Gender, Politics, and Democracy offers an account of Chinese women’s struggles for political suffrage from around the turn of the twentieth century to the eve of the Communist victory in 1949. Edwards argues that the term “canzheng,” suggesting political participation in general, was understood by female political activists in the first half of the twentieth century in the more concrete sense of “suffrage,” “centring on the twin rights to vote and to stand for election associated with the full political franchise of full citizens” (17). The book’s focus on the public political activities of women represents a refreshing change from the preoccupation with sexuality and the private life, especially among US scholars, that often says more about the concerns of contemporary American feminists than about their Chinese subjects. Indeed, a basic argument of the study is that the call for women’s suffrage sought to force a shift in the consciousness of both men and women from a privatising understanding of women’s virtue in terms of sexual chastity to a public sense of virtue, hitherto monopolised by men, which measured worth according to public norms of ability and accomplishment, especially education.

The account is guided by three premises. First, while the “suffragists” were only part of a broader women’s movement, and restricted in their aims and constituency, they were historically significant both for what they represented and what they achieved. The domination of the women’s movement by radicals from the 1920s, and in hindsight consciousness with the victory of Communism, has consigned the suffragists to historiographical obscurity as a marginal elite group of women largely irrelevant to mainstream concerns with issues of social reform and transformation. While the suffrage movement had developed a limited mass following by the 1920s, the leadership came from the ranks of elite professional women, mostly from wealthy backgrounds and foreign educated, which rendered the movement suspect in the eyes of radicals. And while these leaders spoke to social issues in a limited way, the movement remained focused throughout on women’s right to suffrage, raising questions about the role private ambition played in their activism. Edwards argues, nevertheless, that while progressive men also took a significant role in the promotion of women’s rights, the women who pursued the cause of suffrage provide important evidence of women’s agency in achieving women’s goals. Equally, if not more importantly, in the priority they gave to political rights, the suffragists were instrumental in fostering a consciousness of women as not just a social but also a political category with distinct collective interests of their own. This also rendered them a component of women’s political movements globally.

Edwards argues, secondly, that while the suffragists were also nationalists, this should not detract from their feminism in a reductionist privileging of nationalism, which is a pervasive problem in the historiography of modern China. Nationalism may have been a driving force of Chinese politics, but it was itself a site of contestation and interpretation in conflicting visions of China. She rightly points out that nationalism carried a different meaning at different times and for different constituencies. “As the women’s suffrage movement….explored gendered notions of political citizenship,” she writes, “they invoked these

ever-fluctuating conceptions of nationalism and national benefit as it suited their political goals” (5). Rather than political opportunism, we might add, the deployment of nationalism in feminist causes is best grasped in terms of a feminist standpoint that, similarly to other political positions, perceived nationalism in terms of particular group interests and political visions.

Finally, and most importantly, the suffragist movement was driven by a simultaneous affirmation of equality and difference between men and women. Equality arguments were nourished by assertions of equality among all human beings, the demands of modern civilisation, and evidence of women’s participation in the struggle for national independence and nation-building. They served to challenge the denial to women of their qualifications for political participation, as well as to demand equal access to education, property, and divorce. “Difference arguments” pointed to the fundamental part women played in public causes, not only in public roles but also in their private roles as wives and mothers. These arguments were utilised in the assertion of women’s collective interests, as well as in the securing of guaranteed quotas for women in political institutions. As with the flexible deployment of nationalism, this “pragmatic” approach to issues of women’s equality underscores Edwards’ departure from feminist scholarship that has questioned the feminism of the Chinese women’s movement in the name of a “pure feminism.”

The study pursues these themes chronologically from the Republican revolution of the late Qing through the social upheavals of the 1920s, Kuomintang rule in the 1930s, and the Civil War period following World War II. While the arguments for suffrage assumed new dimensions in response to changing circumstances and with the inclusion of new generations, the movement remained distinguished by its focus on politics, its militant activism, and a remarkable continuity in leadership. The fact that the same names appear from generation to generation -- in some cases, such as the medical educator Dr. Wu Zhimei, throughout the Republican period -- serves as prima facie evidence of the commitment of the movement’s leaders to their cause, as well as their adaptability to changing circumstances. Edwards is an able guide, deftly sketching out the political developments in each period, and leading the reader through the organisational and intellectual responses on the part of the women’s movement. Women in the late Qing participated in the nationalist movement, even in auxiliary military activities, but they asserted their presence in calls for the rights of “women citizens” (nü guomin). The political identity formed during this period served them well in the early Republic when they continued their ideological agitation and organisational activities for political inclusion, even storming the parliament in Nanjing for its refusal to eliminate from the electoral laws discrimination on the basis of sex. At the same time, they promoted greater access to education for women, both to foster women’s political consciousness, and to enfranchise them by meeting the educational and wealth criteria that at the time determined political participation.

With the disintegration of the central government following Yuan Shikai’s death in 1916, the focus of the women’s movement turned to provincial-level activity in Hunan, Guangdong, and other locations, where women registered some success as sympathetic political leaders responded to their demands for an end to discrimination based on sex. But the important development of these years came with the May Fourth period and the revolutionary movement of the 1920s, which placed women's liberation on the national agenda. This period also brought an expansion in the political consciousness of women with social and ideological radicalisation in the Kuomintang, and the recruitment of a new generation of women into the newly established Communist Party. Edwards observes that these developments brought a new awareness of class to women activists who hitherto had conceived of franchise rights as “equality between men and women of the educated and privileged classes. Yet the increasing awareness of class furthered the development of the conception that women were unified as a group because of their collective disadvantage relative to men.” (28)

The latter, however, may have been more of an abstraction than Edwards is willing to admit. With the new consciousness came increased attention to social issues such as the rights of working women and concubinage. At the same time, however, these issues proved divisive, as the woman’s movement now had to confront the contradictory strategies implied by class vs. gender analysis. The issue of concubinage was even more threatening to women who hitherto had sought in virtuous behaviour proof of their qualification for political participation. These divisions were exacerbated by the Kuomintang-Communist split in 1927, and the subsequent surge of conservatism in the
Kuomintang, which proposed to return women to their traditional roles as “good wives and wise mothers” (185). The conservative backlash was a setback for the women’s movement, but in Edwards’ telling it was also used by women to their political advantage in asserting that their difference as wives and mothers entitled them to special recognition. The Kuomintang itself was committed politically to an egalitarian system. Despite the conservative turn in the mid-1930s, it legislated equality between men and women in matters of divorce and property rights, and the Constitution it promulgated in 1936 recognised the right to vote and be elected for all citizens above a certain age, regardless of educational and wealth requirements. Women were able to take advantage of the new political equality to argue for special quotas for women as a disadvantaged group, equal to but different from men. Their demands were met in the 1946 amendment to the national constitution, on the eve of the Communist victory over the Kuomintang. In her concluding pages, Edwards wonders if this was actually a “hollow” victory for women. While the women’s movement seemed to have achieved the goals it had pursued for nearly four decades, the majority of Chinese women “remained divorced from these ideas and activities” (231). It remained for the new Communist government, committed to social transformation, to bring these other women into the political process. Had this question been raised and confronted earlier, the study might have engaged problems in the women’s movement more rigorously than it does. While Edwards’ sympathy for the political struggles of elite professional women enables her to rescue the suffrage movement from historiographical obscurity, it also leads her to gloss over problems that emerge in the tensions in her narrative. The study consistently refers to participants in the women’s movement as “feminists” without considering the difficulties presented by that term, which is no more transparent than other terms such as class or nation. It does not take a “pure” or “fundamentalist” approach to question whether or not an elite women’s movement devoted to securing political participation for a restricted group of women might indeed be considered a feminist movement. While a radical definition of feminism as a commitment to the transformation of the political, social, ideological, and cultural structures of patriarchy may be too restrictive at a time when the likes of Sarah Palin, Hilary Clinton, and Condoleezza Rice have risen to power as establishment figures, and there are Chinese women who identify themselves as Confucian, it is still necessary to wonder how far the term can be stretched without losing its meaning -- a problem for any political concept. Edwards’ use of the term, moreover, leads to the obscuring of significant differences among Chinese women, both socially and politically, even though some of these differences are quite apparent in the narrative. I have already alluded to one such instance in the author’s reference to awareness of class as an expansion of the consciousness of women as a collectivity, when it is quite obvious that the issue of class also divided women in the movement. There is more than a hint of ideological projection in the reference in the same context to “working-class or peasant sisters” when the suffragists were barely aware of the existence of those “sisters” who lived in a world apart from theirs -- as the book acknowledges in the conclusion. The study is clearly intended to rescue the women’s movement in China from its appropriation for revolutionary historiography, but it insists in its discussion of the 1920s on treating the Communist and professional “bourgeois” movements as if they were part and parcel of the same struggle. On the other hand, there is little discussion of the differences among the suffragists themselves, except the rare acknowledgement of disagreements occasioned by the question of admitting concubines into their ranks, and references to conservative women in the Kuomintang in the concluding part of the study. Regardless of their roles in the establishment, Sarah Palin, Hilary Clinton, and Condoleezza Rice represent different politics of the establishment, and Gloria Steinem knows the difference! More extended critical engagement of such differences might have revealed deeper fissures in the women’s movement in China than the author might have desired, but it is no less necessary for understanding problems in the women’s movement than confronting divisions within the Communist movement or other political movements. Finally, the author might have inquired further into one of the fundamental premises that inform the argument: the possibility of equality in difference. It is possible that women used these arguments opportunistically, or for contingent tactical purposes. It is also possible that they used them with full conviction. In either case, there remains a question of what they might tell us about the suffragists, perhaps more in the latter than in the for-
mer case. It seems somewhat disingenuous for elite women to have portrayed themselves as a disadvantaged group deserving of quotas much as ethnic minorities and overseas Chinese (212), which would suggest that they were not beyond tactical opportunism in their pursuit of political participation and power. On the other hand, if the women activists did indeed believe that they were naturally endowed with certain characteristics that distinguished them from men, as conservative men had argued all along, would that suggest that while they struggled for political equality, they simultaneously reinforced the foundations of patriarchy? In other words, how do we distinguish women’s movements politically? Are “Confucian women” the logical outcome of a movement that sought equality for women but remained wedded to the familistic and cultural assumptions of the society it sought to change — much the same as a Sarah Palin may be viewed as one offshoot (and an increasingly infectious offshoot) of women’s movements in the United States? The question is larger than the Chinese women’s movements, and for that very reason it is necessary to uncovering its contradictions. •

FRÉDÉRIC KECK

Two recent works reintroduce China into the anthropology of kinship. Cai Hua and Laurent Barry are both students of Françoise Héritier, who at the Collège de France has revitalised our understanding of the systems of African kinship. Their two books, similarly constructed, devote considerable space to the systems of the Han. The anthropology of kinship, a discipline founded in 1870 by Lewis Henry Morgan’s Systems of Consanguinity and Affinity of the Human Family, and revived in 1949 by the thesis of Claude Lévi-Strauss, in Les Structures élémentaires de la parenté (The Elementary Structures of Kinship), has in the course of the past 20 years absorbed the shock of new technologies of reproduction and new forms of family relations: medically assisted procreation, cloning, blended families, civil partnerships, homosexual parentage, etc. The scientific positions on these burning issues have been radically opposed to each other: on the one side are those who, following the declarations of the influential Pierre Legendre, have asserted the immutable character of the “symbolic order” rooted in the individual’s unconscious, and on the other those who, in the wake of the analyses of the lamented Yan Thomas, have highlighted the invented and thus malleable character of the legal constructions of kinship. The works of Cai Hua and Laurent Barry present the advantage of taking a step back from these impassioned debates and of offering us a “view from afar” at European kinship via the detour of the Chinese systems.

In 1997, half a century after Lévi-Strauss’ theory first appeared, Cai Hua published his own thesis on the Na society in China, which made waves — in muddied waters, some would say — in studies of kinship. Under the title Une société sans père ni mari (A Society Without Fathers or Husbands), he describes a matrilineal society that practices a tradition of “visits” (furtive or conspicuous) by men that ignores the rules of marriage. These rules were imposed by the Qing empire, but, as observed by the ethnologist, the Na continued to follow their own customs. This observation poses certain ethnographic problems (how regular is the practice of the “visit” conducted? Does it result from a situation where the men emigrate from the village?), but it also raises an important anthropological question: is it possible to conceive of a social order outside the framework of marriage? Have the theories of kinship suffered from an unfounded assumption of the universal nature of marriage? That would drive a wedge into the Levi-Strauss theory of kinship, as Clifford Geertz remarked in the New York Review of Books, providing Cai Hua’s work with great resonance: “The very idea of a ‘kinship system,’ a culture-bound notion if ever there was one, may be a large part of the problem.”

5. Cai Hua defended his thesis at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales under the supervision of Kristofer Schipper, Françoise Héritier, and Olivier Herrenscheid. He is currently Professor of Anthropology at Peking University.
In *L’homme pensé par l’homme*, Cai Hua returns to the Na in order to compare them with three other “cases.” (7) The Na represent a type of kinship in which consanguinity is transmitted by the women, the man only playing the role of a temporary “waterer” of a fertile soil (as the Na saying goes: “if the rain does not fall from the sky, the grass will not grow from the earth”). In contrast, the Han case (studied by Cai Hua during research in Kunming) understands consanguinity as exclusively masculine, sperm being considered as blood issued from the bone. Set against these two forms of monolateral consanguinity, Cai Hua puts forward two other forms, which he calls bilateral symmetrical and asymmetrical: the French accord to the man and the woman an equal role in consanguinity (the man contributing the sperm and the woman the blood), while among the Samo of Upper Volta studied by Françoise Héritier, the man contributes the permanent blood and the woman a provisional blood. This tableau of four cases allows Cai Hua to define kinship as the bond between consanguinity (biological bond) and affinity (social bond). To reinforce this definition, he examines the different theories of kinship, from Lewis Henry Morgan to David Schneider, which in his eyes all exhibit the weakness of tracing kinship back either to consanguinity (and thus the biological aspect) or to affinity (and thus the social aspect), with Lévi-Strauss occupying a paradoxical position somewhere between these two poles. Cai Hua does not, however, discuss the analyses of Robertson Smith in *Kinship and Marriage in Early Arabia* (1885), which linked beliefs about consanguinity to the ritual of sacrifice as a sharing of the blood, and which exerted a major influence on the theory of Durkheim, according to which kinship is exclusively social, or ultimately religious. From this rapid review of the history of anthropology, Cai Hua concludes that the discipline has not been able to imagine this strange alliance of consanguinity and affinity, or, to put it in other words, of a biological fact and a social representation, or even, to use more charged terms, of nature and culture. He consequently proposes a theory of belief aiming to explain that ideas emanating from the imagination can form institutions and act through norms (according to a tradition that he traces back to Mencius). This theory maintains that the belief in the transmission of substances defines the individuals with whom lasting relations are established. The problem that arises then is the status of the social sciences in relation to these beliefs. If Cai Hua demonstrates that the anthropological theories of kinship have tended to reproduce a Western conception of consanguinity (from Morgan’s assertion according to which Roman law is the most “natural” classification of the systems of kinship, to Lévi-Strauss’ analysis of marriage as an exchange establishing the foundations of the social order), what, then, guarantees that the anthropologist’s discourse does not take up an indigenous belief while projecting it onto other indigenous beliefs? To answer this question, Cai Hua proposes in *L’homme pensé par l’homme* an epistemology of the social sciences that does not design them on the model of the natural sciences without renouncing their status as a science. It is not certain that Cai Hua provides all the tools to resolve this epistemological problem, a constituent component of these sciences since Durkheim forged the concept of “social fact” in order to give them an object. (8) The domain of “ontology” where he ends up is promising but a little vague, and the distinction between a general ontology and a restricted ontology remains unclear. However, the great value of his book is to pose the problem on the basis of a very particular ethnographic case. Claude Lévi-Strauss was very conscious of this problem, and all the rest of his work has aimed at resolving it by distinguishing the environmental organisation of societies and the mythological representations that express their contradictions (according to a model of “dialectical reason” borrowed from Marxism, the premises of which Cai Hua surprisingly does not discuss here). In response to the objection of the Marxist anthropologists, he wrote in *La pensée sauvage*, published in 1962: “I must now confess to having myself unintentionally and unwittingly lent support to these erroneous ideas, by having seemed all too often in *Les Structures élémentaires de la parenté* as if I were seeking out an unconscious genesis of matrimonial exchange. I should have made more distinction between exchange as it is expressed spontaneously and forcefully in the
praxis of groups and the conscious and deliberate rules by which these same groups – or their philosophers – spend their time in codifying and controlling it.” In 1997, in response to the objection of Cai Hua according to which the Na ignore the exchange, Lévi-Strauss wrote in La Republique: “The Na represent an extreme case of a system, other examples of which have been known for a long time, particularly in Nepal, southern India, and Africa. And far from such cases destroying the accepted ideas, the family structure that they illustrate simply offers a symmetrical and inverse image of our own. These are quite simply societies that do not, or no longer, place a regulatory value on kinship and marriage in order to ensure that they function, but leave that to other mechanisms.” (9) All of Lévi-Strauss’ efforts since his Structures élémentaires de la parenté have been invested in moving beyond this ideology of the exchange, which he had appeared to formalise, by directing his research into the mechanisms of thought that govern practices, the inverse effects of which can be seen in matrimonial exchange and the Na system.

The book by Laurent Barry, published at the same time as that of Cai Hua, takes up this Lévi-Straussian intuition again, but proposes to synthesise all the works of anthropology of kinship that have appeared since Lévi-Strauss’s thesis. (10) The affirmation of the founding role of exchange and communication by Lévi-Strauss in 1949 (taking up again the analyses of Mauss on economics and of Jakobson on language) has indeed been subjected to at least two salvos of objections from English anthropologists. On the one hand, focusing the study of kinship on the alliance of marriage -- defining whom it is possible to marry -- leads one to ignore the mechanisms of descent -- defining the members of the group towards whom the individual has rights and duties. (11) On the other hand, highlighting exogamy as an obligation to marry a member of another group leads one to ignore endogamous forms of marriage, which are far more widespread in the societies of North Africa (“Arab marriage”). (12) Furthermore, the Lévi-Straussian analysis of the universal character of the prohibition of incest (at the interface between nature and culture) has been called into question by the research of ethologists into animal societies, which similarly understand this prohibition, and by the study of ancient societies that tolerated incest while giving it various forms. Finally, the study of the complex structures of kinship, which do not prescribe spouses but define which ones should be avoided, leads one to resort to new tools, such as statistics and demography. From now on, the anthropology of kinship has to be conducted, according to Laurent Barry, on new foundations, while affirming less clearly the autonomy of a set of rules and being more attentive to the variety and the malleability of their transformations.

Laurent Barry starts out from a minimal definition of kinship: “It is a taxonomic process that concerns the human and which sorts us into our ‘kind’ and others in the group of individuals who are really or putatively related among themselves by birth or marriage. But this without the communal identity that it postulates ever resulting immediately from filiation, consanguinity, or alliance.” (13) He then proposes defining “groups of kinship” by “properties,” whereby individuals can be said to share the same kinship, and by “principles,” which express the roles of each sex in mating and procreation. This leads him to distinguish four groups of kinship: (14) a uterine kinship, corresponding roughly to the forms known as the “Arab marriage” and granting women an overwhelming role in the generation of beings; a parallel kinship, corresponding to the “elementary structures” studied by Lévi-Strauss in India, Oceania, and Africa, and obliging one to take a spouse from an outside group; a cognatic kinship, corresponding to the Chinese system of the Han, in which it is the man who constitutes the pivot in the bonds of kinship.

Laurent Barry grants a lot of space to China in his analyses. If he skips a little quickly over the Na case (which he classifies in the field of uterine kin-

10. Laurent Barry edited the issue of the journal L’Homme (founded by Claude Lévi-Strauss) that was dedicated to “Questions of kinship” in 2000. He is Associate Professor at the Ecoles des hautes études en sciences sociales and researcher at the Laboratoire d’Anthropologie Sociale.
14. It is striking that four groups of kinship are counted in Barry’s work and in Cai’s. This is because both of them propose formal systems based on a binary opposition: between consanguinity and affinity in Cai, between filiation and alliance in Barry. They thus take up a method adopted by Philippe Descola in Par delà nature et culture, Paris, Gallimard, 2005.
ship). He does on the other hand dedicate long analyses to the systems of kinship among the Han. There, he reviews in detail the demonstrations of Marcel Granet in the *Catégories matrimoniales en Chine ancienne*, a work that appeared in 1939 and which played a central role in the genesis of Lévi-Strauss’s thesis. Barry particularly notes the attention Granet gave to the link between the degrees of proximity in kinship and the number of days of obligatory mourning. This link was expressed in the *Book of Rites* and then codified in the legal texts intended for the “barbarians” who were unaware of these obligations. The analysis of the transformation of rites into law in China is as fascinating here as the one that precedes it on the transformation of the moral reflections of the Romans into the theological speculations of the Christians – bearing witness to the virtues of a term-by-term comparison of the two traditions that does not lapse into the easy options of Orientalism.

At the end of this impressive work of more than 700 pages, one question has to be asked, however. Returning in conclusion to the ambition of his work, which is to “reunite in a single explanatory scheme a heteroclitic set of matrimonial systems (...) formerly or elsewhere subject to a colourful assortment of local theories,” Laurent Barry recognises that this perspective, “adopted by every science that frees itself from its ideological foundations,” leads resolutely to “the voluntary abandonment of certain ancient philosophical ambitions of anthropology in this domain,” such as the one that aims to formulate the meaning of the human condition through the passage from nature to culture. Here the epistemological reflection of Cai Hua regains its interest: is it possible to formulate a theory of kinship that is entirely “freed of its ideological foundations”? One can have doubts about that because the anthropologist, if not writing in purely formal language, adopts an entire vocabulary (kinship, filiation, alliance, consanguinity, affinity) that is laden with ideology, and above all because the discussion that it engenders is produced by a certain historical situation and addressed to a particular community. The anthropology of kinship raises both intellectual questions and political passions, as is shown by the debates on civil partnerships in France, because it is simultaneously ideological and critical: ideological insofar as it does this via the detour of distant societies where these intuitions are disrupted. Thus the detour via Africa or China allows Laurent Barry to criticise our evidence originating from the Christian theme of “una caro,” just as the detour via the Na allows Cai Hua to criticise the Chinese conception of marriage in a way that he illustrates through the Chinese proverb: “The stone from other people's mountains can carve our jade.” This balancing of ideology and criticism is what gives anthropology its philosophical dimension. This does not mean that it expresses in systematic terms the fundamental conditions of humanity, as some hasty readers of *Structures élémentaires de la parenté* believe, but rather that its discourse always lies halfway between the spontaneous philosophy that it criticises and the indigenous philosophies that it rehabilitates. Claude Lévi-Strauss thus concluded his contribution to the edition of *L’Homme* devoted to “Questions of kinship” in 2000 with these words: “Whether one rejoices or whether one frets about it, philosophy once again occupies centre stage on the anthropological scene. No longer our philosophy, which my generation had asked the exotic societies to help undo, but, in a striking reversal of things, theirs.”
LYNN WHITE

s a future Sino-American war probable or not? If it began, would it likely be started by China as a rising power, or by America as a declining hegemon?

Many theorists of power transitions have seen the twentieth century’s world wars as conflicts started by Germany seeking to replace Britain as a world hegemon. Contemporary application of that paradigm suggests that America, while still strong, might muster resources to resist China’s rising power. Steve Chan argues, however, that this version of power-transition theory is inaccurate as a description of the past and self-fulfilling as a prophesy of war. He likens the future Sino-American power shift to smoother transitions, such as that from Britain to the US. Although “officials and scholars construct realities (...) the U.K. chose to appease the U.S. and oppose Germany.” Chan suggests Britain’s motives were not cultural: “The argument for [Anglo-American] affinity will hardly suffice to explain London’s decision to recruit Japan as a junior partner in the Asia Pacific during the late 1800s (...)” (p. 4). He claims that Germany’s main fears in the 1910s and 1930s were of a rising Russia, and that Berlin’s efforts to keep London (and then Washington) neutral failed when smaller allies’ interests in war trumped the interests of larger powers in peace. Tails wag dogs before major conflicts.

Chan suggests that rising states are rational enough not to go to war merely because of past humiliations or current regime-type differences. Instead, they become violent when they expect the result of war may be a net gain for them. “Wars happen because there are discrepancies between states’ power shares and their benefit shares” among either newcomers or hegemons. Danger arises when national leaders believe they do not receive a “fair” share of benefits in proportion to their power” (p. 75). For example, if a dissatisfied state has prospered from exports (as China has, at least until 2009), a keen sense of past insults may shape rhetoric without creating violence.

Chan predicts that a Sino-American power transition “is unlikely to materialize in the next three or so decades at the earliest, if at all” (p. 9). Taiwan, if it declared independence, could threaten this peace. But Chan expects (and joins this reviewer in hoping) that American policy can avoid a war by continuing to assure both Beijing and Taipei that the US will not defend such a declaration.

To make his critique, Chan parses both logical categories and empirical evidence. While commending Chan’s variety of styles of argumentation, this reviewer prefers the specific histories to the incorporeal logics. It is possible to object to some of the ways the book mixes them. For example, Chan notes that most power-transition theorists in Germany before either world war saw the US as a non-central contender in world politics because of Berlin’s overly exclusive attention to the European continent. But it might be simpler to say that Berlin underestimated the reactions of both London and Washington and overestimated Germany’s power. Greater immunity to the lure of the abstract could lead a writer to express more direct hope that Beijing does not act externally until its power is enough for peaceful Chinese success.

To take another example, it is hard to estimate the truth of a sentence such as “A severe sense of insecurity, rather than overconfidence, was the impetus behind Japan’s military planning [before Pearl Harbor]” (p. 56). Insecurity and overconfidence are both documentable as factors in this mistake. Social scientists, including many whom Chan rightly criticises, tend to like the kind of moncausal explanation that could have been avoided here.

Chan organises a convincingly full panoply of historical similes and theorised causations (including several versions of realism, institutionalism, and constructivism). To make a long story short, he concludes as an optimist. Big wars can occur when rising powers underestimate extended deterrence by hegemons that do not make their interests clear. But Chan does not think this will happen any time soon in the Sino-American case, where both major powers are nuclear, and where the most relevant deterrence is of an attack on Taiwan, presuming the island does not legally renounce its option to be part of China.

The danger of Sino-American war would come from US indecision over whether to deter a conflict if it could, or to make concessions if it could not. Chan says the PRC’s neighbours, including Taiwan, are more likely to engage China’s prosperity than resist it. He argues that if China receives adequate net benefits from its overall
relations with America, there will be peace. He
guesses that “current trends favour an eventual
settlement of Taiwan’s status” (p. 119). Severe
economic depression, more nationalist definitions
of “benefit” among Beijing leaders, and/or a
resurgence of Taiwanese nationalism might sug-
gest less optimism—but Chan suggests that
politicians can continue to avert a war.
This reviewer guesses Chan is right, even though
some of his interpretations are expressed in
unnecessarily complex forms. He claims, “For a
policy of pivotal deterrence to be credible, Taipei
must be made to believe that Washington does
not really intend to abandon it should it declare
formal independence” (p. 101). This sentence
depends on an involved discussion of differ-
ences between “pivotal” and “extended” deter-
rence, but that framework omits consideration of
factors such as American naval capabilities or
internal politics in Taiwan or the PRC—and after
Chan introduces such factors, the discourse
becomes convincing. Some theory is always
needed before empirical data are gathered, but
Chan is all too faithful to contemporary political
science on the unusual occasions when he puts
deduction prior to induction without noting the
iterative feedback between them.
Important prospective readers of this book are in
China. Some, apparently including the Peking
University Dean Wang Jisi, would believe Chan’s
opinion that no power transition may take place
soon. Their foreign policy is thus careful. But the
most important readers of the book are American,
if they see Chan’s evidence that declining hege-
mons (often spurred to war by much smaller allies)
have made crucial decisions that led to world
wars.
A power transition point is evidenced if one
nation’s power surpasses that of another. Yet
there are big problems with criteria such as a
“composite index of national capability,” which
has been used by researchers in the Correlates
of War Project, and also with criteria developed by
the CIA and others. Chinese social scientists such
as Tsinghua Professor Yan Xuetong have been
avid surveyors of national power, and Yan
includes a subjective factor: the degree of will to
use objective capabilities. “Soft” cultural power
has also been subject to surveys: numbers of
tourists or foreign students or movies. Dangers of
unnecessary tragic war lurk in the wide grey-area
ranges (not points) in which asymmetric conflict is
possible and the crossover of effective power is
uncertain
A problem of power-transition theory, which Chan
mentions but does not stress, is that power is
meaningless when separated from the goals for
which it is exerted. The current global “superpow-
er” has not been all that super in places such as
Somalia, or in serving its own interests in the
Middle East. Chan’s criticisms of power transition
are cogent, and he might have extended them by
stressing that it is hard to interpret measures of
power abstracted from its purposes.
Critiques of this critique are possible, therefore.
But Chan has written a carefully circumspect
book about a global issue of the utmost impor-
tance. This book is like a crash course in both
international relations theory and Sino-American
security relations. It is highly recommended to
anybody who is interested in either China or
peace.

KRISTOF VAN DEN TROOST

One of the most prominent directors in
Hong Kong at the moment, Johnnie To
Kei-fung, has over the past few years been
receiving more attention at film festivals globally
with films such as Breaking News (2004), Election
I & II (2005-2006), Exiled (2006), The Mad Detec-
tive (2007), and most recently, Sparrow (2008).
Sometimes referred to as the post-1997 poet of
Hong Kong, To has a career that actually goes
back as far as the 1980s, and as one of the few di-
rectors to keep up a high output even after the
local film industry started to decline, his CV now
boasts close to 50 films. Writing a monograph on
To is therefore no easy task, and there are few
people as qualified to attempt it as Stephen Teo,
who previously wrote an important history of
Hong Kong cinema and studies of other Hong
Kong directors such as Wong Kar-wai and King
Hu.1)

Teo’s main theoretical concern – outlined in the
first chapter – is how to accommodate genre the-
ory with auteur theory to explain To’s somewhat
paradoxical position as an auteur working in the
often disdained action genre. Teo proposes to
consider To’s “auteur function,” a term derived
from Michel Foucault’s work that, in Teo’s words,
refers to “those functions specific to the auteur

BFI Pub., 2005; King Hu’s A Touch of Zen, Hong Kong, Hong Kong University Press, 2007.
and his role in mediating, altering and transforming the codes of genre” (p. 14). To is therefore an “enunciator of pre-existent material,” which makes him somewhat of a paradox: he seemingly submits to the system and questions it at the same time. This makes his films very complex, a complexity that also stems from their idiosyncrasy: To’s films “all exert a certain quality that can only be identified as the personal touch of To” (p.16). Since Teo considers idiosyncrasy as essentially cultural, he also aims to pinpoint the cultural specificity of the mutual relation between To and the action genre. This cultural specificity “determines the way the films respond to the specific urban culture of Hong Kong, and how the characters’ behavior drive the pacing and the rhythm of the narratives” (p. 16). While To’s films indeed raise questions about genre and auteurism, the director is perhaps not so unique as Teo makes him appear: one can think of many filmmakers who once occupied a similar position (for instance, Alfred Hitchcock, John Ford, and in a Hong Kong context, John Woo). What makes Johnnie To more problematic, however, is what Teo calls his “unevenness”: the system influences the efficacy of To’s auteur function, making him an “uneven auteur” whose “essential characteristics are attenuated across genres” (p. 19). In this manner, Teo explains how To excels in the action film while simultaneously producing rather remarkable romantic comedies and other genre films.

In the next four chapters, different phases of To’s career are closely investigated. Chapter Two takes as its subject the films of the period before 1996, when To established his own company, Milkyway Image. Tracing various elements that recur in the director’s films in the action genre, the chapter shows how To gradually develops his art. The first true masterpieces, however, appear only during the Milkyway period discussed in the third chapter. Ironically, the director credits most of these early Milkyway works went to To’s protégés (particularly Patrick Yau), although it is now generally accepted that To directed most of Yau’s films. The themes of fatalism, impermanence, and death are prominent in these films, resonating with the uncertainty and despair surrounding the handover of sovereignty in 1997.

From 1998 on, To started directing films under his own name again, producing what Teo in Chapter Four follows To in calling “exercises,” including films such as The Mission (1999), Running out of Time (1999), PTU (2003), and Breaking News (2004) – all films that helped establish To’s name internationally. Chapter Five discusses films made in the same period as those of the previous chapter, but not as accomplished or easily classified. Five films are discussed: Needing You (2000), Help! (2000), Fulltime Killer (2001), Running on Karma (2003), and Throw Down (2004). Teo puts them together and calls them “neo-exercises” with the argument that they all illustrate To’s “unevenness” as an auteur. He gives this “unevenness” various meanings depending on the film, so that while in Needing You it refers to a funny sight gag in a not so funny film, in Fulltime Killer it refers to the inconsistency of language, and in Throw Down to the quirky narrative. With such an open definition of “unevenness,” the term seems to lose its meaning and makes its application appear like an excuse to put these very different films together in one chapter. Teo admits as much when he states at the end of the chapter that his theme of “unevenness” is a “structural conceit” (p. 175). It shows how difficult it is to write about a director with such a large, varied, and indeed, qualitatively uneven body of work, and raises the question of whether another structure for the book would have been better: chapters focusing on the varied and developing treatment of certain themes in To’s work seems like a good alternative in this regard, although it would inevitably lead to a less chronological and straightforward account than the one offered by Teo.

Illustrating the risks involved in writing about a very productive and innovative director, Teo had to add a postscript to his book to keep abreast of To’s prolific output. This postscript deals with Election I and II, as well as Exiled, and focuses on To’s treatment of violence in these films. Teo puts these recent films in the category of the “neo-exercises” he used to describe the “uneven” films in Chapter Five. This classification seems inappropriate, however, because unlike most of the films in the fifth chapter, these more recent films received considerable critical and popular acclaim. It begs the question of whether To’s career has entered a new phase, and whether the categories of “exercises” and “neo-exercises” are useful at all in thinking about To’s films of the last
ten years. Finally, in the epilogue, Teo summarises some of the points he made about Johnnie To and his films throughout the book, focusing in particular on how To’s style of filmmaking defies and transmutes spectator expectations of the genre. This is most clearly illustrated by his handling of the convention of the happy ending, which in To’s films often isn’t all that happy. Unfortunately for Teo, since his book came out in 2007, To has directed and/or produced seven new films, amongst which two (The Mad Detective and Sparrow) are of obvious critical importance to an assessment of his career, since they show To taking his experiments in a somewhat different direction. The Mad Detective harks back to previous masterpieces (especially PTU and The Longest Nite), but adds supernatural/magical elements to the mix (the detective’s ability to see people’s multiple personalities, for instance). The supernatural returns in Linger (2008), where the main character experiences various encounters with her deceased lover’s ghost, and also in Sparrow there seems little concern with realism. This last film is perhaps To’s most personal and light-hearted film to date (with the possible exception of Throw Down), and is a wonderful homage to (old) Hong Kong. In a number of ways the film is also a further attempt to combine the two genres To is famous for: the action film and the romantic comedy (something he started to work towards in the Andy Lau-Sammi Cheng vehicle Yesterday Once More, 2004). These movies reveal To’s further development as an absolute master of the image, his recycling of old themes and ideas, and his experiments towards a new kind of cinema – one with relatively little concern for conventional plot development, realism, and characterisation, but brilliant in its creation of atmosphere, its combination of music and the visual, and its (generic) innovativeness. Despite these more recent developments in To’s oeuvre, one has to admire how accurately Teo identifies recurring themes and motifs in the director’s films, in this way proving the book’s insightfulness and continuing relevance. Director in Action is thus a must-read for anyone interested in Hong Kong cinema and one of its most prominent directors, Johnnie To.

CAMILLE DEPREZ

During the 1980s and 1990s, major political and social events underpinned the work of a generation of young Hong Kong filmmakers. This eclectic movement made its mark on the international cinema scene under the name of the “Hong Kong New Wave” and led Hong Kong University Press to bring out a new collection on the subject. Since 2003, scholars and critics have been analysing in fine detail the most significant films of the past two decades, each volume being devoted to a single film. Stacilee Ford has written the most recent work in the series on An Autumn’s Tale, directed in 1987 by Mabel Cheung. The singular nature of this work within the collection is shown by the fact that it is the first to focus on the work of a female director. Ford, who teaches in the History Department at Hong Kong University, specialises in national and transnational American studies, and regularly publishes on women’s history and youth identity. This theoretical background serves as a kind of narrative frame for the book and enables her to make an in-depth study of the film, and Hong Kong cinema more generally, as well as to keep her critical distance. This work is made accessible to the uninitiated by providing basic information, such as the film’s screenplay and Mabel Cheung’s place in the Second Wave of Hong Kong cinema, and carefully guides the reader through a subtle reading of the film. Beginning with the Preface, Ford announces that An Autumn’s Tale will be examined from an intercultural and transnational perspective involving China and the United States, with a particular interest in the growing interdependence between these two peoples and the representations of the Chinese diaspora. The author widens the scope of American studies to take a centred look at An Autumn’s Tale far from the stereotypes of Hollywood. The book’s central idea consists of understanding the images that people in Hong Kong wanted to show of themselves ahead of Hong Kong’s handover to China, during a period of transnational movement and doubts about identity.

Stacilee Ford, Mabel Cheung Yuen-Ting’s An Autumn’s Tale, Hong Kong, Hong Kong University Press, 2008, 128 pp.
Ford begins by pointing out that *An Autumn’s Tale*, made by a female director, focuses on complex female characters who invent for themselves a flexible identity made from a mix of societal expectations and individual desires, a typical perspective of the Second Wave (Clara Law, Stanley Kwan, Fruit Chan, Evans Chan). The writer then recalls that this success, which was both critical and commercial, is in the tradition of Hong Kong films that revisit American myths in the light of multiple and hybrid connections between the two cultures. In fact, Mabel Cheung puts newly arrived Chinese immigrants to New York at the heart of her narrative, people who are not usually in the limelight in commercial films of either the Chinese or Hollywood variety. According to Ford, these characters correspond neither to the essentialist and exotic caricatures common to Hollywood, nor to the idea that the “American way of life” is necessarily beneficial to foreign nationals; rather, she leads us to rethink questions of boundaries, nation, and cultural difference in transnational terms.

Ford then pursues, through a summary of the plot, what keeps apart and brings together the film’s two main characters, Jenny and Figgy, immigrants from Hong Kong and the People’s Republic respectively. Everything seems to stand in the way of their love story, from their educational background to their family environment and their ambitions in America. Figgy makes a living by picking up menial jobs, moving especially within the Chinese community in Chinatown, and dreams of opening a restaurant on the seashore. Jenny, on the other hand, propels her desire to discover the world, gradually makes her mark on the New York scene, and leaves Chinatown for the fancy neighbourhoods of Long Island. Each realises their ambitions, a *Happy End* symbolising the various ways of assimilation into American society.

Ford subsequently examines how *An Autumn’s Tale* explores the myth of the American dream, which is generally associated with the opportunity to make it through individual effort, and goes beyond questions of assimilation in favour of a multicultural discourse. While the film confirms the idea that the United States still offers its migrant population upward mobility, it also reminds us that the Chinese community makes a contribution to the vitality of the country, to the extent of transcending the discourse of black/white dichotomy and giving an Asian interpretation of identity construction. Through Jenny and Figgy, the audience discovers stories of highly individual lives that are at the same time symbolic of the experience of thousands of migrants. In doing so, this feature film takes on an undeniable relevance in the eyes of the diasporic audience, beyond the personal and much publicised trajectory of the filmmaker herself. The fundamental issue in the end is how to become American without compromising one’s Chinese identity — that is, how to engage in multiculturalism. It is up to each and every person to find their particular balance, irrespective of national myths and cultural expectations. Ford delivers an idealistic and optimistic message that has little to do with run-of-the-mill Hong Kong films about migration. She also makes the point that, while the film flies in the face of certain socio-cultural stereotypes by offering a more subtle view of the situation of Chinese in the United States, it still reinforces other stereotypes, for example, through its caricatures of black and Latino minorities, which are represented as the major obstacle to a free and safe life in New York (although it is also true that this reflects the view of many Chinese living in Chinatown, focused inwardly on their own community). What finally counts for Cheung is to encourage her audience to see things with new eyes.

What picture of New York emerges then from *An Autumn’s Tale*? According to Ford, in a world in which mobility has become the norm, the film presents a city that is at once strange and familiar, a cultural space where Western and Eastern influences meet and new identities are negotiated. A reconfiguration of genres in the context of diaspora is thus what she sees as emerging from the film. The female characters reflect a variety of Chinese socio-cultural, ethnic, and national identities. They illustrate different possible trajectories, showing, in particular, that choices and opportunities are multiplied tenfold in a context of diaspora. The film also questions Chinese masculine identity, between the virile household provider and protector of tradition on the one hand, and on the other, those who fall by the wayside of economic success. Either way, the film keeps its distance both from Hollywood stereotypes and the pessimistic discourse of the Hong Kong New Wave, just as it does with respect to the character of the killer, a role in which the famous actor Chow Yun-fat had previously been typecast. For Ford, *An Autumn’s Tale* promotes an understanding between individuals and communities abroad, a kind of remedy for the anxiety felt by Hong Kong residents with regard to the handover.

Stacilee Ford here offers us a living document (including the transcription of an interview with
The HIV/AIDS epidemic that spread in Henan Province (and beyond) in the 1990s through unsafe blood collection represented—a watershed for Chinese society in its interaction with the state. While official attitudes did not change perceptibly before the SARS outbreak of 2003, and remained reticent even after that (no senior official in Henan has been held to account; two of the provincial secretaries concerned, Li Changchun and Li Keqiang, hold Politburo standing committee positions today)\(^{(3)}\), the perceived legitimacy of non-governmental organisations was greatly enhanced. Similarly, in a post-Tiananmen context in which writers and intellectuals were reluctant to embrace political agendas in the public arena, the type of social activism that grew out of the AIDS crisis offered a model of how to go about “changing mindsets” in a bottom-up manner, rather than offering the theoretical blueprints for democratisation for which Yaojie played a central role in raising awareness.

Yan Lianke, the first fiction writer to become interested in the subject, also read Gao Yaojie’s early accounts of the situation in Henan in the mid-1990s, and as a native of the province himself, he decided to pursue research on the matter. As he stated in an interview published in Southern Weekend in 2006, when Gao Yaojie explained in detail how “blood heads” would go around the fields to collect blood, using slightly bigger pouches to trick the peasants and making them lie down so as to feel less dizzy, “I felt that I had to write something.”\(^{(2)}\)

Reportage literature (baogao wenxue) is a strong tradition in modern Chinese writing, with roots both in May Fourth (Mao Dun) and in the 1980s (Liu Binyan\(^{(3)}\)) and Dai Qing), but it seems that Yan Lianke was determined to use the fictional genre from the very beginning, forming the project of writing both a novel and a “document” in which he would record all the “unheard, unimaginable, and shocking matters” that are too terrifying to be used directly in fiction (he still plans to do so).\(^{(4)}\) In another interview he refers to Ba Jin’s injunction that literature must “tell the truth” (jiang zhen hua). The French translation discussed in the present review, first published in 2007 and recently released in paperback, remains the only translation to date, and is therefore important in bringing Yan’s work to a wider audience, despite some shortcomings discussed below.

Yan, born in 1958 in Song County (near Luoyang), was originally a writer in the propaganda depart-

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1. Li Changchun was provincial secretary for Henan from 1992 to 1998 and is now responsible for propaganda in the Politburo; Li Keqiang was provincial secretary from 2002 to 2004 and is Executive Vice-Premier. Chen Kuixian (2000-2002) is also a Politburo member, CUPC vice-president, and Party secretary of CASS; Ma Zhongchen (1998-2000) has retired.
ment of the People’s Liberation Army (like Mo Yan). He began writing satirical fiction in the 1990s, attracting attention with The Summer Sun Sets (Xia ri luo, 1994), which depicts career jostling within the PLA (a young army cook commits suicide, ruining his superiors’ prospects of advancement). The Joy of Living (Shou huo, 2004) portrays local officials bent on making money out of anything, even the remnants of Communism: a local cadre organises a group of disabled people into a travelling circus in order to make enough money to buy Lenin’s corpse. After this publication, Yan was asked to resign from the PLA and became an employee of the Writers’ Association, which remains his “work unit” today. Serve the People (Wei renmin fuw u, 2005(3)) attracted much attention in the West following the recall of the issue of the Guangzhou literary journal Huacheng in which it was originally published. Its depiction of a whole army camp thrown into havoc by the adventures of a division commander’s wife (who seduces his orderly), though sexually scandalous on the surface, is perhaps most noteworthy for its depiction of the impunity enjoyed by high-ranking officers during the Cultural Revolution: the commander volunteers to dissolve his entire division under a pilot scheme simply to rid himself of his wife’s many lovers. It was in the aftermath of these two works that Yan turned to seriously researching the AIDS crisis in Henan. He accompanied a Chinese-American medical researcher to a village near Kaifeng on a total of seven visits over three years, until Dingzhuang meng was published in 2006 by Shanghai wenyi chubanshe. Controversy followed: the authorisation of distribution was withdrawn by the General Administration on Press and Publications (supervised by the Central Propaganda Department, by this time under the leadership of Li Changchun), and reprints were forbidden. However, copies already in bookshops continued to be sold, and pirated versions circulated widely. Yan had originally intended the royalties to be paid to the village in which he had carried out his research, and consequently sued the publisher when, following the restrictions, the latter refused to pay the promised amount. A settlement was finally reached under which the publisher paid the author, who donated the money to the village. Yan highlights that his use of fiction is a way of toning down a reality that is in some ways inconceivably frightening. He has deliberately left out stories reported to him about collecting blood in plastic soy sauce or vinegar bags, and washing out the used bags in a pool that eventually turned red. He also chose to leave aside his first fictional idea of an imaginary country linked to the rest of the world by a blood pipeline through which local officials export blood to achieve the country’s rise to the rank of world power. These cuts should not be seen as mere self-censorship (at least not as purely political self-censorship), but also to reflect a preoccupation with finding an adequate form for what remains an untellable reality, a form that is both helpful to understanding the objective situation and true to the subjective experience of the villagers themselves. Here lies the originality of the book, which despite fantastic elements and overtones, never resorts to the sensationalism that characterises some of China’s contemporary fiction, most notably Yu Hua’s recent novel Brothers (Xiongdi). The story is narrated in the first person by a dead child, Ding Qiang, who died of eating a poisoned tomato given him by the villagers because his father is the “blood king” of Ding village. The story, though harrowing, is simple enough. Ten years before the time when the narration begins, after initially resisting a scheme formulated by provincial officials to attain development through selling blood, the Ding villagers are persuaded by a gesture made by the narrator’s grandfather, the respected elder Ding Shuyang, who, scooping water from a muddy source by the river, proclaims: “It can’t be scooped dry: the more you scoop, the more it flows!” (p. 31; DZM, p. 23(10)) This moment is all the more significant as the stream flows in the old bed of the Yellow River, the...
very source of inexhaustible Chinese civilisation. After this, a blood craze breaks out: blood collection multiplies, first through various public channels, then by private “bloodheads,” in particular the narrator’s 23-year-old father Ding Hui. The main part of the action takes place eight years after this episode, when people begin falling ill from “the fever” and dying like “leaves falling from the trees.” While the narrator’s grandfather (who is not infected), having learned about the nature of the illness, tries to organise the villagers who have contracted the virus, bringing them to live in the school and work together in an autonomous, cooperative way, his leadership is soon contested by his nephews, who are hungry for power and seek to recreate a political hierarchy with privileges for the leaders within the school. Others steal rice from the common food supplies or clothes from other sick people. When the narrator’s uncle finds love with another infected woman, Lingling (both are married), the new self-proclaimed leaders of the school issue Cultural Revolution-style regulations punishing adultery with public humiliation that involves parading around the village with a dunce’s cap and being doused with HIV-infected blood. The utopian community that might have been possible, Yan Lianke hints, when the terror inspired by the illness breaks down oppressive political and social structures, quickly gives way to routinisation, bureaucracy, and new forms of exploitation. This bureaucratic evolution has no positive side: there is no hospital, no medication, no insurance paid by the authorities; it is simply used as a pretext to exert power over the weakened villagers. Without care and medication, the villagers die off one by one, and at the end of the novel, when Ding Shuiyang, the grandfather, returns to the village from the city, all seem to have fallen victim to the illness and the political struggles that have accelerated its spread.

However, this storyline is only the outside shell of the novel. As suggested by the title, the narrative actually moves back and forth between the events described by the narrator and his grandfather’s many dreams. The importance of dreams is underscored by the biblical epigraph taken from the Old Testament story of Joseph, in which the Pharaoh’s dreams prefigure seven years of plague. It is regrettable that the French translator has chosen not to reproduce the distinction between bold and ordinary type that appears throughout the original version, and which structures the novel into more realistic and more dreamlike modes, although the barriers are fluid (another difficulty is that the chapters in translation are numbered straight through from 1 to 20, whereas in the original they are structured into 8 parts or juan). The very first dream passage in bold alludes to Yan’s original idea for the book:

Grandfather had been dreaming the same dream for three nights. (...) Under the towns of Weixian and Dongjing a network of pipes spread out like a spider’s web: in every pipe, blood was flowing. From the cracks where the pipes had been badly connected, and in places where they curved, blood sprayed out like water, spouting heavenwards and falling like crimson rain, the stench of red blood irritating his nose. And on the plain, grandfather saw that the water in wells and rivers was all flaming red, exuding a pungent smell of blood. (p. 8; DZM, p. 8)

Several other dreams expand on this theme: the dream of gold (Chapter 4 of the French version), the dream of the coffin factory (Chapter 5), and the dream in which all trees are cut down to make coffins (Chapter 10). In these dreams, it becomes clear to the grandfather that his own son, Ding Hui, is responsible not only for the blood collection (the “dream of gold,” in which solid gold appears in all the fields where the peasants are working, waiting only to be picked up), but also for embezzling the money allocated by the government to provide free coffins for the dead (the coffin factory). By selling the coffins meant to be distributed for free, just as he has sold blood before, Ding Hui not only makes a fortune that allows him to buy a traditional courtyard house in the district town, with a safe in which he keeps millions in 100-yuan bills, but also to ascend the government hierarchy to an unassailable position.

At the end of the novel, he strikes on a third gold mine: arranging marriages in the afterlife by “selling” dead people for a high fee. Worse yet, he does not hesitate to use his own dead son to “buy” into an alliance with the district secretary: he betroths the latter’s dead daughter (who, we are told, suffered from a limp and mental deficiency) to Ding Qiang, whose remains are exhumed to be lavishly reburied, far from home, with a photograph of the young woman.

At this point the grandfather draws the line: after his grandson repeatedly appears to him in his dreams, protesting bitterly against his forced remarriage in the nether realm, he finally uses a
chestnut wood truncheon to kill his own son (11) – though not until after the reburial has been carried out. For this he is briefly arrested, and as he returns from prison to the village, the reader realises that this is the same event narrated in the first pages: the whole novel is a flashback. The grandfather remains alone, facing the desolation of the Great Central plains that stand for Chinese civilisation itself:

In each village, the houses were still there, but not a tree. They had all been cut to make coffins. (…) The plain was completely bald, all human beings and animals were dead. (p. 325; DZM, p. 284)

Yet the book ends with a glimmer of hope: in a torrent of cleansing rain, the grandfather sees a woman throwing up mud with a willow stick, thus shaping innumerable human figures who dance before his eyes. This ending is very difficult to interpret. Yan Lianke has shown skilfully how even within the calamity of the HIV infection, a space can be created for hope and for reinventing new forms of life in common, even of love (the narrator’s uncle and Lingling). In his interview, Yan speaks with conviction about the discrete but impressive resistance of the peasants of Henan: “They just continued to work in the field and they sat still and ate their bowl of rice in front of the door at home.” (12) At the same time, he highlights that mass death is no impediment to characters such as Ding Hui, who will use it to obtain wealth and power by selling not only blood, but also government-granted coffins and even dead relatives. The political system that provides incentives for such action, although not explicitly taken to task, certainly does not come away unscathed. Nonetheless, there is no moralising and no finger-pointing: in what some may see as an act of self-censorship, the readers are left to draw their own conclusions.

In his postscript, which is entitled “The collapse of literature” (Xiezuo de bengkui, p. 286; the title is unfortunately omitted in French), Yan adds that even he found himself perplexed and crying the day he finished writing:

I couldn’t say why I felt such sadness. For whom was I crying? Why was I experiencing a previously unknown despair and helplessness? For my own life? Or for the world I live in? Or was it for Henan—my homeland—and for all the other provinces and places filled with calamity and suffering where innumerable AIDS sufferers were living their lives? Or could it be for the dead end my writing might be facing after finishing The Dream of Ding Village, because I had expended all psychological forces? (p. 325; DZM, p. 287)

There is no simple answer to these questions, except that all hypotheses probably apply equally. The radical quality of Yan Lianke’s writing does not spare even the author himself, when he goes so far as to suspect his own suffering of being triggered by narcissism. This is no doubt why the narrator is a dead child, the only figure that can truly appear “innocent.” Carlos Rojas, in a perceptive review, concludes by asking whether the grandfather is locked in a state of melancholy or whether he can start rebuilding new attachments and institutions, having gone through a stage of mourning. (13) Yet the grandfather remains a problematic figure, having himself initiated the blood craze by scooping up the bowl of water from the Yellow River, and taking justice into his own hands by killing his son to avenge the displacement of his grandson’s grave. The reader is surely not expected to condone such vengeance. No character comes away unscathed from the scandal: in this respect the implicit political responsibilities are only part of a more general moral and human breakdown in values. By concluding with the image of clay figures dancing on the Central Plains, which speaks both to Chinese creation mythology and to the Biblical epigraph, Yan Lianke is probably suggesting that humanity itself has fallen victim to the events that are alluded to in the book, and that humanity itself needs to be reshaped and rethought.

