academics around the world, Yan had been teaching his classes online since 2020 because of the pandemic), and the text of his preliminary remarks was quickly posted to many online fora. In particular, Yan opened his lecture by asking his students, “Do you have the capacity for memory?” He explained that “having the capacity for memory is the soil for memory itself, as memory grows and extends from this soil. Having memory and the capacity for memory is the fundamental difference that distinguishes humans from animals.” Yan then invited his students to consider the following counterfactual scenario:

Imagine for a moment that we don’t discuss those distant histories that have already undergone a change of book cover and book number, and instead focus only on events from the past twenty years, which young people like yourselves, who were born in the 1980s and 1990s, have experienced and can remember, including the national crises such as AIDS, SARS, and the novel coronavirus. Are these latter crises man-made disasters, or are they natural disasters that humans are unable to resist, like the Tangshan and Wenchuan earthquakes?

Yan concludes by observing that even though it may be difficult to identify the precise cause of the present crisis, at the very least we can ask “Where did our memories of these earlier crises go?”<sup>5</sup> The title of Yan’s speech captures his conclusion: “After this plague, let us become people with memory.”

Although societal memory has long been an important concern for Yan, in his 2020 lecture he focuses not only on individual and collective memory (*jìyì*) but rather on the very *capacity* for memory (*jìxíng*). Moreover, Yan’s focus on memory and amnesia in the context of the pandemic is very fitting, given that a key factor in the virus’s ability to spread through communities is whether a sufficiently large percentage of the population had developed resistance or immunity—meaning that someone’s immune system retains a memory of previous inoculations or infections that can permit it to respond more effectively to future infections. Similarly, in this 2022 talk, and throughout most of his career, Yan

has persistently attempted to help his readers “see the darkness” and to spur their “capacity for memory”—in order to better position them not only to remember previous traumas or crises but also to respond more effectively to future ones.

#### NOTES

- 1 Yan Lianke, “On China’s State-Sponsored Amnesia,” trans. Jane Weizhen Pan and Martin Merz, *New York Times*, April 1, 2013; Yan Lianke, “Finding Light in China’s Darkness,” trans. Carlos Rojas, *New York Times*, October 23, 2014.
- 2 The future Nobel laureates in question were Elfriede Jelinek and Harold Pinter.
- 3 After being awarded annually from 2001 to 2020, the prize now appears to have been discontinued. The statement here is from the webpage of the Franz Kafka Society, which is offline but has been archived. Franz Kafka Society, “Der Franz-Kafka-Preis” [The Franz Kafka Prize], archived January 11, 2022, at Archive.org, <https://web.archive.org/web/20220111121858/http://franzkafka-soc.cz/cena-franze-kafky/>.
- 4 Yan Lianke, *Discovering Fiction*, trans. Carlos Rojas (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021), 99.
- 5 Yan Lianke, 經此疫劫，讓我們成為有記性的人 (“Jing ci yijie, rang women chengwei you jixing de ren” [After this plague, let us become people with memory]), *China Digital Times*, February 22, 2020.

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