



International Fiction Book Club

Yan Lianke – *The Four Books*

Monday 18 January 2021, 6.30pm by Zoom

The tenth meeting of the Litfest International Fiction Book Club was held by Zoom on Monday 18 January 2021 at 6.30pm.

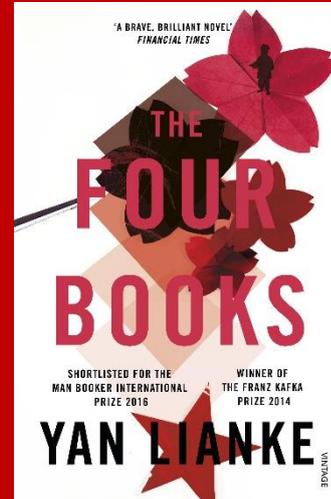
We discussed *The Four Books* by Yan Lianke, translated from the Chinese by Carlos Rojas, and published in paperback and as an eBook by Vintage.

About the Book

This story of the Writer, the Professor, the Musician and the Child in a re-education camp during Mao's Great Leap Forward is at once horrific, humorous and visionary.

'A Chinese novel hailed across the planet as a masterpiece ... For once the hype doesn't go far enough' *The Times*

A meditation 'on the meaning of integrity, truth, love, ethics when confronted with horror. It is an extraordinary novel' *Observer*



We chose this book for its irony, its great meditative power, its humour and its humanity.

If you haven't read *The Four Books* yet, we hope you will. An edited transcript of our discussion with the translator Carlos Rojas follows.

Bill Swainson Welcome, Carlos.

Carlos Rojas Hi, how are you?

Bill Very well, thank you. And thank you for joining us. There are some people you may know here, Laura Susijn and Nicky Harman.

Laura Long time, no see.

Carlos Indeed, indeed.

Bill And Nicky Harman is travelling at the moment. So to keep voice contact by Zoom, she's without a picture. You can't see her, but she's here.

Carlos I see her name.

Nicky Hello, Carlos.

Bill I'm going to hand back to Sam O'Donoghue now, who's the co-convenor of this book club. He's been moderating the meeting so far and will take it from here.

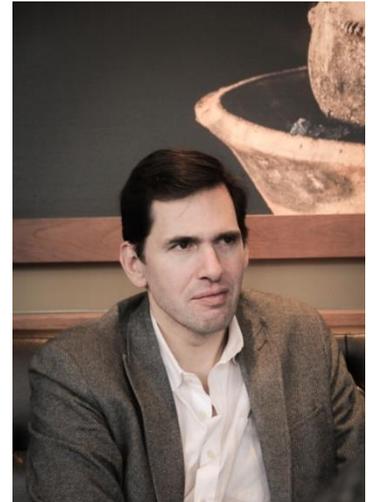
Sam O'Donoghue Hi, Carlos. And thank you so much for coming today. We have a number of questions that are more about the mechanics and process of translation, and your work specifically with the author. And so I guess we'll begin with those before moving on to some more thematic questions. So we'll begin with Jack's question.

Jack Hi, Carlos. My question is, how closely did you work with the author on the translation? How much back and forth was there, and about what details in particular if there was any back and forth?

Carlos Yeah, I know Yan Lianke well. We're in regular contact, and I often see him when I go back to Asia. But for my translations, I always bring him in at the very end of the process. I'll translate a novel, and at the end, if I still have questions – and usually I do have some issues that still need to be resolved – I'll ask him. But we don't have a regular back and forth in the process of translation. I would also note that, for all the novels that I've translated, there's actually another step, is that after I've finished the translation and send it to the press, it is then reviewed by the editor and copy editor. The editor and copy editor, who are reviewing only the English text, will often have questions that they'll kick back to me – some of which I can resolve myself, including some oversights on my part. But they also often find issues with the original, continuity issues or logical issues. For these, I'll often confer with the author, and sometimes his response will be, Oh, that's interesting; I hadn't I ever thought that. In some cases, we end up making some minor revisions to the actual text in response to the copy editor's queries.

Karen Hi, Carlos. How far did you have to deviate from the original language to get this English moving as fluidly as it does?

Carlos It's hard to quantify. I would say that in general, I try to translate as faithfully as I can, but readability is also a consideration. One of the things I often do is keep an eye out for issues of repetition. Compared to English, the Chinese language is generally more tolerant of, and even encourages, repetition. This applies not only to individual words or phrases, but even plot details and longer sections. In Chinese this often works well rhetorically, and is recognised as a characteristic of some of the

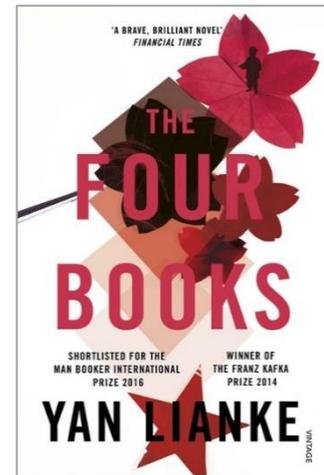


Carlos Rojas

‘Compared to English, the Chinese language is generally more tolerant of repetition’

authors I translate, including Yan Lianke. But it doesn't really work as well in the English. In general, however, I try to be quite faithful to the original. In the case of this novel, one of the particular challenges involves the opening paragraph, which is quite metaphorical, elusive, and abstract. Accordingly, it would have been difficult to offer a strictly a literal translation, given that it's so abstract, particularly given that it's the first paragraph of the novel. So, in that case, I did modify it slightly. Going back to Jack's question, when I finished translation, I went to the author and said, let's talk about this first paragraph and what it's trying to say. I then took some of his explanation and spliced it onto my translation, to try to make the passage a bit more legible.

At an event in Hong Kong that Laura attended along with one of his other publishers, a Norwegian publisher took two or three different translations of the novel, and read the first paragraph, and said something to the effect of, *Look, these are all great, but they're quite different from one another*. Indeed, all three translations took very different approaches to how to resolve this highly metaphorical language of the opening paragraph. As I was the only one of Yan Lianke's translators in the room, the publisher asked me what I would say about the translation of the opening paragraph? I couldn't, of course, speak to the other translations, but in my case, I did have that email discussion with the author about what the paragraph was trying to do. But that approach is actually very unusual for me, and usually I try to keep that sort of interpretive interjection to a minimum.



Stephen Hi, Carlos. My question – you kind of touched on in your last answer. So the narrative flows in a fairly linear fashion, and yet, it's drawing on four separate sources, which have four different styles, I suppose: the metaphorical or more abstract type of writing, then record keeping, then memoir, and then the short chapter at the end, the philosophical treatise. So what I was wondering was for you as a translator, did you translate it linearly? Or did you translate all the metaphorical parts then all the record-keeping parts, all the memoir parts, then finally, the philosophical part, join it together, and then tweak and amend it?

Carlos That's an excellent question. No, I translated linearly, from the first page to the last. One of the challenges that this particular novel presented involves the need to preserve the different voices of each of the four texts. Each of the four texts belongs to a different genre, as you just very correctly noted, and they each represent a different kind of perspective, and a different writing strategy. The tricky thing is how to preserve those differences, particularly when alternating back and forth between the 'Old Course' and 'Criminal Records' texts. These two texts mirror one

'Each of the four texts belongs to a different genre'

another more closely than the other two, and furthermore they're both written by the same fictional hand. But as text, they're doing something very, very different, right. One text is written strategically to help expose other detainees, and to help the fictional Author gain benefits from the authorities. The other text, by contrast, represents the Author's own private writing that he hopes will become his future *magnum opus*. However, the actual content of what these two texts are describing overlaps quite closely. So that was an interesting challenge.

But in response to your question, I did initially translate from beginning to end, and then I went back and tried to do what I could to match up the respective voices.

Lisa I had a question about the use of repetition, mostly, and you've already explained that it's a device that's used in Chinese literature, but I wondered whether it was kind of retained to give a sense of the monotony of what life was like for these people. But also, it does sound very biblical, or like a sacred text, but it's also, as you said, a literary approach, a Chinese literary approach. So just wondered how much was retained of that repetition? And was it retained because it was a direct translation? Or was it meant to give a kind of sense of what people's lives were like?

Carlos Yeah, that's a great question. My earlier comment about repetition was intended more generally. I do a fair amount of literary translation from the Chinese, and repetition is something I encounter on a regular basis – just in terms of sort of literary conventions, and the way that language works. Even at the level of individual words, repetition is much more tolerated, or even encouraged, in Chinese. For this particular novel, though, I think repetition has a more specific function – or functions. You just identified a couple of them, including the role of repetition in illustrating and reinforcing what you described as the monotony of daily life at this re-education centre, which I think is absolutely correct. You also mentioned the attempt to get a feel for biblical language. And, this is definitely a very specific way in which repetition is used in the 'Heaven's Child' portion of the text, where a particular set of phrases is repeated in a way that mimics biblical language.

I think you're absolutely correct in those two aspects. Another way in which repetition functions is on a more structural level. This is more unique to this particular novel, and goes back to the issue that I was discussing a second ago regarding the relationship between the different texts that make up *The Four Books*. You often find a sort of Rashomon effect, where you'll have the same scene or event described several times, but each time from a different perspective. This way, you first see the scene from one perspective, and then another. So, on a surface reading, it seems like repetition because you're like – I've already read about this. But then you realise that it's actually quite deliberate, because it's giving you a different viewpoint on those events, and everyone is seeing only their own limited perspective.

'A sort of Rashomon effect, where you'll have the same scene or event described several times but from a different perspective'

In response to your question, however, for this novel, and sort of more generally, my approach to repetition is to try to give the reader a sense that the repetition is there, even if I'm not necessarily preserving every instance of repetition. For instance, if there are certain phrases or words that appear over and over again in a text, I might end up cutting some of them, but keep enough to make the reader aware that the repetition is there. And this is also kind of a collaborative process. I'll make some of those decisions on my own, and then there is also the copy-editing process. One of the benefits of having an external copy editor is that they'll sometimes say, Well, you know, this reads well, but this feels unnecessarily repetitious. Sometimes we'll end up cutting individual words, and in some cases we might cut a paragraph or two, if they feel unnecessarily repetitious.

Nicky I've only read the translation, I haven't read the original, but I was very struck by, and, yes, carried along by the incantatory quality of the language of the translation. And there was some wonderful alliteration – it was just one sentence that really, really struck me at the bottom of page 229. But I'm in a dark car, so I can't read it to you. And I wondered if you could say something about the incantatory quality of the Chinese – I imagine it was also in the Chinese.

Carlos I love that word –‘incantatory’. Particularly coming from a fellow translator, so thank you for that. I’m not sure – I just pulled up my book here. I’m not sure if we have the same pagination, but at the bottom of page 229 of my text, I have this, from the ‘Heaven’s Child’ section.

So it came to pass.

This is how things came to pass. And then they fell apart.

Yeah, ‘it came to pass’ is a perfect example of a phrase that appears over and over again in the text – sometimes with minor variations, but often repeated word for word, so I tried to retain that in the translation. This appears in the biblical portion of the text, and it’s an adaptation of the Chinese version of the biblical language. It clearly has a mythological, legendary, fatalistic function. And after this phrase has appeared repeatedly, you sometimes find a slight twist on it. Such as here, you have ‘And this is how things came to pass’, immediately followed by, ‘And then they fell apart.’

This is more a commentary on the original than it is on the translation. I was trying to follow the language as closely as I could there, and I think this is a good example of the way Yan Lianke uses repetition for rhetorical effect.

Kane Moving on from fatalism, I was going to ask about the sort of the magic realism and specifically the use and symbolism of blood throughout the novel. And also, I guess, that’s important in some of his earlier novels.

Carlos That’s a good question. You called it magical realism?

Kane I think because that’s the first thing I go to, which might be entirely incorrect.

Carlos No, it’s not incorrect. It’s actually quite interesting, because this novel was published in 2010, and immediately after, in 2011, Yan Lianke published a book of literary criticism called *Discovering Fiction*, in which he opens with a quote from an afterword he wrote for *The Four Books*, where he talks about his relationship with realism and different traditions of realism. It’s in this 2011 book of literary criticism that he not only offers a history of realist fiction in Western and Chinese literature, he also introduces what he describes as his own approach to realism, which he calls ‘mythorealism’. This is a key term he introduces in this 2011 text (which, incidentally, I just finished translating, and will be coming out from Duke University Press).

**‘He introduces ...
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And one of the things Yan talks about in this volume is a trajectory from nineteenth-century high realism (by figures like Tolstoy and Dickens), then moving on to someone like Dostoyevsky, to the early twentieth-century turn to what Yan calls ‘zero-truth’ or a ‘zero-realism’, which he identifies with Kafka. He argues that the latter phenomenon represents a direct break from the kinds of causal bonds that anchored nineteenth-century high realist fiction. And then the third step that he identifies in this kind of trajectory is García Márquez’ *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, and more generally Latin American magical realism, or magic realism, which he sees as being a kind of halfway point between the emphasis on what he calls the full causality that one finds in nineteenth-century realist fiction, and what he calls ‘zero causality’ that one associates with something like *The Metamorphosis*, where it’s just causal enough that it’s easier to accept, where there’s still things that happen that you would expect to find in the real world. Then he moves on to use that as the groundwork for what he’s describing as his own recent literary practice, which he calls ‘mythorealism’. The full analysis needs a longer sort of explanation than I can provide here, but mythorealism is basically a synthesis of elements taken from each of these earlier realist traditions, and is grounded on an interplay between the real and what he’s



Yan Lianke

calling the ‘mythos’, these kinds of legendary, almost mythological qualities that are, I think really exemplified in a novel like *The Four Books*. And so, going back to your question about the crop irrigation, this this kind of quasi cannibalistic imagery of blood as irrigation and then consuming these blood-irrigated grains. This is, again, the most immediate reference point in terms of his own fictional writing for this critical concept that he’s calling ‘mythorealism’ that he’s using to describe not only his most recent works, but also a general tendency that he’s identifying in a number of other contemporary works in modern Chinese fiction.

Margaret I’ve noted that *The Four Books* title is a reference to the Confucian *Four Books*, but that’s where my knowledge of the references stops short. And I wondered if you could say something here about what you feel his influences were from Chinese literature, and maybe from Western literature, as well. From what you’ve said, so far, he’s obviously very widely read in Western literature. So, you know, is there a sort of interplay of influence there? Do you think? Or how do you see that working?

Carlos Yeah, absolutely. Before COVID shut down international travel, on one of my most recent trips to China, someone who was introducing me looked a little bit too quickly over my CV, and when we were talking afterwards, he said, Oh, so you translated *The Four Books*, that must have been a huge undertaking. Later on in the conversation, I realised that he thought I translated the actual Confucian *Four Books*, rather than Yan Lianke’s novel by the same title.

Yes, the novel’s title is definitely troping on the Confucian *Four Books*, although the literary and cultural reference points are quite different. Actually, I don’t see any sort of any meaningful reference to the Confucian *Four Books* in the novel. There are a couple of references to Mencius, but otherwise there’s not really a systematic attempt to engage with the Confucian *Four Books* that I’m aware of.

Near the end of the novel, you realise that the Child has been secretly collecting classic literary works, both Chinese and Western, and has been storing them even while simultaneously making a public display of book burning. I think you could easily see this as a metaphor for a Yan Lianke’s own sort of approach to writing, in that he’s definitely a literary archivist. In *Discovering Fiction* he offers detailed discussions not only of Western classics like *Anna Karenina*, *War and Peace*, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, and so forth, but also works I had never heard of, like a novel by Joseph Goebbels or a short story called ‘The Third Bank of the River’ by the Brazilian author João Guimarães Rosa.

‘I think he has an iconoclastic streak’

Yan is an omnivorous reader who reads all sorts of fiction. But at the same time, I think he has an iconoclastic streak, sort of mirroring the book burning in *The Four Books*. He arguably wants to sort of tear down certain traditions and rebuild them from the inside. So, I think that the Child in *The Four Books*, in a very extreme way, represents two of Yan’s tendencies – of both wanting to preserve and reproduce these earlier works from a variety of different literary traditions, while at the same time trying to turn away from these precedents and create something genuinely new. In

terms of actual direct influences on which he draws in *The Four Books*, obviously the Bible is one key work, together with some twentieth-century Russian authors like Solzhenitsyn. The final chapter is obviously a reference to the myth of Sisyphus, but it's also a more immediate reference to Camus' 'The Myth of Sisyphus', which was fairly influential in China during this period. So, that's double literary reference – referring both to a classic myth as well as to a contemporary retelling of that same myth.

Bill You mentioned Solzhenitsyn earlier, and I was struck by how the impact of *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* is delivered at the end – it's an absolutely astounding book all the way through its barely 180 pages – but at the end, the narrator says this day is 'just one of the 3,653 days of his sentence'. And he gets the repetition into one sentence at the end. Whereas I noticed with Yan Lianke that one of the benefits of telling the same events from slightly different points of view is that it has a multiplying effect on the monotony, but you've got to keep your wits about you because it's not monotonous. The characters are experiencing monotony, but you the reader aren't.

And I also thought that his humour and humanity and the steadiness of his philosophical gaze to even reimagine the Sisyphus myth, as being obliged to hope. The stone rises up the hill and you've got to force it all the way back down to the bottom, but you're not going to show anyone what you're feeling. And we've seen it all the way through the book in different guises. You're not going to show anyone what you're feeling because then something will change. So 'normality' has a kind of balm to it, even if it's a horrendous normality. But just tell us, if you would, a bit about how you dealt with his humour, because it can be absolutely shocking, but it's also very wry, very good observational humour.

Carlos Yeah, that's another great question. I think humour is definitely one of the distinguishing characteristics of Yan's writing, and particularly dark humour, or black humour – which is something in which he's quite interested, in terms of Western literary antecedents. One of the things Yan talks about in *Discovering Fiction* is black humour by authors like Joseph Heller, and the degree to which he's taken inspiration from that. So, in terms of how I deal with it, I try to just take the humour and preserve it, at least as I understand it. I mean, humour is obviously somewhat individual and impressionistic – and something that you might find humorous might not strike someone else as funny – but I think it's for him, I think the humour is often situational. I mean, that sort of the deadpan quality of describing something in a matter of fact, way, and then having the underlying irony speak for itself is, I think, one of his strategies.

That's pretty much all I have to say about that, but since you mentioned the end of the novel, and the twist on the Sisyphus myth of pushing a stone down a mountain rather than up it, I might close by noting that, here, he's taking inspiration, not only from the Greek myth and from the Camus retelling, but also from an actual location in China. It's a place in the northeast. It's a tourist spot, about a 45-minute drive from the city of Changchun. It's a tourist park with a number of local oddities, including a stretch of road where it looks like the road is going up, but it's actually going down. And so you have all these tourists that drive there, and will, you know, put a bottle on the ground and watch it roll down or up, or in some cases, even, you know, drive their car to the middle of the road, put into neutral and then see what sort of backup and everything.

'Humour is definitely one of the distinguishing characteristics of Yan's writing'

I think this was clearly an optical illusion, right? I mean, you have this row of hedges near the road, and it's arranged in such a way that it looks as though the road is slanted in one direction, whereas it's actually slanted in the other direction. But he was explaining that it was actually some sort of gravitational fluctuation in this particular region. Going back to the question of humour – it's hard to tell exactly, you know, whether he was being tongue-in-cheek, or whether he actually did think that it was some sort of weird sort of gravitational flux.



Yan Lianke. Photo by Shiyi Peng

Then again, who am I say? Maybe it was a weird gravitational phenomenon. At any rate, he did mention that, that this tourist site was one that was the direct inspiration for his twist on the Sisyphus myth at the end of the novel. It was his own private joke, given that it is something that, presumably, very few of his readers would be aware of.

Sam Fantastic. Thank you for that last anecdote, giving us a little taste of the author himself and his humour. And thank you so much for coming to our book club today and for your answers to our questions.

Carlos Thanks for having me. Thank you for your interesting questions, and thanks again for your expert curation of the session.

Carlos Rojas is Professor of Chinese Cultural Studies at Duke University's Trinity College of Arts and Sciences. He has translated many of Yan Lianke's novels, including Lenin's Kisses and The Day the Sun Died.

Sam O'Donoghue is Lecturer in Spanish in the Department of Languages and Cultures (DeLC) at Lancaster University, and with Bill Swainson co-convenor of the Litfest International Fiction Book Club.

Next Meeting

The next book to be discussed at the Litfest International Fiction Book Club on **Monday 15 February at 6.30pm** is Daniel Kehlman's sweeping historical fantasy, the Booker International short-listed novel *Tyll*, translated from the German by Ross Benjamin, and published in paperback and eBook by riverrun.

'A work of imaginative grandeur and complete artistic control' Ian McEwan

'Kehlman's imagination runs deep and wild... It travels with the currents of history ... and echoes with the power of myth' Valeria Luiselli

If you would like to register to join the Litfest International Fiction Book club, please email Bill Swainson at litfestbill@gmail.com.

