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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Reading Yan Lianke's Fiction through the Lens of *Shijing* Exegesis

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Yan Lianke is one of the most prominent contemporary writers in China and worldwide. This study reaches beyond the established masterpieces of Yan's oeuvre and concentrates on works that have received less critical attention—namely the satirical novels *Hard Like Water* and *Ballads, Hymns, Odes*. The former work is a "revolution plus love" story set in the early People's Republic of China, while the latter is an account of the travails of a contemporary Chinese professor. This essay focuses on the recurring motif of the protagonists rendering the world around them in ways that resemble different aspects of the *Shijing* exegetic tradition. While some elements of this tradition may appear dated and of limited value, this essay argues that Yan is interested in exegesis as a practice of unconstrained literary imagination. Yan's characters, who are either feverishly devoted to a single interpretive framework or are stumbling in search of an innermost meaning, serve as metaphors for trials and tribulations experienced by intellectuals in their quest for truth and knowledge. Thus, the close reading presented in this essay explores the focal point of Yan's fiction and the long-lasting tradition of interpreting *Shijing* poems that is manifested in the inquisitive intellectual spirit of the protagonists of *Hard Like Water* and *Ballads, Hymns, Odes*.

本文通過對閻連科長篇小說《風雅頌》和《堅硬如水》的分析，探討其作品中主人公觀察和解讀世界的方式與《詩經》詮釋傳統之間的內在聯繫。文章首先簡要回顧《詩經》詮釋史中的關鍵流派，尤其是“毛詩”的解讀傳統。在《風雅頌》中，主人公楊科以知識份子的身份詮釋世界，其關鍵的詮釋轉變過程映射了《詩經》詮釋的發展脈絡，特別是對“淫詩”的註釋。《堅硬如水》則展現了文革時期高愛軍如何借助“毛體”語言將日常生活政治化為革命寓言，這與“毛詩”對《詩經》愛情詩的政治化解讀異曲同工。通過對這兩部作品的對比分析，本文揭示了閻連科作品中人物形象與藝術風格的發展軌跡，為深入理解其後期創作提供了重要參照。

Keywords: Chinese literature, Yan Lianke, *Ballads, Hymns, Odes*, *Shijing*, interpretation, fiction

關鍵詞： 中國文學，閻連科，《風雅頌》，詩經，詮釋，小說

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Yan Lianke's 閻連科 (1958–) satirical novel *Fengyasong* 風雅頌 (*Ballads, Hymns, Odes*, 2008) stirred up considerable controversy in mainland Chinese academic circles immediately after its publication. The sometimes quite intense debates over this work are covered at length in extensive studies in English by Xie Haiyan 謝海燕 (2022) and Fang-yu Li 李方瑜 (2015). In addition to exploring the critical reception of *Ballads, Hymns, Odes*, Li concentrates on the autobiographical and confessional narratives in the novel, whereas Xie addresses the connection between the work and the ancient poetry anthology *Shijing* 詩經. Both studies trace how Yan's self-proclaimed artistic style, *shenshi zhuyi* 神實主義 ("mythorealism" or "divine realism" in Li's translation), is reflected in the novel.[1] Indeed, both English-language and Chinese-language studies comment extensively on *Shijing*'s role in *Ballads, Hymns, Odes*. However, I believe that there is still room for further inquiry on the subject.

This essay does not concentrate on Chinese literary scholars' hostility toward Yan's portrayal of academia or the role of mythorealism in his fiction, as both of these aspects are covered extensively in existing scholarship. Instead, it considers from a different angle several aspects of *Ballads, Hymns, Odes* that have previously received scholarly attention, such as the role of *Shijing* and its exegetical tradition and the portrayal of intellectuals.[2] To demonstrate that these aspects are not an outlier but have a significant and lasting presence in Yan's fiction, I also focus on the instances of exegetic-esque narrative in Yan's early work *Jianying ru shui* 堅硬如水 (*Hard Like Water*, 2001), which has received much less critical attention than *Ballads, Hymns, Odes*. The essay opens with a short outline of the history of *Shijing* exegesis and reflects on why it can be a significant source of inspiration for a writer such as Yan. This is followed by an analysis of the exegetic-esque narratives in *Ballads, Hymns, Odes* and *Hard Like Water* that links these narratives with certain aspects of *Shijing*'s exegetic tradition. The goal is to explore how the theme of exegesis and interpretation reflects Yan's stance on the issue of intellectuals' precarious place in contemporary Chinese society.

Portrayals of downtrodden intellectuals and of academia as an institution, as well as the importance of interpretation, are indispensable parts of Yan's later works, such as *Sishu* 四書 (*The Four Books*, 2011), *Suqiu gongmian* 速求共眠 (*Urgent Wish to Sleep Together*, 2018), and *Xinjing* 心經 (*Heart Sutra*, 2020). *The Four Books* consists of four narratives—a clandestine denunciation, an autobiographical novel, a quasi-biblical narrative, and a philosophical parable—that offer drastically different interpretations of tragic events that unfold in a re-education camp for political prisoners. *Urgent Wish to Sleep Together* is a *Rashomon*-like metafictional novel—Yan's fictional double attempts to adapt into a film script the impossible love story of a young researcher and a migrant worker that takes place on the Peking University campus. Intertwined yet contradictory accounts of the event render this task extremely challenging and their interpreter prone to falsification. Finally, *Heart Sutra* probes the boundary between faith and ideology in telling the story of a religious training centre at the fictional National Political University 國政大學 and its students, who are clergy torn between the teachings of their sacred scriptures and the doctrines of the party-state.

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[1] For a detailed account of mythorealism, see: Yan 2011b or Yan 2022.

[2] Beside studies by Xie and Li, see for instance: Yao 2009 and Kan 2016.

It is evident that intellectuals, interpretation, and interpretation's effect on the world are areas of focus in the majority of Yan's mature works. In turn, *Ballads, Hymns, Odes* and *Hard Like Water* are important but often dismissed precursors of the writer's celebrated style.[3] Thus, this essay challenges previous perceptions of *Ballads, Hymns, Odes* and seeks to bring due critical attention to *Hard Like Water*, highlighting the novels' status as significant milestones in Yan's oeuvre as well as more generally in Chinese academic fiction and fiction concerned with the intelligentsia.[4]

Shijing Exegesis and Literary Creation

In this section, I revisit *Shijing* and its exegetic tradition and consider how they resonate with Yan Lianke's artistic work. *Shijing* is an anthology of verses composed between approximately the tenth and seventh centuries BCE. Its poetic pieces are divided into three sections—*Feng* 風 (Airs of the States), *Ya* 雅 (Court Hymns, further divided into *Xiaoya* 小雅 or Lesser Hymns and *Daya* 大雅 or Greater Hymns), and *Song* 頌 (Eulogies)—which also serve as the title of Yan's novel. Although the graph *jing* 經 in *Shijing* means "classic," and, indeed, it became an integral part of the Confucian canon's Five Classics 五經 during the Western Han period (206 BCE–9 CE), its almost sacred status was not undisputed throughout history. The history of this ancient anthology's reception is marked by multiple instances of interpretation, as well as re- and misinterpretation.[5] These permutations were caused by the complex exegetical tradition that through the centuries grew inseparable from the anthology proper. Commentators have ascribed different readings to *Shijing* poems in accordance with their philosophical, scholarly, and aesthetic standpoints. The more straightforward the text of a poem was, the more effort it took for the commentators to force it into the exegetic paradigm. Such a commentarial approach is a seminal trait of *Maoshi* 毛詩 (*Mao Tradition of the Poetry* or *The Poems in the Mao Tradition*, hereafter Mao tradition), an exegetic tradition that enjoyed canonical status alongside the anthology proper for almost a millennium.

The Mao tradition of *Shijing* exegesis, named after its supposed founder, a certain Mr. Mao 毛公, was one of several prominent commentarial traditions that flourished both before and during the Han period.[6] It ultimately triumphed over its rivals and became the predominant way of interpreting the

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[3] Since *Ballads, Hymns, Odes*, Yan has increasingly chosen canonical texts as focal points of his fiction. See, for instance, such later works as Yan 2015; Yan 2023a; Yan 2023b; Yan 2024a.

[4] Yan himself laments that his novel *Wei renmin fuwu* 為人民服務 (*Serve the People*, 2005) received much more publicity and praise than *Hard Like Water*, primarily because it was the first of his works to be translated into English. Both works focus on the relationship between revolution and sex, as well as that between the official and the illicit. However, according to the author's own evaluation, the former novel is a somewhat insignificant part of his oeuvre, while the latter is a much better yet undeservedly neglected work. See: Yan 2024b, 53.

[5] See: Loewe 1993, 418–20.

[6] The commentary is attributed by different scholarly traditions either to Mao Heng 毛亨 or Mao Chang 毛萇 (both Warring States Period [c. 475–221 BCE] to Early Han, exact dates unclear). See: Kern 2010; Loewe 1993.

ancient poetry anthology for centuries to come, although other interpretations continued to exist alongside it.[7] Reaching this high status by the Eastern Han period (25–220), it was practically canonised alongside its source text during the Tang period (618–907), when the ultimate work of exegesis, *Mao shi zhengyi* 毛詩正義 (*The Correct Meaning of the Poems in the Mao Tradition*) was compiled. The signature trait of this tradition is to read every poem as a political or ethical allegory featuring prominent historical figures of the past, no matter how forced such an interpretation might be. The disjunction that this approach creates between a poem's text and its interpretation is particularly egregious for love poems. Mao's interpretations de-emphasise the aesthetic dimension of the poetry, instead reinventing the anthology as a textbook of proper conduct. However, Zong-qi Cai 蔡宗齊 sees another side of the reductive exegetic tradition: "True, the ethico-sociopolitical readings of *Shijing* love poems in these three texts are implausible, boring, and hard to defend. But these readings hide an ironic, completely overlooked fact: the interpretive process that yields such readings is itself an admirable exercise of literary imagination" (Cai 2018, 68). Up to the present day, this literary phenomenon continues to fascinate and inspire scholars and writers alike. For instance, the scholar He Xuan 何軒, a compiler of a commentated anthology of migrant workers' poetry, explicitly mentions that his work aims to mediate between poets and scholars inspired by the Mao tradition (Klein 2019, 207). Naturally, the possibility of the fusion of tightly interwoven lyrical and political discourses that the Mao tradition presents was also bound to catch the interest of a writer like Yan Lianke, whose works often feature a close mix of the personal and the official. As Carlos Rojas puts it: "[T]hemes 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" (Rojas 2024, xv).

Thus, the Mao tradition can be perceived as a source of inspiration for Yan. One can also draw parallels between his fiction and the arch-rival of Mao's canonical exegesis—Song dynasty (960–1279) scholars' interpretations of *Shijing*. At a certain point, the long-standing tradition of shoehorning beautiful poems into the rigid framework of didactic allegories could no longer satisfy new generations of scholars. The anti-canonical movement in *Shijing* exegesis peaked when the stalwart of neo-Confucianism, Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200), composed his *Shi jizhuan* 詩集傳 (*Collected Commentaries on the Poems*), attempting to rediscover the original voice of the ancient poems, free from the Procrustean bed of Mao exegesis. However, the same issues that had centuries before perplexed Han erudites-*boshi* 博士 proved just as confusing for Song iconoclasts. For instance, *Shijing*'s love poems, at last unbound from their allegoric shackles, astonished scholars with disturbingly straightforward depictions of feelings and sexual desire. Thus, the history of *Shijing* exegesis is characterised by the constant struggle of, as Steven Van Zoeren (1991, 11) puts it, "'two readings': one proper and apologetic; the other secret, pleasurable and dangerous." Stephen Durrant (1995, xv) extrapolates this dichotomy to Chinese culture en masse. Indeed, the intertwinement of state ideology and personal passions within

[7] The Mao tradition's eventual triumph over the initially more influential and officially backed traditions of Lu 魯, Qi 齊, and Han 韓 is due in great part to the Eastern Han (25–220) scholar Zheng Xuan 鄭玄 (127–200), who based his orthodox Confucian interpretation of the anthology on the Mao tradition rather than the other three. For a detailed history and analysis of *Shijing* exegesis, see the monograph-length study of the subject: Van Zoeren 1991.

an individual has always been one of Yan's main artistic interests, as this manifests itself in one form or another in most of his works. It is thus somewhat safe to say that while working on such novels as *Hard Like Water* and *Ballads, Hymns, Odes*, Yan also familiarised himself with the *Shijing* exegetic tradition and may have drawn on it to portray the protagonists' constantly changing relationships with sex and power, both legitimate and illicit. For instance, Xie (2022, 39) views the representation of *Shijing* in *Ballads, Hymns, Odes* as a "disenchanted" classic, connecting it to the disenchantment with the lofty image of intellectuals in the contemporary commodified world. In the following analysis, I approach *Ballads, Hymns, Odes* and *Hard Like Water* as directly inspired by controversies in *Shijing*'s exegetic tradition, with their protagonists going through multiple paradigm shifts akin to those experienced by different generations of scholars interpreting the ancient classic.

Ballads, Hymns, Odes: A Classic-Inspired Controversy

Although Xie (2022, 33) argues that *Ballads, Hymns, Odes* does not suffer from a lack of interest on the part of Western scholars, it is still among Yan's somewhat neglected works. It has been criticised mainly for its flat characters, an overly harsh treatment of modern intellectuals and higher education institutions, Yan's lack of exposure to the current academic setting, and his inability to fully utilise *Shijing*'s potential as the narrative frame.[8] Alessandra Pezza (2022, 162), in a study of the intellectual turn in Yan's writings, views this novel as being deservedly overlooked because of its low artistic value. This impression is bolstered by the absence of an English translation—a glaring gap in Yan's otherwise formidable English-language bibliography. However, simply viewing *Ballads, Hymns, Odes* as a mediocre novel and as one of Yan's artistic failures is somewhat misguided. David Der-wei Wang 王德威 (2009, 80) posits that the novel is an essential example of the recent trend of fiction exposing the vices of contemporary academia. Now, more than a decade after the novel was published, it has become a classic in its own right as a seminal work in the burgeoning genre of Chinese campus fiction.

The novel's structure is based entirely on *Shijing*, with every chapter titled after a poem in the ancient anthology. In turn, the protagonist Yang Ke 楊科 experiences several significant shifts in his worldview that in my reading somewhat mirror the stages in *Shijing* exegesis, with every shift connected to the role that the anthology plays in the narrative. At the beginning of the novel, the protagonist is a tenured professor at the elite Qingyan University (Tsinghua 清華 and Peking (formerly Yenching 燕京) Universities' fictional stand-in), who has managed to build a successful academic career despite his humble peasant background. However, a series of personal and public events turn the university elite against Yang, and he is forcibly sent to a psychiatric hospital on the Chinese capital's outskirts. He escapes these oppressive institutions for the safe haven of his rural hometown at the foot of the Balou *shanmai* 耙耬山脉 (the Balou Mountains)—the signature topos of Yan's fiction—and returns to pre-

[8] For a representative example of such critiques, see: Shao 2008.

academic life. However, during his prolonged absence, this remote place has become a local centre for adult entertainment, with numerous restaurants, karaoke rooms, and brothels.

Yang eventually succumbs to and even finds solace in abundant sensual temptations. However, near the novel's end, he leaves the town following an altercation with other residents and wanders deep into the wilderness of the Balou Mountains. There, he eventually discovers an ancient settlement abundantly decorated with quotations from a previously unknown edition of *Shijing*. Yang dubs it Shicheng 詩城 (Poetry Town) and starts a utopian commune there, welcoming other exiled scholars—as well as sex workers—to establish a harmonious society away from the world that wronged them. Although brief, this sequence is even more absurdist than the rest of the novel, with scenes such as one in which members of the commune hold a literal pissing contest for the right to choose sexual partners.

Several scholars emphasise the phasic nature of the novel in their discussions. Xie, for instance, divides *Ballads, Hymns, Odes* into two main parts. The first takes place in the urban setting of the university and psychiatric hospital, while the second takes place following the transition to the protagonist's rural hometown (Xie 2022, 34). However, this two-part division based on Yang's relocation from the hostile environment of the capital to his rustic roots neglects the protagonist's last major spatial and spiritual shift—his escape into the unknown world of utopia.

Yao Xiaolei 姚曉雷, in contrast, sees Yang's wanderings as indicators of his inner shifts—in other words, as milestones mapping the novel's structure. He takes every significant change in Yang's personality—in the Freudian sense—as a new stage in the character's development. The first stage, in Yao's discussion, occurs when the protagonist enters the psychiatric hospital. The second stage is his escape to the Balou Mountains and the death of his first love, Lingzhen 玲珍. The third is the rampage that Yang goes on after seeing the marriage between a fellow villager and Lingzhen's daughter, for whom he has developed an affection, and the fourth and final stage is Poetry Town's utopian commune (Yao 2009, 111–13). However, following this structure, the first fourth of the novel, set in Qingyan University, appears somewhat irrelevant, because the protagonist has not yet done anything worth discussing. This essay argues that there is more to this part than just a critique of academia; rather, it is crucial for understanding Yang's initial way of interpreting the world, which subsequently changes because of his travels and travails. The spatial dimensions of *Ballads, Hymns, Odes* and the protagonist's personality are indeed heterogeneous and in flux. The novel's setting is perpetually changing—first a capital-city university and psychiatric hospital, then a brothel in rural China, and finally a commune established on the site of an ancient settlement. At the same time, the protagonist goes from peasant to scholar and professor, back to peasant, and then to leader of a bizarre utopian community. Thus, this essay's reading of *Ballads, Hymns, Odes* is based on treating Yang's spiritual and spatial shifts as equally significant, linking them, where reasonable, to *Shijing* exegesis.

The Exegetic Journey: Yang Ke's Transition from Traditionalism to Iconoclasm and Beyond

Now, bearing in mind that Yan's interest in exegesis and interpretation is a continuous and recurring theme in his artistic creation, as shown in this essay's introduction, I read *Ballads, Hymns, Odes* as a narrative of the protagonist's re-interpreting the world through exegetic practices. In *Ballads, Hymns, Odes*, as in *Hard Like Water*, bodily love and desire are catalysts for the protagonist's exegetical endeavours. Probably the most discussed episode of the novel with a connection to *Shijing* is the first chapter, which is named after the anthology's opening piece—"Guan Ju" 關雎 ("*Guan guan* Cry the Ospreys").[9] In this episode, Yang comes home from the university after finishing his magnum opus of *Shijing* exegesis. Upon entering his apartment, he discovers his wife in flagrante delicto with the university's vice president. Surprisingly, instead of acting like a cheated husband, Yang acts like a wronged scholar. He implies that he is not jealous because all of his carnal desires have supposedly been quenched through his scholarly work: "My *Odes of Fengya: A Study of the Shijing's Spiritual Roots* is completed. With this monograph, I've everything I need. I don't need anything anymore" (我的《風雅之頌——關於〈詩經〉精神的本根探究》寫完了，有了這部專著，我什麼都有了。什麼都不再需要了。) (Yan 2008, 32).[10] While asking the adulterers not to carry on their affair, he also implicitly blames himself for being too prejudiced and narrow-minded: "First, my mind is not liberated, so please, don't make what you did with Zhao Ruping a precedent, would you? Second, I'm old-fashioned in my thoughts, so don't do it again, I beg you!" (一是我思想不解放，你和趙茹萍的事情你們下不為例好不好？二是我觀念還不新，求你們下不為例好不好？) (Yan 2008, 32). Finally, Yang kneels, pleading for them to respect him as an intellectual and to end the affair. In this bizarre sequence, a betrayed husband ends up kneeling and begging to be excused for not being modern and open-minded enough to accept the affair.

Yang's interpretation of the affair is thus drastically different from what the reader would expect. Li (2015, 90) reads this as a sarcastic invocation of the political allegory, which is the poem's true meaning according to the Mao tradition. The tradition's interpretation of *Shijing*'s opening piece transforms a touching song about a male lover longing for his beloved into a king's principal wife's appraisal of the virtues of the concubine she has selected for her royal husband (Legge 1960, 3). This opening scene can also be interpreted as Yan's condemnation of the self-censorship plaguing contemporary Chinese literature, including his own works. Indeed, one of the readings that Li (2015, 98) proposes for *Ballads, Hymns, Odes* is a confessional narrative: the portrayal of the repentant protagonist going through a process of spiritual redemption in an attempt to "return home" is based on both Chinese intelligentsia in general and Yan in particular.[11] In this light, Yang is at his lowest point at the beginning of his journey,

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[9] Here and elsewhere in the essay, English titles of the poems are listed following Waley's translation (1996). More straightforward translations are provided in brackets when necessary.

[10] Here and elsewhere in this essay, all translations from *Ballads, Hymns, Odes* are my own. For other writings by Yan, I use existing English-language translations.

[11] In the afterword to the novel, Yan states that *Huijia* 回家 (*Return Home*) was the working title of the novel (Yan 2008, 422).

finding himself in a position of moral superiority but refusing to accept reality and resorting to an elaborate self-deception. According to the author himself, such self-deception is one of the main obstacles to the development of Chinese literature (Yan and Flagg 2008, 43). Yang is purging the bodily and illicit aspects from his assessment of the situation, presenting himself as a noble—if wronged—scholar, although what has taken place has nothing to do with his intellectual identity or academic endeavours. In a sense Yang's worldview in the section of the novel that takes place in an urban setting is the closest in the narrative to the Mao tradition of exegesis.

At the beginning of his journey, Yang interprets the world in a way akin to the Mao tradition. He is feverishly devoted to his own reception of *Shijing* as a guide to salvation, and he finds lofty explanations for unbecoming circumstances. However, his sexuality is still tightly repressed by his self-perception as a wronged sage. Yang sees himself as a worthy but unjustly treated person, and he gives vent to his frustration by composing his magnum opus.[12] This puts him among the great thinkers of the past, including the authors of the *Shijing* poems, who, according to the historian Sima Qian 司馬遷 (c. 145–c. 86 BCE), used their anger and frustration to create literary masterpieces: "For all these men resentment and sorrow knotted their minds and they could not get through their own way. Therefore, they recounted past events in order to think of the future" (van Ess and Ssu-ma 2019, 330). In the same vein, through his interpretation of the millennia-old poetry anthology, Yang strives to correct the ways of contemporary Chinese society.

Later in the novel, Yang describes the university leaders' appraisal of his work, which supposedly can help Chinese people rediscover their spiritual roots (Yan 2008, 103). However, at this point, the reader has strong reservations about Yang's reliability as a narrator, and the leaders' subsequent decision to banish him to the mental hospital hints that these words of praise are most likely just the protagonist's own thoughts (Li 2015, 102–3; Xie 2022, 44).[13] Thus, in the campus-based part of the novel, Yang is an ardent advocate of a didactic exegetic tradition akin to the Mao tradition, although this is actually a façade that he desperately struggles to maintain. The scene of banishment marks Yang's end as a scholar who sees his life as an allegory of the wronged sage.

Another crucial *Shijing* scene appears in the middle of the book. Yang's exegetic standpoint changes from a virtuous but unappreciated intellectual who lives to write for posterity to a happy-go-lucky propagator of bodily love and desire. At this point, Yang has fled the psychiatric hospital for the hometown he had left long ago to attend the university, only to find this backwater turned into a hub of adult entertainment. In this region, which thousands of years ago served as the cradle of Chinese civilisation and was home to people who composed *Shijing* poems, Yang sheds his identity as an upright scholar who scorns all worldly matters. He is fascinated by the town's adult industry but refuses

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[12] At the beginning of the novel, the reader learns that Yang's teaching and scholarship are largely frowned upon by his peers and students alike, which causes the protagonist a great deal of frustration. This frustration eventually pushes him to complete a supposedly ingenious *Shijing* monograph. On frustration and creativity in Chinese traditional culture, see Ing 2017, 112–42.

[13] Li, in her analysis of narrative inconsistencies, elucidates that Yang, despite his self-proclaimed worthiness, likely resorts to the petty act of hiding the vice president's underwear that he left in Yang's apartment. Yang's unreliability as a narrator thus becomes a recurring theme in the novel. Xie, in turn, considers the possibility that Yang suffers from a nascent schizophrenia-like mental illness, which undermines the credibility of his narration.

to admit to his fascination, continuing to use the poetry anthology to interpret the world around him. In one of the most vivid scenes in the novel, Yang spends Lunar New Year's Eve in a brothel surrounded by a group of young prostitutes who look up to him as an intellectual and urban dweller and who are willing to entertain him as he pleases. Instead, he turns a night in the brothel into an impromptu *Shijing* seminar, giving the excuse that he misses lecturing at Qingyan University. On the surface, this decision seems noble, as Yang abstains from satisfying his sexual desire and instead provides spiritual nourishment to an underprivileged part of the community. However, in reality, this is only a cover for Yang to realise his sexual and scholarly fantasies merged together:

> They said, "Do your students also sit there without any clothes on during seminars? Are they also completely naked?" I said, "People are happily celebrating New Year with their families, and we, who are away from home during this holiday, must also have some happiness. Haven't you said that I could have any of you that I fancy, and if I fancy two, I could have two, and if I happen to fancy every one of you, you all have to listen to me? It's time to begin our class, so sit still. I will enter the lecture hall now." Having said that, I stepped into the back room, leaving them there completely naked. One girl pulled up a piece of clothing to cover between her legs and breasts, so I glared at her and said, "Class is in session and you're still fidgeting? This is the capital city's higher education institution, don't you know that?"
>
> 他們說你的學生上課都不穿衣服，都光著身子嗎？
>
> 我說人家過年在家，有人家高興的事，我們過年在外有我們高興的事。說你們不是說，我看上一個就要一個，看上兩個要兩個，全都看上了，就全都聽我的。現在上課了，誰都不要動，我要從教室門外進來了。說著我退到裏屋去，讓他們十二個端端裸裸地坐在那兒時，有人拉過衣服把她的雙腿之間和乳房遮住了，我回頭瞪了她一眼，說上課了，你還做什麼小動作？這是京城的高等學府你知不知道？
>
> (Yan 2008, 249)

This farcical "class", which is also sexualised entertainment for Yang, resonates with the chapter title, which is named after one of the Song hymns of the *Shijing*: "Jiong" 駉 ("Stout"). This poem plays a seminal role in the history of *Shijing* exegesis, as Confucius used a line from it to characterise the magisterial feature of the whole anthology: "The Master said, 'The *Odes* number several hundred, and yet can be judged with a single phrase: 'Oh, they will not lead you astray'" (子曰："《詩》三百，一言以蔽之，曰：'思無邪'。") (Slingerland 2003, 8; *Lunyu* 2018, 19). This line is *si wu xie* 思無邪, which has been translated and interpreted in many ways throughout history. The general meaning of the line is "without swerving." The graph *si* 思 serves as an exclamative word without meaning, yet the graph's meaning of "thinking" or "thought" gives another dimension to the line's interpretation as the key to the reception of *Shijing*.[14] In the context of the brothel scene, the use of "Stout" as the

[14] For a comprehensive overview of *si wu xie*'s numerous interpretations, see: Broughton 2016.

chapter's title has an overtly satirical meaning. On the surface, Yang does not swerve in his thoughts, choosing culture and restraint over debauchery. In truth, though, he is still pursuing his own satisfaction. Only now, instead of being an upright scholar who only cares about his writings and their didactic effect on the Chinese nation, Yang tries on another persona. In this scene, he appears as an adept of love and sexuality, which are transmitted through the *Shijing* love poems. In the culmination of the chapter, Yang even goes as far as inscribing these love poems on the girls' naked bodies, further blurring the line between a seminar and an orgy (Yan 2008, 252).[15] This hypocritical treatment of *Shijing* is somewhat reminiscent of the Song exegetic tradition's approach to the same subject matter in the anthology.

With the retreat of the Mao tradition, Zhu Xi and other Song scholars desperately tried to find another proper way to read *Shijing*'s love poems. In his discussion of *si wu xie*, Zhu offers an excuse for Confucius' decision to extrapolate this principle of *Shijing* reception over the entire anthology, despite the questionable nature of some of the poems. He posits that even though a poem might be outright wicked, one can still enjoy it without blemishing one's thoughts by reading it as a warning against moral degradation (Wong and Lee 1985, 215). In this exegetic endeavour, Zhu tried to free the beauty of *Shijing* verse from the Mao tradition's constraints but ended up inventing a new restrictive framework for the text. In the same vein, Yang's behaviour in the adult entertainment district is reminiscent of Song scholars' approach to *Shijing*'s "licentious" poems *yinshi* 淫詩. Yang enjoys the bodily pleasures that he discovers after escaping to his hometown, mingling with female sex workers and spending much of his time in brothels. Still, he interprets his own behaviour as an attempt to save a vulnerable part of the community. Even the death of his first love, Lingzhen, does not change his new mindset. Yang grows affectionate toward Lingzhen's daughter and puts on a show of looking after the orphaned girl just to get closer to her. When she marries a fellow villager, Yang, crazed with anger, breaks into the nuptial chamber and attacks the groom. This scene of unprovoked rage contrasts sharply with the beginning of the novel, when he kneels and pleads with his wife and the university's vice president despite them rightfully anticipating his anger.

The history of *Shijing* exegesis also has no shortage of dramatic twists and turns. For instance, the Mao tradition tried to delicately maintain the anthology's canonical status and mitigate controversy over "licentious" poems by hiding them behind didactic allegories. In contrast, adepts of the exegetic tradition during the Song period ultimately attempted to resolve the same problem in a somewhat brutal way—the scholar Wang Bo 王柏 (1197–1274), for instance, purged all of the "licentious" pieces from his edition of *Shijing*.[16] Still, both ways largely failed to produce a universally accepted approach to the anthology. In a sense, Yang retraces these historical convolutions of *Shijing* exegesis, only to go through yet another shift—beyond iconoclasm, preceded by traditionalism, to the tabula rasa of exile.

Yang's utopian commune in Poetry Town can be interpreted as an attempt to finally break free of all of the exegetic shackles and to enjoy *Shijing* poems as their readers and listeners did thousands of

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[15] This scene is depicted on the cover of the Taiwan edition of *Ballads, Hymns, Odes*, perhaps chosen as capturing the gist of the entire novel.

[16] On Wang Bo's *Shijing* scholarship, see: Cheng 1968.

years ago. However, this attempt to establish a primitive yet harmonious *Shijing* society leads nowhere, and Yang leaves again, this time willingly, setting out on a journey for more lost poems. As Stephen Owen sums up the relationship between ancient poetry and the modern reader: "The poem can still address us; however, we also recognize we can no longer accept such an invitation with simple delight, nor could we ourselves be able to offer such an unself-concious invitation. A poetry as simple and open as his is somehow beyond our capacities" (Owen, foreword to Waley 1996, xii). In the same vein, Yang's escape to the imagined utopia of Poetry Town's ancient denizens is an unfulfillable dream. Such a world exists only in poetry, and Yang's attempt to interpret reality again through *Shijing* (even if freed from all of the constraints brought by its exegetic traditions) is bound to fail.

In Li's reading of the novel's finale, Yang is ultimately denied salvation and is bound to carry on the Sisyphean task of searching for lost poems. Still, Li pinpoints the question: if the protagonist is bound to fail, what is the meaning of his arduous journey (Li, 2015, 110–11)? Indeed, one might ask whether all of Yang's travails as an intellectual, scholar, and interpreter of *Shijing* are in vain and whether he is another Sisyphus eternally struggling with the weight of his exegetic delusions. In the final section of Yan's award-winning novel *The Four Books*, one of the central characters, named simply "The Scholar" 學者, presents his version of the Sisyphus myth, possibly alluding to Albert Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus* (*Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, 1942), and rethinks the nature of the recurring punishment:

> 人一旦對懲處結果出的苦難、變化、無聊、荒誕、死亡等等有了協調與從適，懲處就失去意義了。懲處就不再是一種鞭刑和力量，而從適會從無奈和不得一中轉化出美和意義來。
>
> (Yan 2020, 382)
>
> As soon as someone develops a sense of familiarity and comfort with respect to the difficulty, change, boredom, absurdity, and death resulting from their punishment, the punishment thereby loses its meaning. As a result, the punishment ceases to be an external force, and instead can be transformed from a form of passive acceptance to a beautiful significance.
>
> (Yan 2015, 335)

Following the same logic, Yang is not pursuing a definitive goal such as a destination that is "home" or a monograph containing the sole correct interpretation of *Shijing*. His salvation lies instead in committing sins, failing, casting away some views and adopting others—all to keep moving forward in search of "lost poems". In addition, the enormous weight of the multi-millennial tradition that every Chinese intellectual is bound to carry and unable to cast away may be perceived as a metaphorical Sisyphus' boulder. Every trip to the mountain-top—that is, every adoption of a particular perspective—is unavoidably replaced by another act of disillusion, and vice versa. Hence, this essay reads *Ballads, Hymns, Odes*, and particularly the sequence of the protagonist's hermeneutic shifts, as a testimony to the fact that for Yang (and, similarly, for Yan himself, along with every other contemporary intellectual), salvation lies in punishment—that is, in continuing to constantly reinterpret the world even if it is evident that a single definitive reading does not exist.

Hard Like Water: Mao Tradition Meets Mao-Style Language

Having discussed how *Shijing* exegesis directly influenced the structure, narrative, and style of *Ballads, Hymns, Odes*, it is crucial to pay attention to Yan's interest in reshaping the world through exegetic practices as reflected in his other works. Indeed, Yan's fascination with hermeneutical interpretations of familiar worlds did not start with *Ballads, Hymns, Odes*. In *Hard Like Water*, the connections to *Shijing* exegesis are, if they exist, implicit. Still, the focus on interpretation and exegesis-like practices reshaping the reality of everyday life is firmly in place. In the novel, the protagonist, Gao Aijun 高愛軍, is peculiarly fond of revolutionary struggle as represented by Mao-style language 毛體—the officialese ubiquitous in China during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). For instance, the generic lyrics of revolutionary songs are the only thing able to awaken Gao's sexual drive. But most illustrative of the transformative power of Mao-style language are the scenes in which Gao and his lover Xia Hongmei 夏紅梅 find supreme pleasure through engaging in exegesis-like verbal competitions, composing revolutionary slogans. Gao and Xia are unwaveringly devoted to their revolutionary hermeneutics throughout the novel. By interpreting the world around them through the lens of ideological discourse, they see everyday items and situations as vivid illustrations of class struggle and the communist movement. In a sense, for these two ardent revolutionaries, the whole world becomes a mere backdrop for expressing their ideological passion, which verges on mania, as in the following scene:

> 我指著洞房牆角扔的鐵鍬說：「抓革命，促生產；一張鐵鍬把地翻。」她說：「一張鐵鍬鬧革命，嚇得敵人心膽顫。」我說：「鐵鍬翻地又反天，億萬人民笑開顏。」她說：「鐵鍬可做槍，英雄鬥志昂。」我說：「喜看稻菽千重浪，遍地英雄下夕煙。」她說：「高愛軍，高鎮長，你的話裡沒鐵鍬，我的背癢了，罰你給我擾一遍。」我說：「夏紅梅，夏支書，沒有鐵鍬翻地，哪有稻菽千重浪的大豐收？我的腳心癢了，罰你輕輕替我擾十遍。」
>
> (Yan 2007, 153)
>
> I gestured at the shovel lying on the ground, and said, "Pursue revolution, promote production; use a shovel to overturn the earth." Hongmei replied, "By using a shovel to incite revolution, we can terrify the enemy." I said, "A shovel can overturn not only the earth but also the heavens, and a billion people will burst into smiles." She said, "A shovel can be used as a rifle, with a heroic fighting spirit." I said, "I like to look at endless waves of grain, and in all directions there are heroes in the sunset mist." She said, "Gao Aijun, Mayor Gao, in that last statement you didn't refer to a shovel. My back itches, so your punishment is to scratch it." I said, "Xia Hongmei, Party Branch Secretary Xia—without a shovel, how would you harvest the endless waves of grain? The sole of my foot itches, and as punishment you must scratch it ten times."
>
> (Yan 2021, 240–41)

Numerous allegorical meanings are extracted from a simple farming tool, as Gao and Xia turn it from a prosaic appliance into a glorious symbol of both revolutionary labour and warfare. In his final statement, "I like to look at endless waves of grain, and in all directions there are heroes in the sunset mist," Gao ascends to pure allegoresis. Initially serving as a starting point for this exegetical competition, at this stage, the shovel has effectively fulfilled its purpose and can be discarded. This approach resembles the Mao tradition's treatment of *Shijing* poems, where the original text is sometimes exploited as a frame for sociopolitical commentary. The coincidental pun—the progenitors of Mao tradition and Mao-style language share a surname—strengthens the resemblance.

Discarding initial objects and situations in favour of far-flung allegories allows Gao and Xia to strike a balance between two seemingly incompatible things: their clandestine affair, which causes the deaths of their legitimate spouses, and their self-perception as model revolutionaries. In the same way that the Mao tradition turned passionate love poems into conventional didactic tales, the two lovers interpret the illicit nature of their relationship as a revolutionary struggle. As Gao exclaims:

> 我們因為不是夫妻而超百倍的體會到男歡與女樂。我們每一次事後躺在床上，都說：「革命值了哩，死了也值啦！」
>
> (Yan 2007, 150)
>
> In fact, precisely because we weren't yet married, we were able to enjoy several hundred times more pleasure than an actual couple. Every time we did that thing, we would lie on the bed afterward and exclaim, "The revolution is certainly worth it, and even death itself would be worth it!"
>
> (Yan 2021, 236)

Another noteworthy aspect of *Hard Like Water* related to *Shijing* exegesis is that the novel's action mainly unfolds in the hometown of prominent neo-Confucians of the Northern Song period (960–1127): the brothers Cheng Yi 程頤 (1032–1085) and Cheng Hao 程顥 (1033–1107). Gao is obsessed with destroying their historic estate, where the scholars' entire textual legacy is preserved. What draws our attention here concerning the novel and *Shijing* exegesis is that the anthology was one of the persistent intellectual interests of the Cheng brothers as scholars of the Classics. Their innovative *wanwei* 玩味 approach to the anthology promoted ignoring the abstruse allegoresis of canonical exegetic tradition to study the poems as they appear to a reader, "playing with and savoring" the texts (Van Zoeren 1991, 211–12). No wonder Gao, whose entire worldview is buttressed by the rigid interpretative framework of Mao-style language, considers them his sworn enemies. In addition, being adept at revolutionary hermeneutics, Gao rapidly climbs the cadre ranks, becoming the town's deputy mayor despite lacking actual managerial skills. Such a career path somewhat resembles the stereotypical image of an imperial official—a dogmatist obtaining governmental appointments based on the results of examinations that primarily tested his knowledge of the Classics. However, the power of Mao-style language has its limits, and the higher-level party cadres eventually discover Gao and Xia's misdeeds. Even under detention and awaiting prosecution, the lovers turn to revolutionary exegesis as their last

hope—and their devotion is indeed rewarded. Thanks to Gao's excellent command of the Chairman's literary oeuvre, he cracks the prison security system based on the famous "Changzheng" 長征 (The Long March, 1935) poem, thus escaping the cell to make a final desperate attempt to destroy the Cheng brothers' estate.

In a sense, the pervasive Mao-style language in *Hard Like Water* functions for the protagonist and his lover in the same way as Mao poetic exegesis, turning everything around the couple into revolutionary allegories. While some prominent Chinese writers and scholars have been accused of inadvertently embracing Mao-style language, Yan is fully conscious of the power it still retains over modern Chinese literature.[17] His ironical treatment of this otherwise oppressive discursive regime opens an unexpected dimension of literary experimentation. Following the Mao tradition's path of first being canonised, then fought against, and finally acknowledged as a unique phenomenon in the history of Chinese literature, under Yan's pen, Mao-style language is separated from its ideological burden and presented instead as a tour de force of literary and linguistic imagination.

Conclusion

Prompted by Chinese scholars' multiple inquiries into the image of the intellectual in Yan Lianke's oeuvre and by English-language studies by Li and Xie, this essay operates on the margins of these studies in an attempt to elucidate some under-explored aspects of Yan's less studied works. It intentionally avoids discussing Yan's mythorealist theoretical framework, as this aspect is covered exceptionally well in Xie's essay, as well as in the recent monograph *Ideology and Form in Yan Lianke's Fiction* (Xie 2023). Similarly, the autobiographical element of *Ballads, Hymns, Odes* is comprehensively analysed in Li's dissertation. Instead, this essay focuses on Yan's interest, which began in his early work *Hard Like Water* and reached its peak in *Ballads, Hymns, Odes*, in interpreting and re-interpreting the world in an exegetic-esque manner.

Over the course of his writing career, Yan has established himself as a member of various academic circles, and he holds professorial positions at Renmin University of China and The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology. Such status grants him great authority, enabling him to speak not only as a storyteller but also as a scholar, as well as to engage in debates regarding the Chinese intelligentsia with an insider's perspective. As Yan's fictional double in one of his recent novels reasons, somewhat tongue-in-cheek: "You're a student at Peking University, I'm a professor at Renmin University. You don't trust a writer, but can you distrust a teacher?" (你在北大讀書，我在人大教書，你不相信作家，你不會不相信一個老師吧？) (Yan 2018, 115). However, Yan, like his characters Yang Ke and Gao Aijun, hails from a peasant and military background and had to carve out for himself the new persona of a knowledge worker. In this sense, the two novels discussed in this essay represent

[17] For examples of Mao-style language debates, see: Klein 2016 and Shen 2009.

a formative stage in the development of the writer's views concerning intellectuals, and the convoluted history of *Shijing* exegesis probably provided the writer with food for thought on the matter.

While Chinese-language studies of *Ballads, Hymns, Odes* continually emphasise Yan's highly critical assessment of modern Chinese intellectuals, this essay approaches the work in question as a more ambivalent assessment of this social stratum. In other words, instead of simply giving up on intellectuals, Yan draws the reader's attention to their positive traits, such as their inquisitive spirit, which manifests in intellectuals' interactions with the world despite all the hypocrisy of contemporary society. Similarly, some episodes in *Shijing*'s exegetic history that appear somewhat far-fetched to a modern reader, illustrate, in the context of tradition, the unrestrained power of literary imagination. In the case of Yan's fiction, the journeys of the protagonists of *Hard Like Water* and *Ballads, Hymns, Odes* appear as collections of episodes that range from awkward to outright disgraceful and repulsive. However, if read through the lens of *Shijing* exegesis, their misdeeds and travails suddenly appear to represent transformative if painful intellectual endeavours.

Such an intellectual quest is a double-edged sword that may bring as many insights as obstacles. Yet as Yan's works imply, it is something in which every intellectual must take part to retain this lofty title. If intellectuals give free play to their interpretative faculties, this will probably push them to the margins or even into exile. Whether to treat it as a punishment or a blessing in disguise is up to them. According to Liu Zaifu's typology of exiles, it appears that in *Ballads, Hymns, Odes*, Yan also implies that the final push must bring one beyond these margins-turned-boundaries to a new metaphysical reality (Liu 2021, 185–96). Such a push might be the same type of breakthrough as the act of shedding the limitations of causality, praised by Yan as an outstanding literary achievement (Yan 2022, 58).

The close reading presented in this essay explores alternative understandings of *Hard Like Water* and *Ballads, Hymns, Odes*—that they are not entirely satirical narratives, but also examples of the tremendous subversive power of interpretation, akin to the power that permeates the history of *Shijing* exegesis. Such power can either lead one to a dead end, as happens to Gao Aijun, or grant a chance for salvation, as in the case of Yang Ke. Liu notes that a writer who attains and embraces the position of "exiling the state" can benefit from it immensely:

> 作家既不是被國家放逐的歷史受難者的角色，也不是躲進小樓的心靈避難者的角色，而是恢復作家本來應有的日神精神，自由地、冷靜地觀照一切,包括觀照國家。
>
> (Liu 1994, 284)
>
> The writer plays neither the role of a historical victim exiled by the state nor the role of someone who takes sanctuary of the heart in a small abode, but resumes his original Apollonian spirit to observe and shed light on everything—including the state—freely and serenely.
>
> (Liu 2021, 186)

Such an enlightened state is possible for Yang, who is a writer and, to a certain degree, a fictional representation of Yan himself. More importantly, Yang's unwavering faith in interpretation and readiness to discard old paradigms to embrace new ones hints that against all odds, Yan retains hope in contemporary intellectuals.

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