

Prof Lianke YAN

Citation

The discipline of a soldier runs through the pen of writer Yan Lianke. Every morning he sits down and every morning, without recourse to a computer, the former People's Liberation Army officer marshals his thoughts on to the paper in front of him. Yet what unbounded ideas emerge! While the experimental writing that flourished in the late 1980s and 1990s in Mainland China has mostly moved back to realism, Yan travels his own path to the shores of "mythorealism", the term he has originated for his creative vision. There, he seeks to harness everyday life and his own experiences to continuously push beyond the conventional and accepted through literature's unique power of illumination. To do so, he draws on his deep, self-driven knowledge of Chinese literature and international writing, ranging from European absurdism and US black humor to Latin American magical realism and Russian naturalism, and all imbued with his eastern China worldview.

Such diligence and an innovative diversity in language and style combined with outspoken reflections on Chinese history and modern society have helped Prof Yan, now a faculty member at Renmin University and Sin Wai Kin Visiting Professor of Chinese Culture at HKUST, become one of China's most prolific and distinctive contemporary authors. Over more than 35 years as an author, he has published numerous short stories, 13 full novels, 15 novellas and a 17-volume

collected works. Renowned books include Lenin's Kisses (2003) and The Chronicles of Zhalie (2014), questioning the utopian dreams of both Communism and the open-door era, Dream of Ding Village (2006), exploring the Henan blood-selling and HIV infection disaster, as well as philosophical narrative tapestry The Sunlit Years (1998) and The Four Books (2010). The Four Books, yet to be published in the Mainland, involves a range of Chinese intellectuals, the great famine of the Great Leap Forward - the era into which Prof Yan was born in 1958 - and a searing examination of human nature.

The writer's own life story is as fascinating as his novels. Hailing from a poor peasant family in Henan Province, he joined the army at 20 at the behest of his parents, as a pathway to education and opportunities they could not provide. He remained in the army for more than 25 years where, in a mythorealistic turn of events, he worked as a propaganda writer while simultaneously developing his individual literary vision. In starting out, he saw writing simply as a means to move away from the countryside and make money. Along the way, he earned a degree in politics and education from Henan University and a degree in literature from the People's Liberation Army Art Institute. The more he read and reflected, the more motivated he became to write what his heart and his art steered him to set down.

Recognitions for his work at home include the Lu Xun Literature Prize and Lao She Literature Prize. Overseas, where his books have now been translated into over 20 languages, he was the first Chinese writer to be awarded the Franz Kafka Literature Prize. He has been shortlisted for the Man Booker International Prize and Prix Femina Literature Prize, among others. Yet he wears such eminence lightly, remaining modest about his achievements, ready to listen should respected friends suggest revisions to manuscripts, and always willing to step beyond the commercially popular to embrace fresh literary landscapes.

At HKUST, students across the University have greatly benefited from Prof Yan's passion, eloquence, and generous readiness to share his literary genius. He served as writer-in-residence at the University in 2013 and launched a creative writing class after being awarded a named visiting professorship in 2016. The program and his stature have drawn science, engineering and business undergraduates as well as humanities and social students into the enthralling realm of literature. Prof Yan has edited and helps publish a collection of short stories by students from his class. He has also published two textbooks on teaching creative writing, based on his work at HKUST.

Prof Yan has not chosen an easy path. But in his rigorous and courageous search for that timeless work, which resounds with readers and at the highest levels of literary excellence, in his role as an inspiring, dedicated educator, through his unassuming response to world renown and on-going compassion for the everyman, he serves as

an outstanding example of a truly committed artist, and to us all.

Chancellor, on behalf of the Council of the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, I have the high honor of presenting to you, Prof Yan Lianke, Sin Wai Kin Visiting Professor of Chinese Culture for the award of Doctor of Letters *honoris causa*.