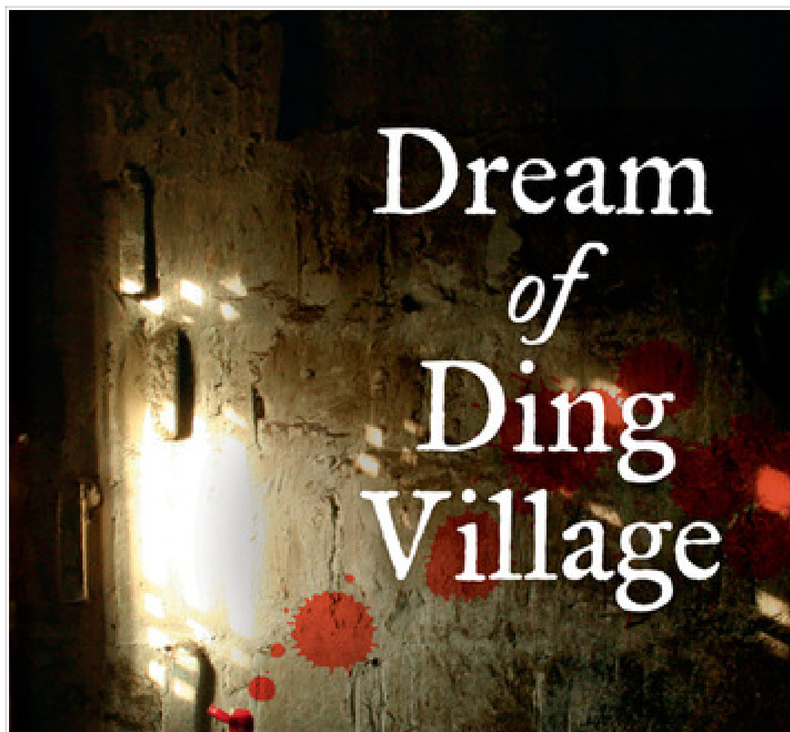
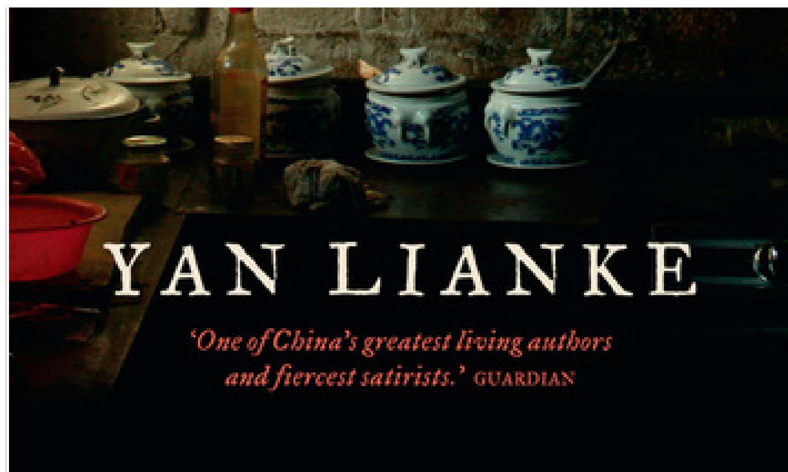
The Subaltern Voice in Dream of Ding Village

by Rachel Leng



Yan Lianke's novel, Dream of Ding Village ····· (2006), provides a fictional account of the decline of a village inflicted by AIDS, focusing on the experiences of the Ding family across three generations. The novel paints an alarming portrait of the trade-off between capitalist progress and human well-being as China acts in an increasingly globalized world. In line with this reading, this paper asks to what extent does Yan's novel mediate the subaltern voice, providing a testimony of suffering AIDS victims in central China? Moreover, can the portrayal of Ding Village's blood-selling crisis be read allegorically in relation to Rey Chow's conception of the myth of consanguinity? By making Qiang, a dead twelve year-old boy, narrate the story from a position both literally and metaphorically at the margins, this paper contends that Yan deploys a ghosted narrator as a discursive tool to enter a site of resistance through the text. Enabling the subaltern to

open in browser PRO version Are you a developer? Try out the HTML to PDF API pdfcrowd.com



transcend Spivak's condition of silence, all the while enunciating a counter-discourse of broader ethical and political agency. As a thematic motif, the circulation of (tainted) blood also interrogates issues of kinship, where instead of strengthening a meaningful sense of community, the act of sharing blood ironically results in the irrevocable rupture of family relations. As such, Dream of Ding Village exemplifies how Yan utilizes literary strategies to empower the subaltern with voice and agency, dispel the myth of consanguinity by appealing to broader political and ethical ideals, and prompt a reconceptualization of the meaning of solidarity and nationhood. This paper argues that Yan's ongoing acts of revisionist history, of returning to scenes of domination and suppression, reactivates attempts at speaking that other forces have sought to obliterate. In revisiting the ruin of an AIDS village, Yan makes it speak in new ways, opening up a line of communication that enters a marginal space – a site of resistance that mobilizes Chinese subaltern vocality for counter hegemonic discourse.

In the early 1990s, hundreds of blood collection stations were set up in Henan Province to supply the Chinese market for plasma (Wu et al. 2004). To persuade farmers to sell their blood, local government officials promoted blood-selling as a rural development scheme that would lift villages out of poverty. "Bloodheads," the network of businessmen and government workers running plasma collection activities, practiced unhygienic collection procedures such as reusing needles and re-injecting separated red blood cells back into peasant blood-sellers to maximize profit, causing the rapid spread of HIV through infusion of pooled contaminated blood cells (Wu et al. 2004). Nevertheless, the Chinese government took great pains to cover-up the HIV epidemic, with officials denying its severity as well as harassing journalists, physicians, and other activists who sought to document the blood scandal (Kellogg 2003).

After AIDS became public in China in 1996, Yan Lianke (…) followed an American medical anthropologist to a village in the AIDS epidemic zone to practice medicine. In an interview, Yan describes his experience

open in browser PRO version Are you a developer? Try out the HTML to PDF API pdfcrowd.com

visiting this AIDS village for the first time: upon sighting coffins for sale and countless graves, he states that the "surprise and shock on his mind cannot be expressed with words" (Zhang 2006). His words also speaks to the psychological problems and mental anguish these villagers experienced as a result of AIDs causing internal fractures within families: married couples becoming alienated, young newlyweds blaming each other for getting infected, and families no longer "harmonious" because relatives did not want to touch each other (Zhang 2006). Upon witnessing the scale of the AIDS outbreak, Yan "felt like he had to write something." And, after three years of undercover work at AIDS villages in rural Henan, this culminated in Dream of Ding Village ····· (2006).

Yan Lianke's novel, Dream of Ding Village (hereafter referred to as "DDV"), provides a fictional account of the decline of a village inflicted by AIDS, focusing on the experiences of the Ding family across three generations. The book opens in the waning years of the "blood-selling boom," where so many people have died in East Henan's Ding Village that "the graves in the village cemetery were as dense as sheaves of wheat in a farmer's field" and families have stopped observing mourning rituals such as writing funeral couplets (8-9; 17). An AIDS pandemic has spread unchecked due to local "bloodheads" who used contaminated needles, intimidation, and chicanery to extort blood from villagers and resell it to government blood banks for profit. Ding Hui was Ding Village's most notorious blood merchant, and angry villagers take revenge on him for infecting them with the "fever" by poisoning his son, Ding Qiang (10). After his murder, Qiang lingers over Ding Village as an omnipresent observer and narrates DDV from beyond his grave, "buried behind the brick wall of the elementary school" (10). The questions I will address in this paper are: to what extent does Yan's novel mediate the subaltern voice, providing a testimony of suffering AIDS victims in central China? Moreover, can the portrayal of Ding Village's blood-selling crisis be read allegorically in relation to Rey Chow's articulation of the myth of consanguinity? This paper contends that Yan deploys DDV's ghosted narrator as a discursive tool to enter a site of resistance through the text, figuratively enabling the subaltern to speak from a silenced position. As a thematic motif, the circulation of (tainted) blood also interrogates issues of kinship, where instead of strengthening a meaningful sense of community, the act of sharing blood ironically results in the irrevocable rupture of family relations.

Representing the Subaltern Voice of AIDS Villagers in China's Central Plains

open in browser PRO version Are you a developer? Try out the HTML to PDF API pdfcrowd.com

In asking the question, “Can the subaltern speak?”, Gayatri Chakrovorty Spivak sparked debates about the power (or lack thereof) of subordinate voices to enunciate its experience meaningfully. Spivak comes to the categorical conclusion that “the subaltern cannot speak” because “there is no space from which the subaltern can speak,” raising complex questions about the ways in which first world intellectuals aspire to give “voice” to third world subalterns (1988, 308-309).[1] Are there literary strategies that authors may utilize to allow subaltern subjects to represent themselves authentically? Or do all well-meaning intellectuals inevitably reproduce simplistic misrepresentations of their own culture’s subalterns? I suggest that Yan’s 2006 novel, DDV, negotiates this tension with a literary strategy that deploys a ghosted narrator speaking from the margins of the story’s diegesis. In this way, the author (Yan) and subaltern subjects (AIDS villagers) are positioned to speak from distinct but complementary perspectives in the text.

[1] Originally a term for subordinates in military hierarchies, the term “subaltern” here is derived from the cultural hegemony work of Antonio Gramsci, where he refers to groups who are outside the established structures of political representation, the means through which people have a voice in their society. In her essay, Spivak further suggests that the subaltern is deprived of both mimetic and political forms of representation.

When Spivak examines the validity of the Western representation of the other, she presents the subaltern Asian woman as paradigmatic of the subaltern condition and urges feminists to speak to rather than for subaltern women, so that “the postcolonial intellectual systematically ‘unlearns’ female privilege” (295). This paper contends that the rural farmers in Yan’s novel similarly exemplify the subaltern condition as figures caught “between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation” that “[disappear] · into a violent shuttling · between tradition and modernization” (306). In writing DDV, Yan admits to struggling with self-censorship, where he did not write the original story he intended and “deliberately avoided many true and terrifying situations,” yet still wished to convey how “the situation in the village was so desperate” (Zhang 2006; Watts 2006). Yan’s conceit of having a fictional character narrate DDV from beyond the grave accentuates the elusive, particularized, and radically decentered subjectivity of the subaltern AIDS villagers, enabling these figures to speak meaningfully.

Contrary to Spivak’s pessimistic account of the mute subaltern, Yan’s novel demonstrates the possibilities for political resistance embodied in subaltern vocality. The narrator, Ding Qiang, reveals that he was “only twelve, in [his] fifth year at school, when [he] · died from eating a poisoned tomato [he] found on the way home from school” (10). Surrounded by people “dy[ing] like falling leaves, their light gone from this world”

open in browser PRO version Are you a developer? Try out the HTML to PDF API pdfcrowd.com

after selling blood, Qiang's death is especially tragic because "[he] died not from the fever, not from AIDS, but because [his] dad had run a blood-collection station in Ding Village ten years earlier· [He] died because [his] dad was · a blood kingpin" (9-10, italics in original). In other words, his young life was taken away in an abrupt and undue manner. As he narrates the decline of Ding Village while the villagers struggle with AIDS, he bears witness to the demolition of his own family and hometown. Towards the end of the novel, Qiang's father has moved on from selling blood to selling coffins and "running a match-making service for the dead" (298). Ironically, Qiang plays a poignant role in the death of his own father when he "scream[s] for dear life" begging his Grandpa, Ding Shuiyang, to "save him" from being married off posthumously (321, italics in original). Qiang screams from "inside [his] coffin" with "cries [that] shook the heavens" and "ripped holes in the sky," finally driving Shuiyang to smash the back of Hui's skull with a chestnut stick (331-2). This macabre scene underscores that Qiang, although marginalized and ghosted, can and does speak to alter the fate of his grave and his family. In this sense, the ghosted Qiang illustrates Yan's effort to speak back to Spivak's concerns, where the fictional character's lingering presence and narration after death simultaneously acknowledges the necessary absence yet underlines the reality of that absence inherent within subaltern positionality.

With this plot development, I suggest that Yan circumvents Spivak's assertion of the silenced subaltern by elucidating bell hooks' statements identifying marginality as a "site of radical possibility" (hooks 1990, 341). In "marginality as a site of resistance," hooks claims that the silenced can speak from "that space in the margin that is a sign of deprivation, a wound, and unfulfilled longing" that becomes "a central location for the production of a counter hegemonic discourse" (1990, 341-3). Qiang's ghosted presence exists "on the edge" between life and death (hooks 1990, 341); in the novel, he was murdered at the brink of puberty and hastily buried at the edge of Ding Village in the local elementary school because "he was too young to be buried in the ancestral grave," underscoring his character's multilayered marginality. He is literally dead silent within the novel's diegesis, yet is the very voice to which we figuratively listen as the story of Ding Village unfold. In this way, Qiang's interstitial presence represents "a site one stays in, clings to even, because it nourishes one's capacity to resist · [and] offers the possibility of radical perspectives from which to see and create, to imagine alternatives, new worlds" (hooks 1990, 341).

According to hooks, a true explanation of subaltern experience can come from the intellectual only if the latter does not assume a cultural superiority when investigating the voices of oppressed subalterns. In DDV, Yan allows the subaltern experience to be spoken through Qiang's perspective – a "radical

open in browser PRO version Are you a developer? Try out the HTML to PDF API pdfcrowd.com

perspective" that is "shaped and formed by marginality" and enters "that space in the margin that is a site of creativity and power" (hooks 1990, 342). Thus, Yan utilizes Qiang's voice in the novel to re-present rural AIDS villagers, emphasizing a position that "inhabits marginal space that is not a site of domination but a place of resistance," a discursive intervention that allows the subaltern to "[speak] from margins· [and speak] in resistance" (343). The fictional Qiang stands in for the actual subaltern subjects that Yan met during his fieldwork and seeks to represent. By making Qiang narrate the story from a position both literally and figuratively at the margins, Yan enables the subaltern to transcend Spivak's condition of silence, all the while enunciating a counter-discourse of broader ethical and political agency.

The Circulation of Tainted Blood and the Myth of Consanguinity

If we accept that the subaltern represented in Yan's novel can speak, the question then becomes: what is the subaltern speaking about? DDV highlights a vast array of issues concerning the transitional tensions resulting from China's rapid modernization, government exploitation, and corrupt capitalism. This paper focuses on the thematic circulation of blood within the text, analyzing it through the interpretive lens of Rey Chow's claims about the myth of consanguinity. In her introduction to Writing Diaspora, Chow elucidates that "a strong single political regime, an identity based on national unity, and · the claims to ethnic oneness – sinicization – · are as practically effective as they are illusory and manipulative" (1993, 24). She insists that these "forces of sinicization" stem from the "myth of consanguinity" – "a myth that demands absolute submission because it is empty" (1993, 24, italics in original). In her view, this myth inexorably results in "the surrender of agency · in the governance of a community" (Chow 1993, 24). As a novel overtly concerned with blood, issues of consanguinal ties and "the responsibility any individual bears for belonging to a community" becomes strikingly apparent in DDV (Chow 1993, 25). The thematic circulation of blood reveals a paradoxical situation that speaks to the myth of consanguinity: blood, rather than strengthening consanguinal or marriage relations, ironically causes internal fractures within families. Although the blood-selling initiative initially strengthens affective connections to imagined communities, these bonds to fictive kin are torn apart by the end of the novel, revealing the vacuity of the myth of consanguinity.

Set in China's disillusioned heartland and centered on a rural blood-selling crisis, the circulation of blood and kinship relations are key thematic motifs threading through DDV. The novel's ironic critique of

open in browser PRO version Are you a developer? Try out the HTML to PDF API pdfcrowd.com

consanguinity is highlighted with recurring metaphors that liken blood to water; another sardonic twist is manifest when these metaphors are used to justify the blood-selling initiative as a nation-building and rural development scheme. When blood plasma resource centers were first set up in Henan, the Director of Education entreats Grandpa to "talk to the villagers and explain that selling blood is no big deal" (29). Heeding the Director's advice, Grandpa repeatedly emphasizes that "blood is like spring water" where "the body's blood is like a natural spring; the more you take, the more it flows," assuring villagers that "water never runs dry, and [they] can never sell too much blood" (30-1). Soon, the villagers are swept up into a blood-selling frenzy that "started as a trickle" but "soon became a stream [and] before long, • turned into a blood boom" bringing along "the fever" that "burst upon [them] like a flood" (12; 38). It is especially unnerving when blood appears to become even more commonplace than water. Blood inundates Ding Village: "pools of red and russet, patches like congealed blood" are juxtaposed against dry riverbeds and "all day long, the air was filled with the stench of fresh blood" (31-2). Even the village trees, after absorbing "so much blood" in lieu of water, have "new leaves" ominously "tinged with pink and veins of brownish-purple" (39). These descriptions counter slogans such as "Blood is Thicker than Water" that, as Chow points out, have consistently been used to strengthen a sense of "Chineseness" amongst diasporic Chinese communities (1993, 23-24). Rather than being the viscous glue symbolically fastening kinship bonds, the novel advances imagery of blood as a watery fluid instead, fundamentally diluting the potency of consanguine relations.

The emptiness of the myth of consanguinity is underscored by the Ding family's fractured kinship between Grandpa, Ding Shuiyang, and his two sons, Ding Hui and Ding Liang. Both of Grandpa's sons' involvement with blood-selling engenders major rifts in their father-son relationship: throughout the novel, they repeatedly clash over issues related to blood, where the atrocities of the blood-selling scandal and AIDS plague overwrites the value of familial blood ties. Qiang narrates that his Grandpa wanted to "ask [Hui] to apologize to everyone and then to kill himself. Because the sooner [his] father died, the better" (13, italics in original). It is Hui's refusal to respect Shuiyang's request for him to apologize and atone for his role in spreading AIDS through Ding Village that results in numerous father-son altercations, including Grandpa's attempted strangling and eventual murder of his own son. When Grandpa attacks Hui, Qiang narrates the conflict as something that has "no going back" and "[can't] be undone," where despite being related by "flesh" and "blood," "father and son [were] trying to kill each other, fighting to the death" (54).

open in browser PRO version Are you a developer? Try out the HTML to PDF API pdfcrowd.com

Additionally, Liang, although also sick with AIDS and consequently receives more compassion from Grandpa, still incurs the wrath of the old man. When talking about his plan to infect his wife, Liang remarks that he "hope[s] · to give [AIDS] to Tingting, so she can't get remarried after [he is] gone," to which Granpa "[recoils], too stunned to speak" (74). These shocking plot developments produce strong antagonistic feelings, where Grandpa wishes that neither of his sons were born. Powerful negative emotions are manifest when Grandpa curses Liang for being "a miserable excuse for a son" and avowing that "his son Ding Hui deserves to die" (164; 184). The circulation of tainted blood is at the root of these fractured family relations. This disillusioned portrayal of blood ties thus illustrates Chow's argument that a sense of solidarity grounded in "submission to consanguinity" is an empty belief that inevitably causes "the surrender of agency," social alienation, and the breakdown of meaningful relations (1993, 24).

Despite irreparably estranged relationships within the Ding family, it is intriguing that the blood-selling crisis and AIDS epidemic initially strengthens the villager's affective connection to imagined communities at both the national and local level. At the national level, the villagers are led to believe that they should spare "a few drops of blood" to "help [their] country" by replenishing the government blood banks (88). Nonetheless, when they started contracting "the fever," the national government turns a blind eye to helping these AIDS villagers, failing to provide them necessary financial and medical assistance, or even enough coffins to bury their dead. At the local level, the sardonic establishment of the village elementary school, that was once also "a temple dedicated to · the Chinese god of good fortune," as "a hospice for people with the fever" creates new relationships when "the sick villagers found that life in the school was better than they had imagined" (61; 69). Specific "rules and regulations" were even set up for "all residents of the school," enhancing the sense of a distinct political and social regime for the community (152). Romance also enters the story through the love that blossoms between Ding Liang and Lingling, two AIDS victims at the school. After being abandoned by their respective spouses, they struggle through their sickness together and fall in love. However, the narrative also states that "this paradise didn't last for long," foreshadowing the inevitable fissures within the community (70). The sense of fictive kin amongst Ding villagers are exposed as woefully empty: villagers resort to stealing from each other in their dying days, two men who take charge of the school end up wrangling over who gets to get buried with the village seal in the late stages of their sickness, and Ding Liang and Lingling both die a few days after they finally complete an arduous divorce and remarriage process to marry each other.

The novel ends with the stark image of a desolate village with not "a single soul" in sight where "people

open in browser PRO version Are you a developer? Try out the HTML to PDF API pdfcrowd.com

and animals had been obliterated, and the plain was barren" (341). The relational ruptures illustrated in DDV therefore reveal how completely the Ding villagers sacrificed themselves and their whole livelihood to the myth of consanguinity, a myth that is exposed as myopic and flawed, leaving only a hollow sense of loss and tainted blood in its wake. At this juncture, I suggest that the belief in consanguinity within kinship webs traversing Ding Village is a synecdoche of Spivak's argument about the subaltern's positionality within networks of institutional authority. Without access to an authentic kinship network, where both imaginary and real blood ties are exposed as void, all the villagers are deprived of the ability to sustain a meaningful sense of community or affective relationships with others. The portrayal of people being alienated from one another because of the circulation of blood – the same symbolic act that is supposed to establish indissoluble connections between – is deeply ironic. In the novel, this dynamic may be interpreted as a metaphor for the way the subaltern is silenced by the very same institutional networks that purportedly give them voice. Along the lines of this analysis, perhaps it is only after the myth of consanguinity is overcome that the subaltern can make claim to agency and negotiate for their voices to be heard.

DDV paints an alarming portrait of the trade-off between capitalist progress and human well-being as China acts in a globalized world. As Yan reflects, "the silence is intense" but "even in absence of voices or sound Ding Village lives on; choked by death, it will not die," turning its very existence into a text of resistance (Penêda 2012). Yan has also proclaimed in several interviews that as a native writer, he felt it was his responsibility to record what happened in Henan (Penêda 2012; Zhang 2006). In addition to DDV, Yan is well-known for novels that have gained him both critical acclaim and hardship with esteemed literary awards and harsh government bans. Thus, Yan represents a member of the literary class that Vera Schwarcz has referred to as "contemporary Chinese intellectuals [who] have become fractured vessels – broken-hearted witnesses to their own and their countrymen's suffering" (1991, qtd in Chow 1993, 25). Schwarcz further elucidates that the "internal fragmentation" of these intellectuals represents "China's best hope for recovery" through "fidelity to historical memory" (1991, 107). In this view, Yan is one such author who takes up this "important and also rather bleak responsibility" to "bring to mind both the courage and cowardice of China as a whole" (Schwarcz 1991, 107); in an effort to "forge a social reality between truth and fiction," Yan strives to liberate his writings so that they reach and speak to readers with authenticity (Penêda 2012). DDV exemplifies how Yan utilizes literary strategies to empower the subaltern with voice and agency, dispel the myth of consanguinity by appealing to broader political and ethical ideals, and prompt a reconceptualization of the meaning of solidarity and nationhood. Yan's

open in browser PRO version Are you a developer? Try out the HTML to PDF API pdfcrowd.com

ongoing acts of revisionist history, of returning to scenes of domination and suppression, reactivates attempts at speaking that other forces have tried to obliterate and keep from having effects. In revisiting the ruin of an AIDS village, Yan makes it speak in new ways, opening up a line of communication that enters a marginal space – a site of resistance that mobilizes Chinese subaltern vocality for counter hegemonic discourse.

Works Cited

Chow, Rey. Writing Diaspora: Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1993.

Kellog, Tom. “Health Officials Seek to Avoid Responsibility for the Spread of HIV/AIDS in Rural Henan.” China Rights Forum. HRIC Human Rights in China, 23 Feb. 2003. Web. 03 Mar. 2013. <http://www.hrichina.org/crf/article/4561>.

Penêda, Vera. “The Dream of Yan.” Globaltimes.cn. Global Times, 19 June 2012. Web. 03 Mar. 2013. <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/715814.shtml>.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. “Can the Subaltern Speak?” In Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture. Ed. By Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988. Pp. 271-313.

Vera Schwarcz. “No Solace from Lethe: History, Memory and Identity in Modern China,” In The Living Tree: The Changing Meaning of Being Chinese Today. Cambridge, MA: American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1991. Pp. 88-112.

Watts, Jonathan. “Censor Sees through Writer’s Guile in Tale of China’s Blood-selling Scandal.” The Guardian. Guardian News and Media, 08 Oct. 2006. Web. 03 Mar. 2013. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2006/oct/09/books.china>.

Wu, Zunyou, Keming Rou, and Haixia Cui. “The HIV/AIDS Epidemic in China: History, Current Strategies and Future Challenges.” AIDS Education and Prevention 16. Supplement A (2004): 7-17. US National Library of Medicine. Web. <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/15262561>.

open in browser PRO version Are you a developer? Try out the HTML to PDF API pdfcrowd.com

Yan, Lianke, and Cindy Carter (trans.). Dream of Ding Village. New York: Grove, 2011.

Zhang, Ying (··). “The Story of AIDS Villages: Being Alive is Not Just an Instinct [·················].” Southwest Daily. ····, 24 Mar. 2006. Web. 03 Mar. 2013. <http://health.sohu.com/20060324/n242450967.shtml>.

About the Author

Rachel Leng is a native Singaporean who moved to Shanghai, China at the age of 6. Growing up on the mainland, she witnessed Chinese society transformed by rapid globalization, spurring her interest in contemporary China’s shifting sociopolitical landscape and cultural change. She graduated from Duke University in May 2013 with a double distinction in Public Policy Studies and Asian and Middle Eastern Studies (concentration in Chinese), and a minor in economics. Rachel is now pursuing a masters in East Asian Studies at Harvard University, where she intends to focus on the imbrications of modern Chinese literature, society, culture, and politics.

0 Comments Duke East Asian Nexus 1 Login

Sort by Best

Start the discussion…

Be the first to comment.

Privacy

open in browser PRO version Are you a developer? Try out the HTML to PDF API pdfcrowd.com

Search the Nexus

Search

Send all submissions and queries to duke.nexus@gmail.com.

Please read the Guidelines and Copyright for all relevant information.

Our Content Sharing Partners

Duke Political Review

Proudly powered by Weebly

open in browser PRO version Are you a developer? Try out the HTML to PDF API pdfcrowd.com