From Slogan to Subversion: The Irony of 'Serve the People!' in Yan Lianke's Novel

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Abstract

This paper examines the political and psychological subversions at the heart of Yan Lianke's *Serve the People!* (2005), a bold satire of China's Cultural Revolution. Centred on a sexually charged and ideologically fraught affair between a young Sergeant and the young pretty wife of a Division Commander, the novel transforms Mao Zedong's revered slogan 'Serve the People!' into a bitterly ironic motif. By unpacking the abuse of language, revolutionary rhetoric, and authoritarian power, this study highlights how personal desire becomes a site of resistance in a regime that demands ideological purity and loyalty. Through a close reading of the novel's symbols such as the desecration of Maoist imagery, the erotic use of wooden signs and red armbands, and the politicisation of private acts. This paper explores the intersection of sexual politics, class inversion, and emotional repression. The analysis draws on broader traditions of political fiction, including works similar to Lianke's, to position Lianke's narrative within the global context of literary dissent. Ultimately, this paper argues that *Serve the People!* functions as a counter-memory to China's sanitised revolutionary history, offering a piercing critique of how totalitarian systems distort not only truth and morality but also the most intimate dimensions of human life.

Keywords: Political Satire, Sexual Desire, Abuse, Power, and Authoritarianism.

Yan Lianke's *Serve the People!* 2005, translated into English by Julia Lovell in 2007, is a bold satirical novel set against the backdrop of China's Cultural Revolution. The title, borrowed from one of Mao Zedong's most iconic and revered slogans, functions as a central ironic motif, exposing how a totalitarian regime can distort language, ideology, and power. Through its portrayal of a transgressive and highly symbolic sexual affair between Wuand Liu, the novel critiques the oppressive machinery of ideological indoctrination, hypocrisy, and the dehumanising nature of state control over private life. Zhang asserts that "Yan Lianke's works are ideological and political, and the criticism of Yan Lianke's works is equally ideological and political" (98).

Lianke's body of work has consistently challenged the boundaries of official narratives in China, and *Serve the People!* is no exception. This novel was censored in mainland China shortly after publication and offers a psychologically rich and politically subversive reflection on life under authoritarianism. According to Fan, Yan Lianke's writing is known for its experimental and surreal qualities, and he is recognised for creating a unique form of absurdism he calls "mythorealism." In his view, China's reality is so extreme and unbelievable that traditional realism fails to capture its essence. In the article, *The New Yorker* shows:

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

This study sheds light on the absurdities of revolutionary culture and the deeper emotional and moral erosion that such systems produce, reflecting Yan Lianke's view that fiction is the only medium capable of illuminating certain hidden truths that reality alone cannot expose. In this sense, fiction becomes not just a narrative choice but a political act and a means of recovery, resistance, and remembrance. In the opening lines of *Serve the People!*:

> THE NOVEL IS THE ONLY place for a great many of life's truths. Because it is only in fiction that certain facts can be held up to the light.
>
> The novel it is, then, for this particular truth.
>
> The story I'm about to tell, you see, bears some resemblance to real characters and events.
>
> Or – if I may put it this way: life has imitated art, re-rehearsing the plot of *Serve the People!* (Lianke 1)

The Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) was a period of profound ideological upheaval in China. Initiated by Mao Zedong, it aimed to reinforce Communist orthodoxy by purging perceived capitalist and traditional influences from Chinese society. This resulted in a decade of widespread chaos, persecution, fear, and intense surveillance. Revolutionary slogans, such as Serve the People!, Destroy the Four Olds, and Loyalty to Chairman Mao, permeated all aspects of daily life.

In this environment, political loyalty was not only expected but also demanded, and even private thoughts and personal relationships were subject to scrutiny. It is this deeply paranoid and morally inverted world that *Serve the People!*explored satire to probe the contradictions of a regime that demanded spiritual purity, while enabling systemic hypocrisy and coercion.The story revolves around Wu Dawang, a peasant who rose through the ranks due to his ideological zeal and embodied the revolutionary ideal: loyal, disciplined, and entirely obedient to Party orders. He was assigned to take care of Liu Lian during her husband's absence. What begins as a menial task quickly evolves into a passionate and dangerous affair between Wu and Liu, "like a single rose and a hoe left abandoned in a vast, bare flower bed" (Lianke 8).

In a moment of unexpected stillness, Wu caught sight of a wooden plaque bearing the slogan 'Serve the People!' emblazoned in vivid red. It was then that he fully grasped the slogan's redefined, symbolic connotation, not a call to ideological service, but a veiled cue for sexual submission. This realisation framed the illicit dynamic between him and Liu Lian, who would go on to isolate themselves for three days within the Commander's house, entirely absorbed in their transgressive affair. As their relationship deepens, " FOR THREE DAYS AND THREE nights, Liu and Wu imprisoned themselves

within the house, attending only to their most primitive needs" (Lianke 128). Their intimacy is both a sanctuary and a battlefield, a paradoxical space where both liberation and subjugation unfold simultaneously.

Their affair has become increasingly complex, marked by power reversals, role-playing, and symbolic desecration of Party Paraphernalia. The revolutionary setting amplifies the stakes, as their affair not only defies sexual and social norms but also represents an ideological rebellion. As the affair intensifies, Wu questions the ideal she once championed. His transformation from an obedient servant of the people to a man driven by suppressed desire and moral confusion reflects the psychological damage inflicted by systems that pit public virtue against private humanity.

Although Wu is nominally a lower-ranking figure, his sexual relationship inverts traditional hierarchies. Liu is technically subordinate in the political order as 'just' a wife, yet within the household and the realm of the affair, she exercises complete control over Wu. Their sexual relationships are laden with symbols of class and power. Liu treats Wu alternately as a servant, a lover, and a revolutionary figure to be manipulated. This constant shift underscores the unstable performative nature of power in authoritarian systems. The personal becomes political, and every gesture, whether romantic or degrading, mirrors the regime's manipulation of people as tools for ideological performance.

The phrase 'Serve the People!'is subverted throughout the novel. What begins as a patriotic mantra becomes a euphemism for sexual submission and emotional enslavement. The act of 'serving' by cooking, cleaning, obeying, and ultimately satisfying her sexuallyis framed as a revolutionary duty. This ironic transformation reveals how revolutionary language can be stripped of its meaning and repurposed for manipulation. In this world, slogans no longer inspire actions for the greater good. Instead, they mask individual ambitions, coercion, and moral decay. Lianke's portrayal suggests that, in the absence of sincerity or ethical grounding, ideology devolves into a theatre performance that conceals personal indulgence and social complicity.

A central conflict lies in Wu's internal struggle between duty and desire. Initially, he is proud of his political obedience and sees personal sacrifice as a badge of

revolutionary honour. However, as his involvement with Liu deepens, his physical and emotional needs override his ideological commitment. This tension reflects the broader psychological conflict many faced during the Cultural Revolution. The system sought to suppress individual will, passion, and emotional expression in favour of collectivist values. Wu's journey is an allegory for the thousands whose inner lives were crushed or distorted by ideological repression. The novel does not condemn Wu's desires; instead, it critiques a system that denies space for genuine human connection.

Yan Lianke crafts a claustrophobic setting that mirrors the oppressive atmosphere of constant political oversight: "these socialist and communist writings also contain a critical element" (Marx and Eagles 43). Even with the privacy of the Commander's home, Mao's portrait looms overhead, revolutionary slogans hang on the walls, and the invisible presence of authority is palpable. This physical setting serves as a metaphor for the invasion of personal life by ideology. There is no true intimacy or freedom from political scrutiny. Even love and passion must occur under the watchful eye of a regime that claims moral superiority while enforcing emotional and sexual repression.

In this novel, symbolism plays a crucial role in reinforcing its satirical tone, particularly through the desecration and subversion of revolutionary icons. The slogan "Serve the People!," once a revered political motto signifying selfless devotion to the masses, was reimagined as a symbol of sexual dominance and submission. Its literal destruction during moments of passion between Wu and Liu becomes an act that mocks its ideological gravity, turning propaganda into a marker of personal indulgence.

Similarly, Mao Zedong's portrait, ubiquitous and sacrosanct during the Cultural Revolution, features prominently in the sexual encounters. Its removal or desecration during an affair functions as both a private act of liberation and a subversive political gesture. The transformation of political icons into erotic props signals not only rebellion but also the collapse of ideological authenticity. Wooden signs and red armbands, traditionally signifying ideological purity and revolutionary commitment, have been transformed into erotic props, further blurring the line between duty and desire. These acts of symbolic desecration not only challenge the sanctity of Maoist imagery but also highlight how such symbols can be co-opted, parodied, and emptied of meaning.

Through this reinterpretation, "Taking the Serve the People! Sign from its place against the wall… 'whenever this sign's not in its usual place, it means I need you upstairs for something"' (10).

Lianke exposes the inherent vulnerability of ideological icons when confronted with the complexities of human emotions and physical desires. Chen Xiaoming's comments:

> Among all the writers in mainland China, no one has been simultaneously less and more difficult to understand than Yan Lianke. In the former case, due to his distinctive style … the richness of his novels can be easily comprehended. In the latter case, however, Yan's works are unusual in that it is hard to tell what he really intends to reveal; he always seems to walk away from his deepest concern for something at the very moment he is about to touch its essence, and instead turn to something else. (42)

Lianke's narrative style is sparse, ironic, and unflinching. He avoids overt condemnation or emotional melodrama, allowing the absurdities of the characters' actions and the hollowness of revolutionary rhetoric to speak for themselves. The novel's restrained tone enhances its satirical effect; readers are not led to pity the characters, but to recognise in their contradictions the broader failures of the ideological system that governs them. Julia Lovell's English translation captures Lianke's subtle humour and deadpan delivery, ensuring that non-Chinese readers grasp both the cultural satire and political gravity. The fluidity and irony preserved in translation are key to the novel's global appeal as a critique of authoritarian excess.

Lianke's *Serve the People!* is meaningfully situated within a broader literary canon of political fiction that interrogates the ideological distortions in personal relationships and moral frameworks. The novel bears strong thematic and structural similarities to George Orwell's *1984*, where the clandestine affair between Winston and Julia serves as a symbolic act of rebellion against a totalitarian regime that seeks to control both thought and desire. Similarly, Milan Kundera's *The Joke* offers a satirical critique of communist hypocrisy in post-war Czechoslovakia, exploring how minor personal transgressions are

magnified by an overzealous ideological apparatus, an approach echoed in Lianke's portrayal of sexual dynamics under Maoism.

While Mo Yan's *Red Sorghum* and Yu Hua's *To Live* explore the devastating human costs of China's political upheavals with a more epic or tragic narrative scope, Yan Lianke adopts a sharper, more subversive angle. His concise, ironic narrative focuses on the absurdities of ideological control in intimate life, using satire to expose systemic contradictions. In D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and Lianke's *Serve the People!* uses sexual transgression as a powerful metaphor for resistance against class oppression in Lawrence's case and ideological tyranny in Lianke's. While culturally distinct, they mirror each other in their critiques of systems that prioritise order and control over individual freedom and emotional authenticity. These intertextual connections position as a critical voice within global political literature, emphasising the complex interplay between private emotion and public ideology in repressive regimes.

As in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, where intimacy is a metaphor for healing and truth, Lianke's *Serve the People!* Presents sexual transgression as a subversive act. D.H. Lawrence writes:

> Life is so soft and quiet, and cannot be seized. It will not be raped. Try to rape it, and it disappears. Try to seize it, and you have dust. Try to master it, and you see your own image grinning at you with the grin of an idiot. … One gesture of violence, one violent assertion of self-will, and life is gone. You must seek again. … One can fight for life, fight against the grey unloving armies, the armies of greedy and bossy ones, and the myriad hosts of the clutching and self-important. Fight one does and must, against the enemies of life. But when you come to life itself, you must come as the flower does, naked and defenceless and infinitely in touch.(323)

This emphasis on vulnerability and authenticity stands in sharp contrast to the performative, coercive intimacy between Liu and Wu, where political ideology mediates every gesture. Lawrence's romantic ideal of connection as resistance is deliberately inverted in Lianke's satire, where desire becomes corrupted by the machinery of revolution and surveillance.

This functions as a form of counter-memory, a narrative that resists official versions of history "of unconsummated passion falling anticlimactically away" (Lianke 47). The Cultural Revolution remains a highly sensitive and often censored topic in the Chinese discourse. In fictionalising the unspeakable, Lianke provides not only a critique but also a remembrance of a literary act of historical salvage. By depicting its psychological and intimate consequences, Lianke challenges historical amnesia and reflects on how public trauma continues to shape people's private lives. The novel offers neither catharsis nor a moral resolution. Instead, it reveals how political systems rely on the suppression of memory, emotion, and dissent to maintain their power. Wu's ultimate fate, whether through emotional destruction or social exile, mirrors the collective experience of many whose individual identities were consumed by revolutionary fervour. As Lianke observes:

> To contemporary eyes, life back then must seem lacking in emotional depth. More often than not, however, psychological complexity exists only in novels, as authors fill in details absent from protagonists' actual thoughts. As emotion, like comedy, is essentially immediate, its outward expressions tend to the superficial rather than the profound. That night, as the sky began to lighten, Wu Dawang finally dozed off and dreamed he was in carnal embrace with Liu Lian. (73)

This scepticism highlights how genuine emotional expressions are often stifled or rendered superficial by ideological constraints. Lianke suggests that fleeting affect, rather than profound reflection, governs outward behaviour. Against this backdrop, Wu Dawang's dream of being in carnal embrace with Liu Lian becomes not an act of psychological revelation but a raw, instinctual escape, an unconscious flare of private desire in a world that denies it space to exist. In this way, Lianke exposes how both emotion and identity are flattened under the weight of a historical narrative, with only fragmented, often banal moments like dreams, bearing witness to what has been repressed.

Albert Einstein and his collaborators observed, "We experience ourselves, our thoughts and feelings, as something separate from the rest. A kind of optical delusion of consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal

desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us" (15). This psychological confinement resonates with Lianke's portrayal of characters whose innermost lives are distorted by politics. Wu's personal prison is ideological rather than metaphysical; his thoughts and affections are corralled by a regime that limits authentic relational bonds and enforces a narrow emotional economy.

Lianke explores how ideology becomes a tool of domination rather than liberation. By centring on sexual politics, Lianke transforms the domestic sphere into a battleground of ideological conflict where desire and discipline collide. Through powerful symbolism, restrained prose, and piercing irony, Lianke reveals the absurdity of political slogans and the emotional costs of blind devotion. The novel reminds readers that authoritarian systems do not merely demand public loyalty; they reshape their citizens' inner landscapes. Rebellion takes the form of passion; slogans are stripped of meaning, and private emotions become the last frontier of resistance.

Lianke has been labelled a "book-banned writer" as he is the author whose works face the highest frequency of bans and censorship in mainland China (Xie 3). This persistent censorship underscores not only the radical nature of Lianke's literary voice but also the enduring threat his work poses to authoritarian structures that rely on narrative control to maintain power. His repeated suppression by state authorities reflects the degree to which his fiction exposes uncomfortable truths about ideological excess, political hypocrisy, and the privatisation of public virtue.

Through *Serve the People!* Lianke challenges official historiography and gives voice to the silenced emotional and psychological costs of revolution, making him not just a censored author but a crucial cultural dissident whose literature is politically dangerous and artistically innovative. As Schillinger observes, "This book is a chapter from living history that the world beyond China is only lately beginning to glimpse."This insight highlights *Serve the People!* as more than fiction; it is a vital contribution to historical memory, offering an intimate lens on a revolutionary era that remains obscured or censored outside China. Lianke's fiction does not simply represent repression; it intervenes and reveals literature as both witness and weapon. Although Lianke's work

echoes the real histories of repression and resistance, it is a vital text for understanding the psychological and cultural legacy of China's 20th-century revolutions.

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