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DECLINING ATTACHMENT TO CONFUCIANISM:  
YAN LIANKE'S MYTHOREALISTIC NOVEL  
*THE EXPLOSION CHRONICLES*

**Abstract.** By combining mythological motifs, allegory, and absurdity with realistic depictions of daily life in *The Explosion Chronicles*, Yan Lianke constructs a fictional world that mirrors the dynamic transformations of the People's Republic of China since the mid-twentieth century. This article explores how mythorealism (*shenshi zhuyi* 神实主义) serves as a tool for revealing the diminishing importance of Confucian values and traditional ethics in contemporary Chinese society. It examines the diminishing significance of principles of filial piety, propriety, and social harmony in the face of modernization, materialism, and political ideology, and further investigates the interplay between mythological references and the emergence of new cultural paradigms rooted in bureaucracy and the cult of power.

**Keywords:** Yan Lianke; mythorealism; modern Chinese literature; Confucian values; myths

SŁABNĄCE PRZYWIĄZANIE DO KONFUCJANIZMU –  
MITOREALISTYCZNA POWIEŚĆ YAN LIANKE *KRONIKI EKSPLOZJI*

**Abstrakt.** W powieści *Kroniki Eksplozji* Yan Lianke łączy motywy mitologiczne, alegorię i groteskę z realistycznym obrazem codziennego życia, tworząc fikcyjny świat, który odzwierciedla dynamiczne przemiany w Chińskiej Republice Ludowej od połowy XX wieku. Niniejszy artykuł stanowi analizę mitorealizmu (*shenshi zhuyi* 神实主义) jako narzędzia do ukazania malejącego znaczenia wartości konfucjańskich i tradycyjnej etyki we współczesnym społeczeństwie chińskim. Autorka wyjaśnia odniesienia do mitologii, kultury i symbolikę, za których pomocą Yan Lianke wskazuje na pojawienie się nowych paradygmatów kulturowych zakorzenionych w biurokracji i kulcie władzy oraz zmniejszającą się rolę zasad synowskiej pobożności, przyzwoitości i harmonii społecznej w obliczu modernizacji, materializmu i ideologii politycznej.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Yan Lianke; mitorealizm; współczesna literatura chińska; wartości konfucjańskie; mity

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## INTRODUCTION

Yan Lianke 阎连科 is one of the most recognized Chinese authors, born in 1958 in the impoverished province of Henan, where many of his works are set. The author has not only personally experienced many hardships but also witnessed firsthand the struggles of his loved ones and the local residents. As an eyewitness to the dynamic social, political and economic transformation of the People's Republic of China, in his novels, he strives to critically depict the Chinese reality and draw his compatriots' attention to the plight of ordinary people during significant moments in China's history since 1949. However, the writer does not resort to conventional methods of describing the fictional universe. He argues that the changes China has experienced in the last few decades are so significant and unique on a global scale that it is impossible to portray the reality of the PRC and the processes occurring in Chinese society without developing an innovative way of writing. Other writers, including Ning Ken (2016), agree with this observation. In the introduction to *The Explosion Chronicles*, Yan Lianke (2019) writes:<sup>1</sup>

China is both a new and old country. It is governed by extreme feudal autocracy, yet at the same time, there is entirely modern luxury. It is extremely Westernized, yet thoroughly Oriental.... Thus, today in China, we have an unreal reality.... A world ruled by strange principles, invisible and intangible. A new logic and a new reason. (6)

Yan Lianke thus initiated a new literary movement, mythorealism (*shenshi zhuyi* 神实主义), defined in his theoretical book *Discovering Fiction*:

Mythorealism is not a bridge offering direct access to truth and reality, and instead it relies on imaginings, allegories, myths, legends, dreamscapes, and magical transformations that grow out of the soil of daily life and social reality. Mythorealism does not definitely reject reality; it attempts to create reality and surpass realism. The difference between mythorealism and other modes of writing lies in the fact that mythorealism pursues inner truth and relies on inner causality to reach the interior of people and society – and in this way it attempts to write truth and create truth. (2022, 99–110)

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<sup>1</sup> All quotations are retranslated from the Polish edition of *The Explosion Chronicles*; parenthetical page numbers following the quotations refer to this edition.

The fictional universe depicted through mythorealism may seem absurd due to its often disrupted logical order. However, extremely improbable events coexist with realistic elements. This suggests that the movement is deeply rooted in reality, and the world presented through it is not limited to products of the writer's imagination.

The aim of this article is to examine how mythorealism helps reveal the diminishing role of Confucianism and traditional values in the lives of PRC citizens starting from the second half of the twentieth century. I have chosen *The Explosion Chronicles* as the subject of my study because it is Yan Lianke's representative novel, which depicts the dynamic development of a small Chinese settlement, rich in literary devices that reference this new literary movement.

## 1. TRADITIONAL CUSTOMS AND CONFUCIAN ETHICS

Confucianism is a doctrine that “encompasses a socio-political program, an ethical system, and a religious tradition. It functions as a fundamental ideology ... permeating the fabric of life in China” (Yao 2020). Its name is derived from Confucius, a Chinese philosopher who lived from 551 to 479 BCE during the Zhou dynasty. For centuries, Confucianism served as the starting point for reflections on morality and referred to ethical principles that should be followed to achieve the so-called state of harmony (*he* 和). This doctrine assumes that humanity belongs to the interdependent parts of the universe. Its central message is the fulfilment of duties toward Heaven (*tian* 天) – a higher force that is a metaphor for the ideal to which one should strive throughout life.

According to Mencius, a philosopher and one of the proponents of Confucius' thought, at the moment of birth, Heaven endows a person with the natural ability to do good (*chi zi zhi xin* 赤子之心). This means that humans are inherently good, and it is up to the individual to follow the Three Fundamental Bonds and the Five Constant Virtues (*san gang wu chang* 三纲五常) throughout their life, thereby fulfilling the will of Heaven and contributing to *tian ren he yi* 天人合一, the unity between humans and Heaven (Lun 2008, 11–14). The term *san gang wu* 三纲五常 *chang* refers to the Three Fundamental Bonds (*san gang* 三纲) – the obedience of a subject to the ruler, a son to his father, and a wife to her husband – and the Five Constant Virtues (*wu chang* 五常): *ren* 仁, *yi* 义, *li* 礼, *zhi* 智, *xin* 信, which translate into benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom and fidelity, respectively (Yao 2020, 36). Additionally,

there are five interpersonal relationships based on reciprocity, known as the Five Cardinal Social Relationships (*wu lun* 五伦) (Pejda and Ciemniowski 2021, 34). These are the relationships between father and son, wife and husband, official and ruler, elder and younger, and between friends. Although these relationships are hierarchical, they are based on reciprocity and refer to the duties placed on each individual as part of Chinese society (35–36).

In *The Explosion Chronicles*, the characters frequently break traditionally accepted rules and fail to fulfil their duties toward relatives, friends, or those in higher positions. This is due to the rapidly transforming value system of the Chinese, who, as a result of the dynamically changing socio-political realities, began to largely reject the ethical values deeply rooted in Chinese culture for centuries in favour of ideas that were considered right at the time. A significant portion of Confucian values and the corresponding duties toward family members were overshadowed or displaced by a sense of duty to the country and the policies it was implementing (Wardęga 2015, 207).

An example of a person who opposes traditional values and breaks the rules of social hierarchy is Kong Mingliang, the newly elected leader responsible for managing the rapidly developing settlement of Explosion. The character clearly does not adhere to the principles of filial piety (*xiao* 孝), which is manifested in several ways. For instance, instead of discussing his desire to marry Zhu Ying with his father, he presents him with a fait accompli, not allowing even the slightest parental involvement in the matter of marrying a woman from a rival family. In the excerpt below, it is evident that Mingliang does not respect his father's opinion on who should command his authority both because of his advanced age and the fact that he is his parent:

Kong Mingguang looked at him in surprise, as if he couldn't recognize his own brother.

'Did Father agree?'

'I agreed.' (Mingliang)

An awkward silence fell. (130)

It is also worth noting the reaction of the protagonist's eldest brother, who is astonished and perplexed by Mingliang's behaviour. The actions of both men serve as a metaphor for Chinese society, where new values began to intertwine with those cherished for generations. According to traditional Chinese family hierarchy, it was previously unthinkable to disregard one's father, but in *The Explosion Chronicles* the relationships and duties upheld for centuries are gradually being degraded.

Another example of Mingliang's failure to adhere to the principles of *xiao* is the fact that upon learning of his father's death he does not decide to return home. The reason for his decision lies in Mingliang's efforts to grant Explosion the status of a county, because "even the most important of private matters does not outweigh the smallest of public affairs. The death of a father or mother is no exception" (255–56). In this statement, we can observe the consequences of the previously mentioned transformation of social roles in China. Mingliang feels responsible for the success of his town, making every effort to support the policies of China, which aimed for rapid development following the introduction of the reform and opening-up policy in 1978. Furthermore, when Mingliang learns of the upcoming mandate requiring the cremation of all deceased citizens and the abandonment of traditional burial practices, he decides to gain recognition among officials by cremating his own father, thereby contributing to the process of familiarizing Explosion's residents with this controversial practice. Another manifestation of the decreasing attachment to family values is the fact that the Kong sons decide to divide their father's estate, leading to the breakup of the family, much to the horror of the mother and their now-deceased father, who shouts from his portrait: "I will kneel before you! Just don't break up the family!" (271). Traditionally, the family was regarded as the smallest social unit whose members could rely on one another. The division of the family in *The Explosion Chronicles* thus addresses the issue of significant social changes and the diminishing importance placed on long-held values.

An interesting aspect is that although Mingliang prioritizes the matters of Explosion over family affairs, he has not completely erased from his consciousness the duties he owes to his father and knows that most of traditional Chinese society still judges him based on the long-established value system. Therefore, he tries to create the impression that he is fulfilling his filial duties by giving his father a burial with great honours. It is worth noting that in doing so, he creates a posthumous "mask" for his father (Ciesielski 2006; Torbicka 2024). However, he overestimates the value of money and does not participate in the traditional seven-day funeral ritual, which, from a traditional point of view, holds far greater significance. Only one of the four brothers, Minghui, visits their father's grave on the third day, which may allude to the fact that during China's period of rapid economic growth, those who valued tradition and ethics became a minority.

In *The Explosion Chronicles*, the residents are quick to abandon their cherished values in favour of material gain or social advancement. When the Kong

family triumphs over the Zhu family, the inhabitants, initially reluctant to humiliate the older man, are encouraged by a cash reward to spit on the former village chief, Zhu Qingfang. Similarly, after the protagonist's death, a member of the Kong family desecrates his grave by exercising on it. However, it is important to note that the narrator does not portray a complete collapse of the traditional value system among the residents of Explosion. The fictional universe is rather full of contrasts, with values passed down through generations, sometimes rejected completely, but meticulously observed other times. For instance, despite the rising materialism, some residents still remember the heritage of their culture and Confucian morality. Although Explosion's community may seem depraved and minimally interested in cultivating traditional values, the novel occasionally presents signs of nostalgia for the old way of life, which has been cast aside in the process of societal modernization, as well as a desire to honour traditions.

An example of aspects reflecting a continued attachment to customs in the novel is when Kong Mingliang notices that "the custom of crying at graves has been neglected in the village for almost two years, and it is high time to visit the cemetery and weep" (127). Other residents also feel the need to visit the graves of their loved ones during the annual Qingming Festival. At the cemetery, some residents engage in rituals such as burning incense, paper money, and making food offerings. In addition to these rites, the novel also references traditions like hanging paper flowers on graves and sticking a symbol of double happiness on the doors of newlyweds. These behaviours may suggest that despite the widespread trend of chasing after money and ignoring "outdated traditions", residents still feel somewhat empty due to neglecting customs that have been nurtured for generations and once formed a constitutive element of Chinese identity. The daily life of the explosion community is thus full of contrasts. In the seemingly progressive lives of the residents of Explosion, just as in real-life China, traces of the past continually emerge, increasingly struggling to fit into the realities of Chinese existence.

## 2. REFERENCE TO PARTICULAR MYTHS

The first-person narrator – the Chronicler – sometimes refers in his work to specific myths. The very history of the founding of the settlement, which derives the name "Explosion" from a volcanic eruption in the region, can be associated with the Chinese creation myth that emerged during the Three

Kingdoms Period (Yuan 2006). Just as in the tale of the mythological hero Pangu 盘古, who creates the world after bursting forth from an egg containing both heaven and Earth, the emergence of Explosion is also the result of a rupture. Similar to the Chinese cosmogonic myth, its creation was prompted by phenomena that were inexplicable at the time. Due to increased seismic activity, the inhabitants of the region were forced to leave and settle elsewhere. Thus, the history of the village's founding has been mythologized (Torbicka 2024).

The Chronicler also refers to the widely known myth of personified Earth. This reference can be seen in the passage: "Earth was covered in wounds.... The soil ... was crisscrossed on the surface with a dense network of scars" (177–78). Additionally, the Chronicler mentions smoking factory chimneys. According to traditional Chinese oral tradition, Earth is compared to a cosmic entity. The water bodies on our planet are viewed as its blood, the mountains as its body, the rocks as bones, and the trees and grass as hair, while clouds and mist represent its breath (Yi-Fu 2001, 89). The reference to the myth of personified Earth in the above passage highlights the price the characters have had to pay for the rapid development of the settlement. The image of a suffering, scarred Earth, whose vegetation has been replaced by buildings and roads, indicates the unsustainable development of the city, which has contributed to the destruction of the natural environment in the fictional region located in the Balou mountains, thus disrupting the unity between humans and nature – a crucial concept from the perspective of Chinese philosophy known as *tian ren he yi* 天人合一.

The Chronicler also employs themes characteristic of ancient Chinese mythology, such as explanations regarding the origins of humans and animals, the conflict between feuding clans, and the theme of human control over nature (Li 1984). The first of these has been transformed in *The Explosion Chronicles*. The myth here is not the creation of humans per se, but rather the granting of new identities to the characters. After the Cultural Revolution, all the inhabitants of the settlement share the same dream, compelling them to leave their homes in search of objects that foreshadow their future roles in the explosion community. This motif of a journey in search of one's destiny, drawn from fairy tales, serves the author to elevate the significance of both the founder of the Kong family and his sons. Even Zhu Ying – the representative of the hated family – never questions the prophecy.

The conflict between the two clans, the Kongs and the Zhus, both residing in Explosion, is clearly outlined and begins when Kong Mingliang and Zhu

Ying meet during the aforementioned night. The unfortunate encounter between the representatives of the feuding clans, who know they must marry to avoid defying fate, sparks a power struggle between the two families. This plot thread can be compared to the skirmishes of mythical figures, such as Gonggong and Emperor Zhuanxu (Yang and Wang 2021, 180–90).

The main characters, including the Kong clan, are able to influence nature to a certain extent. This is noticeable, for example, in the following quote, when a plant comes back to life after Explosion is granted municipal rights: “[Mingliang] noticed that the small ornamental asparagus plant, which had previously dried up to a stick, suddenly miraculously revived” (159). In *The Explosion Chronicles*, there are many instances where nature rejuvenates when Mingliang or his relatives succeed in their work or personal lives. Conversely, nature deteriorates when events take an unexpected turn for the brothers or when the Kong clan faces tragedy. For instance, when Kong Dongde dies, the *Styphnolobium japonicum* “released enormous black flowers” (266).

In Chinese mythology, there are heroes like the esteemed archer Hou Yi 后羿, who tames nine suns, thereby saving the world from destruction, and the goddess Nüwa 女娲, who repairs the pillar supporting the heavens. In both of these examples, the heroes take control of nature to benefit humanity. In contrast, the domination of nature in *The Explosion Chronicles* stems solely from the desire to expand power and gain influence not only among the governed but also over animals, plants, and celestial bodies. This can be observed, for instance, when the weather must conform to Mingliang’s plans as he seeks to transform the village into a city: “According to the calendar, it was winter, but it was obvious that since the village was to become a city, the weather must change as well” (170). An even more striking illustration of this thesis occurs when Mingyao returns to Explosion to persuade the residents to vote for his brother and shoots toward the sky: “The echo of the gunshot lingered in the air for a long time, causing the leaves on all the trees in the village to wither in an instant” (101). An act that should terrify the people thus also leaves its mark on nature, which unexpectedly dies off.

The creator of *The Explosion Chronicles* also portrays the governor of Explosion, making indirect and direct references to two myths from different cultural circles – the Greek myth and Buddhism from India: “They looked at the freshly appointed mayor standing on the red table and husband as if he were a young Buddha dancing in the air, captivated by his fiery speech, his powerful voice echoing like thunder in their veins, stirring their blood” (154). This technique serves several functions. The first is to elevate the character’s

status, placing him on a level akin to the strongest of the Greek gods and to the Buddha from the perspective of his followers. The reference to the highest deity and the founder of a revered religion indicates that the protagonist is seen by the governed as a perfect being deserving of respect and complete trust. Another function of connecting these two myths is to showcase Mingliang's abilities, as he – like Zeus – can control the weather, and – like the Buddha – can persuade people of the righteousness of his actions. Additionally, this technique creates a grand and solemn atmosphere, making the hero speaking to the people appear as an extraordinary individual with the gift of guiding society and helping it achieve various successes.

References to established cultural myths also appear in the phraseology of the text. For example, the development of propaganda is compared to a phoenix rising from the ashes: “At that time, there was a huge boom in the press market, which emerged like a phoenix from the ashes” (175). The reference to the mythical creature with the power of unlimited regeneration is used here in an ironic sense, suggesting that Chinese propaganda has become so deeply embedded in Chinese reality that its removal is no longer possible.

### 3. NEW VALUES AND TRADITIONS

*The Explosion Chronicles* often depicts characters trapped between the past and the present. Habitually, they follow traditional beliefs and value systems that have become outdated in the rapidly progressive town. The old way of thinking is often seen as backward, and the previously upheld moral principles are regarded as incompatible with the newly implemented policies and solutions aimed at accelerating the development of Explosion and, consequently, the entire state. One example is the stigma surrounding prostitution, which was once condemned by citizens who viewed visits to brothels as disgraceful and worthy of scorn. When the residents saw a foreigner utilizing the services of a young woman, they directed harsh words and insults at him. However, it only took a reminder from Zhu Ying: “Do you even know what reform and opening up mean?” and “Don't forget that you built your houses with money sent from the city by your daughters and sisters” (189) for the inhabitants to begrudgingly accept their reality.

The process of coming to terms with the new order is illustrated by the words “People slowly got used to it and gave silent consent to what was happening in the northern part of the main street. Soon, it became a part of everyday life for them” (189).

One manifestation of the coexistence of tradition and new practices can be seen in the previously mentioned behaviour of Cai Qinfang, who uses the signed cards from Mingliang to seek help for her sick father. While the “documents” given by the mayor initially appear to signify the extraordinary power of the administrator of Explosion and the burgeoning bureaucracy, it’s hard to overlook that the magical nature of the written requests might serve an additional function in the narrative. Cai Qinfang’s actions resemble divinatory rituals, specifically the Taoist tradition of appealing to supernatural forces for blessings, prevention of disasters, healing, or assistance in solving problems. The magical practice involved inscribing one’s requests using characters or symbols – such an item was called *Fuzhou* 符咒. This Taoist divination custom is further indicated by the excerpt: “She put the used cards into the pot where she brewed her father’s herbal teas to enhance the effectiveness of the treatment” (424–25). The herbal concoction, said to have healing properties, evokes the concept of *fushui* 符水 – a drink prepared using the aforementioned magical items, which, after being burned, were mixed with water in powdered form to create a miraculous potion.

Interestingly, magical practices appear multiple times in the depicted world, not just among people like Cai Qinfang residing in a remote village. Characters working in administration also believe in superstitions. For instance, when Mingliang talks to the village chief, he reveals, “I asked a fortune-teller about your future. He said you would soon be promoted to the position of mayor of the prefectural city” (256). Thus, new “traditions” – in this case, the developing bureaucracy – and long-established Taoist practices coexist alongside one another. This signals that ancient customs, which once held significant meaning for Chinese society, are beginning to regain favour, despite attempts by the state to eradicate them after 1949 (Gawlikowski et al. 2020, 354).

In Explosion, a cult of power is also developing, reflecting the ideology promoted by the Communist Party in the People’s Republic of China. The “progressive” characters begin to venerate officials and leaders, who bear the responsibility for the region’s development, rather than honouring their ancestors. This phenomenon can be observed among both ordinary citizens and members of the administration. For instance, the crowd adores Mingliang as

he delivers a speech. After his address, the residents become ecstatic and applaud for several hours – a hyperbole that clearly indicates their idolatrous attitude toward the governor. Mingliang reminds the residents to remember the “martyrs”, who were in fact thieves, quoting a well-known saying: “When drinking water, do not forget who dug the well” (*chi shui bu wang wajingren* 吃水不忘挖井人), which refers to Mao Zedong’s decision to build a well in Shaozhouba – a village suffering from a lack of drinking water. Furthermore, Mingliang hangs portraits of former PRC leaders – Deng Xiaoping and Mao Zedong – in his own home. The display of dignitaries’ images on walls may signify a belief in the slogans of predecessors and a hope for their blessings. It’s noteworthy that traditional households previously featured images of deities meant to protect the family from evil and ensure its prosperity. Thus, it can be concluded that these portraits highlight the significance of the cult of power in China, which has become so important that it has led to the rejection of even deeply rooted folk beliefs.

#### CONCLUSION

The new movement introduced by Yan Lianke, in contrast to realism, does not present a mirror reflection of reality and does not explain the motivations of characters or the causes of specific events in a direct and unequivocal manner. This approach encourages readers to engage in deeper reflections on the issues presented. Using a wide range of techniques that enable a multilayered interpretation and provide opportunities to uncover the so-called internal causality and hidden truths of the surrounding world, the author spins a narrative that, despite the wealth of improbable and absurd elements, may actually provide a more comprehensive picture of China.

Through mythorealistic techniques, Yan Lianke illustrates the changes in the perception of traditional values within Explosion’s affluent community, where everyone strives to attain a high position in the social hierarchy at all costs. References to specific myths, magical elements, and disruptions of cause-and-effect relationships help to expose the loss of humanity among the PRC citizens, led by their leaders, as well as the break from tradition and the emergence of new standards for evaluating morality.

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