

## YAN LIANKE'S *DREAM OF DING VILLAGE*: A CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

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**Abstract.** The study of literature from a cultural perspective is an early yet enduring research orientation that continues to attract scholarly attention. As the cradle of the Yellow River civilization, China has long been regarded as one of the birthplaces of world culture. Exploring Chinese literature allows readers not only to perceive the philosophical and humanistic ideas conveyed by writers but also to gain deeper insight into the nation's rich and ancient cultural values. In particular, in the case of Yan Lianke, a leading figure in contemporary Chinese literature, the integration between traditional Chinese culture and literature has become the hallmark of his artistic identity. Among his major works, *Dream of Ding Village* stands out as one of the most representative examples of this cultural-literary integration.

**Keywords:** Culture, *Dream of Ding Village*, Yan Lianke, dualism, symbolism, character, structure.

### 1. Introduction

Although Yan Lianke may be considered a “latecomer” in the landscape of contemporary Chinese literature, he has long occupied a vital position in what critics describe as the effort to “shine light from within darkness,” using literature as a means of moral and cultural self-reflection. Through his remarkable body of work, including *The Commander's Mistress*, *Hard Like Water*, *The Village of Widows*, and *The Four Books*, Yan Lianke has firmly established himself as one of the most prominent novelists in contemporary Chinese literary discourse.

The artistic and philosophical value of his works extends far beyond the borders of China; they hold universal significance for humanity as a whole. This global resonance has earned Yan Lianke numerous prestigious literary awards both domestically and internationally. His fiction also provides fertile ground for scholars, inspiring sustained critical inquiry within Chinese literary studies.

Leading academic journals such as *Contemporary Chinese Literature*, *Journal of Language, Literature and Culture*, *Asian-Pacific Translation and Cross-Cultural Studies*, *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, *Comparative Literature: East and West*, and *Social Sciences in China* have published numerous high-level studies examining the artistic values of Yan Lianke's novels.

As of June 2024, 1,183 scholarly works (including 6 doctoral dissertations and 305 master's theses) have been produced in China focusing on Yan Lianke's life and writing. In

Vietnam, both translation and academic research on Yan Lianke have also flourished. Notable contributions include:

- Nguyen Thi Tuyet & Che Thi Ngoc Han, *The Image of the Crowd in Several Novels by Yan Lianke* [1; 55–67];
- Nguyen Thi Mai Chanh, *Existential Sensibility in Yan Lianke's Novels* [2; 53–60];
- Nguyen Thi Minh Thuong, *Yan Lianke: A Representative Figure of Contemporary Chinese Literature* [3; 82–85];
- Nguyen Thi Tinh Thy, *The Grotesque in Yan Lianke's The Odes to Enlightenment* [4; 35–43];
- Nguyen Thi Tinh Thy, *Intertextuality in Yan Lianke's Fiction* [5; 60–70].

Among his works, *Dream of Ding Village* has attracted particular scholarly attention, with major studies such as:

- Nguyen Thi Mai Chanh & Cao Thi Xuan Giang, *Dream of Ding Village by Yan Lianke from a Cultural Intertextual Perspective* [6; 66–76];
- Nguyen Thi Tuyet, *Dream and Structure in Yan Lianke's Dream of Ding Village* [7; 66–80].

Each of Yan Lianke's novels constructs a distinct artistic world. Yet all of these fictional universes share a common foundation: they are profoundly shaped by cultural consciousness. In other words, culture functions as the structural core that underlies the creation of Yan Lianke's fictional worlds in general, and *Dream of Ding Village* in particular. Accordingly, this study focuses on elucidating the influence of traditional Chinese cultural paradigms on the construction of character systems, artistic space, and symbolic imagery in Yan Lianke's *Dream of Ding Village*.

## **2. Content**

Ancient Chinese culture is among the civilizations most profoundly shaped by dualistic thought. Dualism is one of the three major philosophical frameworks that explain the operation of all things in the universe. Long before dualism was formally systematized as a theory distinguishing *matter* and *spirit*, early Chinese thought had already expressed its presence through parallel and opposing concepts such as *good–evil*, *strength–gentleness*, and *virtue–vice*.

The Doctrine of Dualism in China is believed to have originated in the *Book of Changes (I Ching)*, one of the nation's Five Classics. The *I Ching's* system of *Yi* philosophy laid the foundation for *Taiji* culture and the Yin–Yang doctrine, the most distinctive embodiment of dualistic principles in Chinese thought. The *Yin–Yang* relationship reflects the symmetry of the cosmos and the inherent unity of opposites within all phenomena. In other words, the Chinese worldview assumes that everything in existence possesses two contrasting yet complementary aspects. These aspects not only oppose and contradict one another but also coexist and interdepend to form a harmonious and balanced whole.

Within this cultural and philosophical context, Yan Lianke's novel *Dream of Ding Village* is structured upon dualistic principles. The narrative is artistically organized according to the logic of opposites, which mirrors the traditional Chinese cosmology of Yin and Yang. This study, therefore, adopts the dualistic framework of Chinese culture as a mode of artistic reasoning to explore and interpret the *Dream of Ding Village*.

### **2.1. The Concept of Good and Evil and the World of Characters in *Dream of Ding Village***

The notions of “good” and “evil,” or broader reflections on the moral duality of human nature, have always been fundamental to understanding human identity. The three great Chinese philosophical traditions Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism each offer their own perspectives

on human goodness and wickedness. Although their interpretations differ, they all converge on a shared understanding of human nature across time and history.

In Confucianism, “goodness” (*shan*) manifests in two distinct forms. First, it exists externally as something that one can learn from, strive toward, and emulate. Second, it exists internally as innate virtue, beauty, and moral integrity. Discussing human nature, Mencius made the famous assertion: “*At birth, human nature is good*” (*ren zhi chu, xing ben shan*), explaining that “the goodness of human nature is like water flowing downward. There is no human being who is not good, just as there is no water that does not flow downward.” This view affirms an inherently benevolent human disposition. In contrast, Xunzi, a thinker of the third century BCE, argued that human nature is inherently evil, an idea more consistent with many Western philosophical traditions. Nevertheless, Mencius’s belief in innate goodness remained dominant throughout China and much of East Asia.

In Buddhism, *good* is defined as “thoughts, words, and actions that bring benefit to oneself, to others, and to all living beings.” Conversely, deeds that cause harm are *unwholesome* or *evil*. Importantly, Buddhism extends morality beyond outward behavior to the inner realm of mental states, for it is the mind that gives rise to speech and action. These states, in turn, generate *karma* and moral consequences that shape future experience. Thus, both virtue and vice ultimately depend upon the condition of one’s mind.

If one were to identify a single Daoist term corresponding to “good,” it would be *wu wei* (non-action). *Wu wei* has often been misunderstood as a passive or politically disengaged doctrine, yet philosophically it shares much with the Buddhist critique of greed (*tan*), anger (*chen*), and delusion (*si*). The foundation of *wu wei* lies in *wu yu*, freedom from desire. To act without acting presupposes a state without craving. From the Buddhist standpoint, only when people relinquish greed and attachment can they cease producing unwholesome deeds. Similarly, Daoism teaches that when people are free of desire and ambition, they cease to act against the natural order, thus transcending both good and evil.

Grounded in these long-standing Chinese conceptions of good and evil, Yan Lianke constructs a complex moral world in his fiction. In *Dream of Ding Village*, no character is purely good, nor purely evil. Both qualities coexist within each individual. Yet, in his pursuit to expose the deepest layers of China’s social reality, Yan Lianke tends to foreground the darker, more corrupt dimensions of human nature.

This moral duality is exemplified by the character Ding Hui, arguably the most evil figure in the novel. His wickedness is rooted in greed. Having witnessed the opulence of Shangyang Village, Ding Hui develops an insatiable desire for wealth and power. Motivated by greed, he establishes blood-selling stations, indirectly causing the epidemic and death that devastate the people of Ding Village. The villagers themselves, however, cannot be exonerated; they, too, become accomplices in their own destruction by participating in the trade. Ding Hui’s moral corruption extends beyond material greed to include ambition and lust for authority. As his social status rises from an ordinary farmer to a “blood boss,” then to deputy director and finally director of the County Fever Hospital, so too does his moral degradation. In Yan Lianke’s moral universe, wealth and power are invariably proportional to sin and evil.

Yet Ding Hui is not entirely devoid of virtue. The traces of goodness in him surface in his interactions with his father, Ding Shuiyang. Though at times he speaks harshly, declaring, “If you ever mention my kowtowing in Ding Village again, you are no longer my father, and I will not care for you in old age or in death” [8; 25] he also shows concern: “Father, please go home and rest” [8; 35]. When preparing to move to the city, he wishes to bring his father along: “Even if you have treated me poorly, you are still my biological father... After all that’s happened in Ding Village, our family cannot stay here any longer. You can come to the city with us, or live with Uncle Second. When he passes away, come to the city so I can care for you” [8; 189]. Near the

end of the novel, when he returns to Ding Village to arrange a ghost marriage for Xiao Qiang, he offers his father a small pouch, saying: "It's ginseng the finest wild kind" [8; 315].

This lingering sense of filial duty stems from *xiao dao* the Confucian ethic of filial piety deeply ingrained in Chinese consciousness. Within Confucian hierarchies, all relationships are structured by order and propriety. Social ranks, superior and inferior, noble and humble, are strictly observed. Most importantly, filial piety is held as the highest virtue. The *Book of Rites* (*Li Ji – Jiao Te Sheng*) states, "Humans are born of their ancestors, and the ancestors stand alongside Heaven itself." In Confucius's time, filial conduct was the measure of humaneness; later, Mencius expanded this into the principle of *qin qin* (affection for one's kin), asserting that regardless of parental behavior, a child must remain filial. Some scholars even argue that such devotion can become extreme. Thus, under the powerful influence of filial piety, Ding Hui despite his moral corruption, retains certain ethical boundaries he cannot cross.

In contrast, Ding Shuiyang, often seen as the most virtuous figure in the novel, is not without sin. His first wrongful act, encouraging villagers to sell blood, sets in motion the tragedy that follows. All subsequent evil associated with him centers on his son, Ding Hui. Whereas Ding Hui's evil stems from greed, Ding Shuiyang's arises from anger (*chen*). His resentment toward his son begins as a private thought, a seed of hatred that gradually deepens as Ding Hui's actions bring ruin upon the village. Eventually, his fury manifests as the wish for his son's death: "He wanted my father to kowtow door to door across the village, and when he finished, to die immediately, jump into a well, drink poison, hang himself, it didn't matter, as long as he died before everyone's eyes" [8; 16]. These dark thoughts culminate in Ding Shuiyang strangling Ding Hui during a song performance at the school, finally beating him to death with a chestnut-wood stick.

Despite his rage, Ding Shuiyang's goodness reemerges through repentance and acts of moral restitution. Haunted by guilt, he seeks to atone for his role in the blood-selling catastrophe. He fulfills the last wishes of dying villagers so that they may pass away peacefully: arranging for Ding Huilin's final singing performance, forging a seal for Li Sannian so his spirit could rest, or retrieving a red cotton-padded jacket to fulfill Zhao Dequan's promise to his deceased wife. Within his limited power, Ding Shuiyang strives to redeem his past misdeeds.

Yan Lianke's portrayal of good and evil does not merely juxtapose moral opposites within individuals; it also shows their dynamic interplay and potential for transformation. This idea resonates with Daoist dialectics. Daoism emphasizes the relativity and interdependence of all things, viewing good and evil as mutually defining. Laozi's dialectical philosophy can be summarized in two main principles.

First, Laozi recognized the inherent duality and interdependence of all phenomena: "Being and non-being give birth to each other; difficult and easy complement each other; long and short define each other; high and low depend on each other; sound and tone harmonize with each other; front and back follow one another" [9; 129].

Second, he affirmed the principle of mutual transformation: "What is bent shall be preserved; what is crooked shall be straightened; what is hollow shall be filled; what is worn shall be renewed; what is little shall grow; what is much shall be confused" [9; 130]. Everything exists in relation to something else, and through this dynamic interplay, the universe achieves balance and harmony.

In *Dream of Ding Village*, this law of transformation is vividly embodied in the characters. Li Sannian, once an idealistic village head devoted to improving Ding Village, ultimately succumbs to social pressure and participates in blood-selling, leading to his death. Zhao Xiuqin, a woman known for diligence and humility, secretly steals food from others. Zhao Dequan, an honest farmer who never quarreled or cheated in trade, steals a red silk coat from Ling Ling. Their moral downfall arises not from innate wickedness but from the harsh realities of life.

In contrast to other characters in the novel, whose moral development shifts from good to evil, the character Ding Shuiyang demonstrates that when individuals clearly perceive reality and are properly guided, they can still transform their character from evil back to good. After witnessing the people of Ding Village gradually perish from the epidemic and realizing that he and his son Ding Hui were indirectly responsible for all these tragedies, he constantly feels remorse and guilt, striving in every possible way to atone for his own sins and those of Ding Hui.

In sum, good and evil, though opposites, coexist and interpenetrate within both society and the individual. Through the moral evolution of his characters, Yan Lianke underscores the profound impact of lived reality on human nature. The coexistence and transformation of good and evil virtues and vice constitute the wholeness of the human condition and of the society that *Dream of Ding Village* seeks to portray.

## **2.2. The Concept of Dream and Reality, and the Construction of Artistic Space in the *Dream of Ding Village***

Drawing upon Jung's theory of dreams, Roland Cahen observes that:

"Dreaming is the manifestation of that spiritual activity which lives within us, thinking, feeling, experiencing, and speculating beyond the boundaries of our waking life, at every level from the biological to the spiritual, without our awareness. Expressing the latent flow of consciousness and the data of a life program inscribed in the deepest layers of the human being, dreams reveal the hidden desires of the individual and thus provide invaluable information in every respect." [10; 164]

In this view, dreams function as reconstructions or premonitions of what has happened, is happening, or may happen in reality. Consequently, many artists, particularly literary authors, have adopted the motif of "dream" ("meng") as an artistic technique and an innovative structural form to explore, reinterpret, and elucidate reality within their works. Entering into "dreamscapes" not only allows writers to expand the space of imagination but also enhances the aesthetic quality and artistic appeal of their creations.

In *Dream of Ding Village*, Yan Lianke designates Ding Shuiyang as the dreamer and Xiao Qiang as the one who enters and recounts these dreams to the reader. This narrative choice is deliberate. First, both characters are closely related to Ding Hui, the novel's central figure; thus, exposing his crimes through their consciousness becomes a poignant act of moral indictment. Second, in Chinese folk belief, the elderly and children are regarded as the most honest voices. Moreover, Ding Shuiyang is a respected elder and one of the first to engage in the blood-selling trade; therefore, his knowledge encompasses the full scope of the village's tragedy.

From the standpoint of human imagination, the world may be divided into two contrasting spaces: dream and reality. Essentially, "dream" and "reality" belong to two distinct ontological domains. In simple terms, "dreams" refer to the events and images that arise within human imagination during sleep or wakefulness, whereas "reality" encompasses the external phenomena that exist independently of imagination. In other words, dream and reality exist in a symmetrical, interwoven relationship within the fabric of human life.

Yan Lianke structures the entire novel upon the interaction between these two spaces. Throughout *Dream of Ding Village*, the narrative alternates between the events that occur within Ding Shuiyang's dreams and those that take place in the external world. Among the thirteen dreams recounted by the character, eight correspond to real or historical events within Ding Village.

For instance, in the first dream, Ding Shuiyang saw the towns of Wei County and Dongjing City filled with "underground sewers like a giant spider web, with every pipe bleeding." The wells and rivers were all bright red and reeked of blood. At the same time, hospitals echoed with the sorrowful cries of doctors and patients suffering from the fever. The people of Ding Village shut

their gates tightly and locked themselves inside their homes, hoping the closed doors could somehow keep death away. It was a dream, yet also a painful reflection of the tragic reality that had befallen Ding Village when it was struck by the fever.

In the second dream, Ding Shuiyang saw the origin of the fever, the source of the blood-selling activities, and the wealth of the people of Ding Village following their trip to visit Tai County. This too reflected events that had actually occurred in the village.

The third dream continued to depict the lively, bustling reality of blood-selling in Ding Village, with numerous large and small blood stations being set up. In this dream, Ding Shuiyang also saw the two brothers, Ding Liang and Ding Hui, going each night to the pond to wash blood bags, uncovering the cause of the pond's bright red, foul-smelling waters.

In the sixth and seventh dreams, Ding Shuiyang saw the coffin workshop and witnessed Ding Hui's second crime: embezzling coffins sent from higher authorities for the people of Ding Village and transporting them for resale at exorbitant prices.

In the eighth dream, Ding Shuiyang saw Ding Sansi and his son, along with the entire village population, carrying official documents stamped in red as they went to chop trees for coffins.

In the eleventh dream, Ding Shuiyang saw Ding Hui in the city, witnessing his luxurious, extravagant lifestyle and a room filled with Ding Hui's gold and wealth. This dream reflected the reality of Ding Hui's life in the city.

In the twelfth dream, Ding Shuiyang saw Ding Hui leading people back to Ding Village to relocate graves and arrange a posthumous marriage for Xiao Qiang. This, too, mirrored real events.

It can be seen that, through the combination of these eight dreams with the events occurring outside Ding Shuiyang's dreams, Yan Lianke has fully recreated a realistic portrait of life in Ding Village as it has been and is happening.

The most notable difference in the remaining five dreams compared to the previous eight is this: while the spaces in the eight dreams convey a sense of "realistic space," with events depicted in a layered, structured manner, the spaces in the remaining five dreams evoke a more mythical, dreamlike quality, filled with hazy, ambiguous, and symbolic images, as if "stitched together." These dreams can be divided into two smaller groups:

The first group consists of the fourth and fifth dreams. In both of these, Ding Shuiyang dreams of Ding Village submerged in a sea of flowers. On the village roads, every resident of Ding Village smiles brightly, carrying large bundles as they run home. When Li Sanren's grandchild stumbles and the bundle falls open, Ding Shuiyang sees that it contains nothing but gleaming gold bars and ingots, each grain of gold as large as a peanut. While the six dreams in the "realistic" group reveal surface-level realities, these are perceivable in the outside world. These two dreams expose a deeper layer of reality: the true roots that lead to the disasters in Ding Village.

The second group consists of the remaining dreams, all of which serve as foreshadowing of events that have just occurred or may occur in the future in Ding Village. Specifically:

In the ninth dream, Ding Shuiyang sees Ling Ling kneel to embrace Ding Liang's legs, calling him "father," while Ding Liang goes into the kitchen, picks up the vegetable knife on the table, and chops his left thigh, blood gushing out like water from a fountain in the town square. These images serve as Ding Shuiyang's premonitions of the deaths of Ding Liang and Ling Ling.

In the tenth dream, Ding Shuiyang sees nine suns shining everywhere, causing the earth to crack open. At the same time, on the plains, all living things wither, and the villages conscript young men to shoot the suns. This dream carries a mythical quality, evoking the Chinese myth of Hou Yi shooting down the nine suns. Through this dream, the author intends to foreshadow the impending consequences for the natural environment in Ding Village following the felling of trees for coffins.

The thirteenth and final dream depicts a space suffused with myth. Ding Shuiyang sees a woman walking through the mud, holding a willow branch and sprinkling it as she goes. Beneath each flick of her branch, the mud-dwelling people leap up and dance. This dream evokes the myth of Nüwa creating humanity and simultaneously implies the emergence of a new life in Ding Village.

Yan Lianke's novel *Ding Village Dream* contains a multitude of intertwined, overlapping dreams. These are not limited to the dreams that appear during Ding Shuiyang's sleep; they can also be dreams of wealth, dreams of power, or dreams of new medicines to cure the "hot disease" existing in the minds of the people of Ding Village, even when they are awake. People relentlessly chase after these illusory, distant dreams, only to ultimately realize that all of them are nothing but dreams, things that are forever unreal and unattainable.

Similar to the relationship between good and evil, the connection between dream and reality in the novel is not only interwoven but also dynamic and transformative, impossible to separate neatly. The saying "Dream is reality, and reality is also a dream" goes beyond merely judging whether Ding Shuiyang's dreams reflect actual events; it also expresses a doubt about the very "reality" of everything that occurs in the work. It is possible that all the events in Ding Shuiyang's dreams serve as mirrors reflecting the multiple layers of reality that have existed, are occurring, or will occur in Chinese society. Yet, at the same time, all of these events from the story of blood-selling to the AIDS epidemic, from coffin trading to arranged marriages, might simply be dreams existing within someone's imagination.

In sum, through the intertwining and interweaving of dream and reality, Yan Lianke exposes all the "nonexistent realities, unseen realities, and realities obscured by other realities" within the work. In doing so, he contributes to a comprehensive depiction of rural life in China against the backdrop of the AIDS epidemic at that time. At the same time, the dualistic structure of "dream" and "reality," existing in parallel, adds a distinctive and creative dimension to the novel.

### **2.3. Conceptions of Life and Death, Soul and Body, and the Haunting Symbols in the Artistic World of the *Dream of Ding Village***

In Chinese folk culture, conceptions of life and death, and of the soul and body, originate from the belief in the presence of deities and ancestors, and culminate in ideas about reward and punishment in the afterlife. Traditional Chinese thought attaches great importance to the element *Qi* (vital energy), as it is intimately connected to the issues of life and death. It is believed that life and death, body and soul, represent the beginning and end of an impermanent process of existence under different manifestations of *Qi*.

In Yan Lianke's novel *Dream of Ding Village*, the obsession with the human body is symbolically intertwined with *blood*, the very source of life and death.

First, blood symbolizes vitality and human health. Before Ding Shuiyang's blood-selling campaign and his visit to Tai County, the people of Ding Village steadfastly refused to sell their blood. This shows their awareness of blood's essential role in sustaining life.

However, beyond being the source of life, the villagers of Ding Village worship blood even more fervently because it becomes the source of wealth and power. For Ding Hui, blood grants him both authority and status, earning him the position of "Deputy Director of the County Epidemic Hospital." It also becomes the foundation of his immense fortune and luxurious city life. For the villagers, blood is the path to realizing their dream of a prosperous, comfortable life like that of the townspeople in Tai County: living in red-tiled houses, with flowers at the doorstep and holly trees in the yard; even pigsties and chicken coops built of red bricks; homes furnished with modern appliances, sofas, washing machines, and televisions. Their dream extends to daily abundance, collecting food from the village committee at will: spinach, leeks, pork, or fish, depending on their desire.

The villagers' blind faith that "blood" would generate all things like a divine force, fulfilling their dreams, drives them into the second nature of blood: the source of death.

On the surface, the blood caused the physical deaths of the people of Ding Village through a disease called AIDS. The villagers believed that blood was like water: not only did it give them life, but it also helped them earn money and become wealthy. They thought that this precious, God-given resource would never run out. Yet, confronted with the allure of money, they sold blood recklessly, disregarding proper procedures and the time required for recovery. Each time they sold blood, the interval grew shorter, leaving their bodies insufficient time to regenerate it. When the blood was no longer enough to sustain the body, they devised a solution: as long as there was enough blood to nourish the head, it would suffice. Consequently, every household suffering from blood deficiency imitated each other by positioning themselves head down, feet up, trying to compensate for the loss. This reflects the extreme and absurd measures they took in their pursuit of wealth.

Moreover, their narrow and shallow thinking led the people of Ding Village to consider only the importance of blood for generating wealth, without realizing the dangers if the blood became contaminated. And AIDS arrived among them through this "tool for making money." Ding Hui and Chief Cao indirectly brought the disease and death to the villagers, while the people of Ding Village, through selling their own blood, delivered death to themselves.

At a deeper level, blood is also the agent that brings about the moral death of the people of Ding village. For instance, Director Cao of the Education Department ignored the consequences of blood-selling and encouraged many villages to become "blood supply villages." As a result, disease and death spread throughout Ding village, while he was rewarded with promotion and a new car. Similarly, Ding Hui, driven by his dreams of power and wealth, organized reckless blood collection without regard for safe intervals or sanitary conditions. This led to the outbreak and rapid spread of the deadly epidemic and death across Ding village. It can be said that the villagers of Ding village died from the epidemic, while Ding Hui died in terms of morality.

In contrast to the fragility and transience of the human body, the soul evokes the notion of an invisible power. Ancient Chinese folk beliefs also held diverse views about the soul. In early times, the Chinese believed that there were two types of souls a dual-soul concept: a *rational soul*, associated with human intuition and intellect, and an *animal soul*, linked to the body's vital functions. They believed that after death, these two souls would dissolve and transform: the rational soul became a "spirit" (shen), while the animal soul became a "ghost" (gui). In this belief system, the *spirit* represents the sacred, luminous essence within human existence, whereas the *ghost* embodies the lingering desires of the living.

In Chinese folk culture, those who die unjustly or harbor excessive desires at the time of death are believed to have their souls transformed into ghosts that wander among the living. Moreover, ancient Chinese people held the belief that "Three feet above one's head dwell the spirits" and that "Heaven is watching what humans do," reminders meant to guide people toward goodness; otherwise, they would suffer karmic retribution. Such retribution would not only befall the individual who committed the wrongdoing but could also extend to their family.

In *Dream of Ding Village*, Yan Lianke creates the symbol of the soul through the ghost of Xiao Qiang, Ding Hui's son. His unjust death prevents him from attaining peace, turning him into a wandering ghost haunting Ding Village. The ghost narrator functions as a narrative device that opens up profound psychological hauntings in the reader's mind.

Choosing a ghost narrator is one of the novel's most distinctive artistic strategies. As a ghost, Xiao Qiang can traverse any space, witnessing all that happens in Ding Village. He can even enter Ding Shuiyang's dreams, uncovering hidden truths of the past, the origins of the epidemic, and glimpsing the villagers' tragic future. Through Xiao Qiang's narration, readers gain a panoramic



view of events past, present, and yet to come. Yan Lianke thus skillfully transforms the limited first-person perspective into an omniscient voice through logical narrative design.

Yan Lianke's choice of making Xiao Qiang the ghost narrator also stems from traditional Chinese cultural conceptions of children as symbolic figures. In Taoism, the infant or child is one of the most significant symbols. It is believed that true sages possess a soul as pure and natural as that of a child. For Taoist practitioners, the child represents the power of life and naturalness, since their hearts remain untainted by the worldly doctrines of Confucianism. Children embody purity, innocence, and spontaneity, free from ulterior motives. Thus, Yan Lianke's decision to choose Xiao Qiang, a child, and also Ding Hui's own son as the storyteller enhances the authenticity and credibility of the narrative.

Allowing the ghost of Xiao Qiang, the biological son of Ding Hui, to directly narrate his father's crimes is also Yan Lianke's way of engaging in a dialogue with the Confucian concept of filial piety (*xiao*). Within the Confucian ideological system, filial piety occupies the highest position. When discussing the *Three Cardinal Guides* (*san gang*), the relationship between father and son (*fu zi you qin* the affection between father and son) is mentioned first. It is evident that Confucianism places utmost emphasis on the relationship between parents and children. One of the core principles of Confucian filial ethics is that children must never testify against their parents and are even allowed to conceal their parents' crimes. In direct opposition to this principle, Yan Lianke allows Ding Hui's own son to denounce and expose his father's true face and his heinous deeds. This narrative choice can also be regarded as a form of punishment that Ding Hui must endure.

While other living beings merely experience fear and passivity in the face of death, humans not only fear and attempt to deny death but also possess the ability to recognize it and perform funerary rituals. For human beings, death represents a profound spiritual trauma. This trauma has given rise to myths of the afterlife, intended to soothe the psychological wounds caused by mortality. At the same time, death serves as the foundation for the development of funeral customs, ancestor worship, and ritual prayer in human societies. The people of Ding Village, haunted by the fear of death and the persistence of the soul beyond it, strive to prepare their physical bodies as "carefully" as possible for life after death.

According to statistics on the burial customs of various ethnic groups in China presented in "The Complete Book of Feng Shui Burial Practices", 41 out of 46 ethnic groups practiced earth burials. The reason this form of burial became the most widespread is that ancient Chinese believed that the earth is the mother of all things and that humans are born from the earth. Consequently, deities of the land, such as Earth Gods and Local Deities, frequently appear in Chinese mythology and folk beliefs and are widely revered. Some sayings emphasize the importance of the earth in human life, such as: "The earth is the place where all things are born" (Shuowen Jiezi) or "The one that gives birth to all things is the earth. The earth gives birth to all things in the natural world" (Zheng Xuan). Moreover, in Chinese mythology, humans were created by the goddess Nüwa using yellow earth. In other words, humans are products made from the earth; therefore, when they die, they must return to the earth.

Originally, the Chinese often used stone coffins to bury the dead. This practice helped preserve wood resources as well as the bones of the deceased. However, under the influence of Han culture, they gradually shifted to using wooden coffins. This change, however, brought negative consequences for the ecological environment, specifically for forests and timber resources. According to some records, in the ancient Central Plains, early and extensive wood harvesting had rapidly depleted this resource. During the Spring and Autumn–Warring States period, many Chinese people died without even having coffins for burial. These problems are once again reflected in Yan Lianke's novel *Dream of Ding Village*.

As the number of deaths in Ding village from the “fever disease” increased, Ding Hui embezzled the coffins supplied to the villagers and sold them at exorbitant prices. Many villagers thus found a solution themselves: they went to cut trees and make coffins by hand. The image of villagers competing to chop down trees for coffins is vividly reproduced in Ding Shuiyang’s dream, with “the creaking of saws, the chopping of trees echoing continuously, and people talking, just like in the years when the whole village, young and old, worked day and night forging steel, or cheerfully building irrigation channels” [8; 198]. Even for those who did not make coffins, the sound of tree-cutting still filled the village: “Every household in the village sawed the bronzewood and poplar trees, following the example set by my family.” [8; 197]. Willow trees, poplars, and bronzewood that were unsuitable for coffins were cut down by the healthy villagers for household use, such as for marrying off their children. The result was that “in the village, all the bronzewood suitable for coffins had been completely cut down” [8; 17], and “in a single night, Ding village truly had no more trees left” [8; 203].

From an ecological criticism perspective, the actions of Ding village’s villagers can be explained through anthropocentrism. Ecocritics argue that humans are inherently selfish, always prioritizing immediate personal gain, failing to foresee potential future consequences, and showing little concern for any other species besides themselves. It is precisely this selfishness and narrow-mindedness that force humans to suffer the severe consequences brought by nature.

But it didn’t end there. Even after every tree in Ding village had been felled, the daily death toll continued to rise, and people began using whatever they could find to fashion coffins. Jia Genzhu and Ding Yaojin even allowed villagers to take items from the school to serve as coffins for the dead. As desks, chairs, and blackboards were gradually removed, Ding Shuiyang tried in vain to intervene. Eventually, nothing was left “desks, armchairs, benches, even blackboards and their stands, teachers’ beds used for hanging clothes and storing books...” had all disappeared. Only empty, chaotic classrooms remained, choked with dust and debris. Witnessing this, someone could only exclaim in disbelief: “Heavens! Even the blackboards are being taken home if he’s dead, how will his children read, how will they go to school?”

Ironically, in their efforts to prepare for death, to ready themselves for a life in a world that exists only in imagination, whose reality no one can truly verify, people are willing to gamble with the future of humanity and generations to come. Destroying nature is tantamount to destroying the human habitat; destroying schools is destroying the pathway to knowledge for children, thereby undermining the future of the people of Ding village. One could say that death, along with the beliefs about body and soul, has created persistent obsessions in the minds of the villagers, leaving them trapped in ignorance, blindness, darkness, and folly.

But the concern does not end with preparing the body for burial. The Chinese also harbored anxieties about the souls of those who died unmarried. Many believed that a solitary grave could negatively affect the prosperity of the family and its future generations. These fears, in turn, gave rise to a significant social issue: the custom of arranging posthumous marriages.

In the novel, Ding Hui can be described as a “merchant” who always knew how to keep up with the times. At first, he engaged in “blood trading,” which caused the fever disease to spread throughout the village. When people gradually began to die from the disease, he shifted to “coffin trading.” Later, when most of the villagers had died, he expanded into a new “line of business”: arranging marriages for the deceased. Naturally, relying on his keen sense of market demand and understanding of customers’ psychology, Ding Hui developed his “ghost marriage” business not only in Ding village but also in the surrounding regions. According to Xiao Qiang’s account, in just half a month, several young women in Ding village had died from the fever disease. Graves were immediately reopened so that the bones could be matched by families whose sons had died outside the village. For each successful ghost marriage arrangement, Ding Hui would “neatly” pocket 200 coins as a marriage fee.

The business of arranging ghost marriages not only allowed Ding Hui to earn a considerable profit but also made his reputation spread far and wide. Everywhere, from nearby districts to more distant ones, people praised Ding Hui's "merits." The villagers of Shang Yang called him a "good man," saying that although he was from Wei District, he "sold coffins from Wei District to Shang Liao Village in Tai District at the lowest prices, solving countless difficult problems for the dead; now he even arranges ghost marriages for young men who died unmarried, finding husbands for girls and widows who have no spouse yet, resolving countless difficult problems for the living" [8; 302].

Yan Lianke's pen made even an outdated custom like ghost marriage something that caused everyone in the village to feel joy. It allowed the living to breathe a sigh of relief, believing that a "great worry" had been resolved. In households holding such weddings, both the groom's family and the bride's family celebrated the "successful ghost marriage" with "over a dozen banquet tables to offer congratulations" [8; 303], truly turning a "great tragedy into great joy."

While ghost weddings brought happiness to the families who carried them out, they also caused anxiety for those who had yet to participate. For example, the story of Hong Li, the cousin of Jia Genzhu. Hong Li had already arranged a ghost marriage with Cui Zi, the granddaughter of Zhao Xiuqin, but a man from the Ma family in Shang Liao Village offered 3,000 coins to take Cui Zi away. As a result, Hong Li became a man without a wife. This illustrates that, under the power of money, a marriage, even one arranged for the dead, could easily lose its value and be undone.

The climax of the ghost marriage story, and the last straw leading to Ding Shuiyang's anger and Ding Hui's death, was Ding Hui's attempt to arrange a ghost marriage for his own son, Xiao Qiang. Ding Hui used his son's corpse as a stepping stone for his own fame and power. He sought to marry Xiao Qiang to Ling Zi, the daughter of a county magistrate: "Father wanted to arrange a ghost marriage for me. He found a girl older than me named Ling Zi, who could become my elder sister. Her legs have some defect, an innate defect, also epilepsy. She would have an episode every few days... Father did not hesitate to marry me to her" [8; 314]. Ding Hui's cold-bloodedness toward Xiao Qiang caused the evil thoughts in Ding Shuiyang's mind to spiral out of control, making him realize that only with Ding Hui's death could the tragic chain of events in Ding village come to an end.

It can be said that, drawing on notions of the relationship between body and soul and the symbols associated with them blood, coffins, ghost marriages, etc. Yan Lianke exposed the deepest obsessions and anxieties within the hearts of the people of Ding village in particular, and of the Chinese people in general. At the same time, these obsessions leave a strong impression and create a profound lingering effect for all readers of the work.

### 3. Conclusion

In *Dream of Ding Village*, based on foundational elements of Chinese cultural thought, particularly the dual relationships between good and evil, dream and reality, body and soul Yan Lianke constructs a distinctive world of characters, artistic spaces, and haunting symbols. In other words, cultural foundations constitute the essential substance of Chinese society, which the author mirrors through the microcosm of Ding Village.

The integration between culture and literature in *Dream of Ding Village* establishes a profound connection between the writer and the socio-cultural reality of his time. In Yan Lianke's creative practice, he does not merely reproduce the traditional cultural values of his nation; rather, he delves into their obscured and shadowed dimensions, illuminating the darker aspects of culture itself. This approach affirms that Yan Lianke's literary process is one of creating and seeking reality, rather than merely depicting reality.

The cultural values embedded in *Dream of Ding Village* arise both from spontaneous, experiential learning and from deliberate, reflective cultivation. Alongside the naturally absorbed elements of everyday life and thought, Yan Lianke consciously weaves and reinterprets cultural motifs with creativity and purpose. It is precisely this interplay between intuitive and intentional artistry that generates the novel's intellectual depth and enduring aesthetic power.

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