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DISCLOSING THE INTRICATE ASPECTS OF CHINESE SOCIETY IN YAN LIANKE'S *SERVE THE PEOPLE!*

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ABSTRACT

A study of Chinese literature would be lacking without acknowledging the significant contributions of Yan Lianke, a highly acclaimed writer. Lianke is renowned for his examination of the human condition and his adeptness at portraying the intricacies of life and societal structures in his artistic creations. Lianke's novel, *Serve the People!*, is a captivating story that examines the Chinese Cultural Revolution of the 1960s and investigates the significant influence of government policies on the general population. This paper seeks to assess the characters in the novel and examine its theme, which involves the clash between individual ambitions, societal duties, inequalities, injustices, and the corrupting power of riches, ambition, and the consequences of political instability. The story depicts an unexpected sexual liaison between a soldier and a woman, emphasizing the divergent beliefs of traditional and modern China. The study examines how Lianke adeptly conveys a message

of hope and freedom to the audience, even in the face of prevalent circumstances of repression. Lianke employs comedic elements to highlight the prevailing socioeconomic issues that China is presently grappling with. This paper intends to illustrate how the novel *Serve the People!* serves as a powerful reminder of the need to defend one's beliefs and the right to freedom in the midst of persecution.

KEYWORDS: Social life, human nature, corruption, personal aspiration, and conflict.

Yan Lianke's novel *Serve the People!*, is a complex and thought-provoking work that explores the nuances of communism and the fundamentals of human nature. The Cultural Revolution, a period of political unrest in China in the 1960s and 1970s, brought about significant societal problems. Chairman Mao Zedong was the leader of a period marked by intense political and social unrest. Zedong asserts that "a revolution is not a dinner party, or writing an essay, or painting a picture, or doing embroidery; it cannot be so refined, so leisurely and gentle, so temperate, kind, courteous, restrained, and magnanimous" (28). A violent type of insurrection known as a revolution occurs when one social class forcibly overthrows another from power. Stories from the Cultural Revolution are known for being bizarre and horrifying, and this has had a significant effect on Chinese culture as well as the psychology of people. The adulterous relationship that is portrayed in the story takes place against this backdrop. In an article titled, Fan asserts that:

The reality of China is so outrageous that it defies belief and renders realism inert... Some of the most memorable events in history happened here, but, during my lifetime, it's become one of the poorest places in the country... There is no dignity left, and because of that people of Henan have left a deep sense of loss and bitterness... The feeling of coming out ahead produces a "skewed, misbegotten joy".

The narrative is intricately entangled with political and human longing, which constituted a significant concern during that era. The protagonists in Yan Lianke's literature face a conflict between their personal desires and the communist party's overall goals. The story delves at the dynamics of power distribution between individuals in positions of leadership and those in subordinate roles. The text explores the impact of the party's dominion over its citizens on their lives and their subsequent responses to it.

Bauman's *Liquid Modernity* states, "The complexities of society's life are not only in its structures but also in the collective consciousness and cultural narratives that shape its members' beliefs and behaviours" (203). The preceding remark accurately reflects reality. The intricacy of social existence can be likened to that of a jigsaw puzzle, wherein every piece is interrelated and occupies a distinct role within the broader framework of humanity. Chinese society is characterized by a multitude of races, languages, and faiths, all of which have significantly influenced the culture and conventions of the country.

China is a diverse society characterized by increasing complexity and dynamic change. It is in the process of a difficult and dangerous transition with no clear end point or guidelines. The leadership watches the events unfolding in other countries with which they share many characteristics, and are concerned to maintain control and order, even if this attracts condemnation from abroad.

(Gold 3)

Furthermore, the Chinese economy has a great degree of diversification, including a broad spectrum of industries, sectors, and enterprises. There is significant disparity in the level of economic development, with certain regions being considerably more advanced than others. The Chinese government has historically maintained stringent control, resulting in a complicated and frequently opaque political system. The combination of these elements

results in a social order that is significantly more complex and subtle than what most individuals are aware of. Consequently, gaining a thorough understanding of the Chinese economy and society necessitates an all-encompassing approach, which may prove challenging for the typical individual to grasp. The novel depicts the juxtaposition of conventional and contemporary perspectives on love and marriage, as well as the challenges that emerge from divergent viewpoints.

The narrative also illuminates the disparity and inequity prevalent in Chinese culture and scrutinizes the repercussions of the Cultural Revolution. The plot of the story demonstrates the impact of the Cultural Revolution on the lives of common individuals, as well as its enduring influence on Chinese society, through the portrayal of Liu Lian and Wu Dawang. Their endeavors to meet the expectations of the dictatorship provide us with valuable understanding of the impact of the revolution on everyday existence. The psychic is treated differently based on their ideological frameworks and ways of living.

The concept of gender equality aims to provide fair and unbiased opportunities and resources to individuals, regardless of their gender, without subjecting them to discrimination. However, many individuals remain steadfast in their ideas and are resistant to change. The work employs symbols and metaphors to elucidate the themes of power, oppression, and resistance. For instance, the main character's passage through the village represents his progression towards self-discovery and liberation. The narrative commences by introducing Wu Dawang, the main character, who has the rank of Sergeant and resides in destitution alongside his family. Lianke quotes a few sentences from the book *Serve the People!*:

THE NOVEL IS THE ONLY place for a great many of life's truths. Because it is only in fiction that certain facts can be held up to the light.

The novel it is, then, for this particular truth.

The story I'm about to tell, you see, bears some resemblance to real characters and events.

Or – if I may put it this way: life has imitated art, re-rehearsing the plot of

Serve the People! (01)

Liu Lian is employed as a military nurse and enters into matrimony with the Division Commander as a result of her financial circumstances. The Commander abruptly takes a temporary break from both his family and his work. Ultimately, she experiences a sense of isolation within her married life as well. Subsequently, Dawang is assigned to a remote countryside settlement to provide assistance to the local populace, representing the authority exerted on the individual. It is during this time that he encounters and develops romantic feelings for Liu Lian, the spouse of a military commander. Their love defies conventional expectations, resulting in unwelcome friction between them.

Throughout their time in the village, the pair examines the dynamic interaction between communism and the interpersonal connections that emerge from these societal structures. “They were like a flock of sheep under the control of the Party’s leaders, their thoughts and actions restricted by the Party’s dictates” (Lianke 19). Here are a few excerpts from the well-known novel *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* by D.H. Lawrence:

She had been supposed to have rather a good figure, but now she was out of fashion: a little too female, not enough like an adolescent boy. Disappointed of its real womanhood, it had not succeeded in becoming boyish and unsubstantial and transparent; instead it had gone opaque. Somehow they too were going flat, slack and meaningless. (92-93)

The main character, Connie, grapples with her emotions for her partner, Oliver Mellors, and the quote reflects her awareness of her deep affection for him. Julia Lovell, the translator, draws a comparison between the political satire found in two novels: *Serve the People!* and *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. These works delve into the intricacy of desire and the process of sexual awakening. Nevertheless, both of these works address the identical matter: the intricacy of everyday existence. Both Wu Dawang and Liu, as characters, grapple with their internal longings, resulting in significant personal consequences as they reject societal norms and pursue personal satisfaction.

This work explores both the aspects of suppression and the societal expectations around gender roles. Regardless of the disparity in social class and economic condition, the couple's affection for one another endures unwaveringly. While in a state of surprise, Dawang observed a wooden sign while standing. The phrase 'Serve the People' is prominently displayed in vivid red lettering, prompting the Sergeant to recognize and comprehend the symbolic connotations related to sexuality. Lian and Dawang stayed together for duration of three days at the commander's residence. Extracted from Chapter Eight of the book *Serve the People!*:

HAD LIFE BEEN A GAME all along, or had it only recently become one? Is all the world a stage, and the men and women on it merely players? Does passion come from love, or can love come from passion? Does it matter? Love was a game to be played seriously. (Lianke 111-112)

Once the curtain was entirely up, the play followed a relatively predictable course, despite the mysterious ending. In addition, Lian's pregnancy introduces an additional level of intricacy to the storyline:

The full complexity of Liu Lian's disclosure dawned on him. It had none of the simplicity of a political thought-crime; it was not something that could be rectified by a few years' hard labour. It was an emotional and biological event that broke down all the moral, social, cultural and political boundaries of their world. (Lianke 151-152)

Dawang frequently reminisces about his past while carrying out his appointed duties, initially inhibiting him from indulging in uninhibited sexual pleasure. However, in due course, he managed to liberate himself from his previous experiences and fully express his intense emotions, so embracing the joy of his recently acquired independence. De Beauvoir thinks that freedom is the fundamental determinant of our individual identity and serves as a guiding force for our behaviors. She holds the belief that independence is a crucial aspect of living in a genuine manner and has the potential to bring about a purposeful existence. She contends that freedom is universally recognized as an essential entitlement, enabling individuals to express their unique characteristics in every part of their existence. In her work *The Second Sex* (1989), Simone de Beauvoir emphasizes the significance of uniqueness in the formation of one's freedom. "Two separate beings, in different circumstances, face to face in freedom and seeking justification of their existence through one another, will always live an adventure full of risk and promise" (248).

Through the act of exercising freedom, individuals have the ability to establish and define their own unique identity. The notion of freedom is frequently seen as the fundamental principle underlying Beauvoir's literary works. Dawang has overcome his inhibitions and now lives his life with confidence and freedom. Ultimately, Dawang successfully conquers his carnal cravings and uncovers hitherto unexplored facets of his identity. He acknowledges the potency of passion in shaping his desired way of life. He values and appreciates every

mundane aspect and wholeheartedly embraces the magnificence of existence. The book titled *Sex for One: The Joy of Self-loving* is being referred to:

Sex is about power. When we talk about sexual pleasure and freedom, we are talking about the power to choose our own paths, to create and define our own identities, to find and explore our own pleasure, and to enjoy our sexuality without fear or shame. (Dodson 187)

Ultimately, the novel provides a compelling analysis of the Chinese population's endeavor to establish their position within a social structure that administers both incentives and penalties. Dawang and Lian dismantle propaganda posters. The local military is engaged in a rebellion against the powerful state. Dawang and Lian maintain their unwavering belief that the power of the people surpasses that of the state, despite whatever potential consequences they may encounter. They argue that the state is currently under the authority of officials. The triumph achieved by the general populace is commemorated according to their preferences.

In the conclusion of the novel, those residing in the state were able to construct their own distinct sense of self and revitalize their optimism and bravery. This novel serves as a testament to the accomplishments of individuals who possess limited power but abundant self-assurance. While the state may project an image of strength, it consistently fails to provide the people with genuine equality. The illicit and undisclosed love affair becomes a symbolic representation of the suppressed yearnings and discontentment experienced by individuals residing within restrictive societal structures. Lianke portrays readers' astute understanding of the intricacies of social stratification in China. In the midst of the hardships faced by the Chinese population, they manage to find solace in order to endure. Lianke's

works are highly potent in portraying literature that predominantly addresses social concerns and effectively enlightens readers about the true state of affairs.

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