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Book Review: *Dream of Ding Village*

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By Mike Frick

“Since you have gone, the house is empty, it has been three seasons now
Extinguish the lamps, let the twilight come, we must endure the setting sun” —Chinese funeral couplet

In 2000-2001, Elisabeth Rosenthal published a series of reports in the *New York Times* that alerted the world to a startling AIDS epidemic among farmers in central China. Beginning in the early 1990s, thousands of farmers in the Yellow River provinces of Henan, Hebei, Hubei, and Shanxi had contracted HIV through commercial blood selling. Local government officials in Henan promoted blood and plasma selling as a rural development scheme that would lift farmers out of poverty. State-run collection centers and private collectors known as “blood heads” would pool blood, extract the desired plasma, and then inject the leftover blood back into donors, thereby enabling people to donate more frequently. Unsafe pooling and re-injection practices exposed thousands to HIV; secondary transmission then occurred on an even wider scale through the use of contaminated blood products in hospitals as well as transmission to sexual partners and children by those already infected. After the epidemic came to light, the Chinese government banned the sale of blood and worked to increase the safety of the blood supply. Yet local officials also denied the scale of the epidemic and harassed journalists, physicians, and other activists who sought to document the extent of the blood disaster.

Yan Lianke’s novel [*Dream of Ding Village*](#), a nominee for the 2012 Man Asian Literary Prize, opens in the waning years of the blood-selling frenzy, as a small farming community in Henan province watches “the fever” begin to claim the lives of working-age adults. By the mid-1990s, the Chinese government had acknowledged the spread of HIV/AIDS among drug users on China’s southwestern borders, but no one expected AIDS to appear among poor farmers in China’s heartland. The discovery of *aizibing cun*, or AIDS villages, in central China forced government leaders to confront a pattern of HIV transmission among Han Chinese unrelated to opium trafficking and injecting drug use among ethnic minority communities along the Chinese-Burmese border. At the outset of the novel, so many people have died in Ding Village that families have stopped observing mourning rituals such as pasting funeral couplets outside their homes, and grave markers have become “as dense as the sheaves of wheat” that those healthy enough to work struggle to harvest.

The narrator of Yan’s novel is Ding Qiang, the murdered twelve-year-old son of Ding Hui, the village’s most notorious blood head. The villagers poison Qiang in retaliation for his father’s actions; Ding Hui had established Ding Village’s largest blood bank and used the profits to modernize the family compound. Not content to wait for customers, Ding Hui put his plasma

bank on wheels, pushing it out to the village's fields to collect blood from working farmers, who then fell sick. After Qiang's murder, the boy lingers over Ding Village as a clear-eyed observer. His omniscient narration serves mainly to illuminate the thoughts of his grandfather, who tries to care for sick villagers while shouldering the remorse his son Ding Hui never musters.

Yan's writing is at once richly metaphoric and attuned to the rhythms of Chinese farming life. He describes needle marks on the underarms of blood sellers as "angry red sesame seeds" and pinched veins as "fat-streaked pork." Mostly this language is effective, though at its weaker moments the metaphors can feel overwrought, particularly in the dream sequences that mark major turning points in the plot. Dreams haunt the sleep of Qiang's grandfather and serve as convenient devices for moving the narrative forward, although this sometimes occurs at the expense of good story-telling. Major revelations about Ding Hui's greed and artifice are revealed through lushly animated dreams that allow Yan to transcend the narrative strictures of time and place. Through these dreams we see Ding Hui ingratiate himself with government officials until they appoint him chairman of the county taskforce on HIV/AIDS. In his first move as chairman, Ding Hui intercepts the free government-issued coffins intended for AIDS patients in Ding Village and sells them to other AIDS-affected villages for a profit. For his efforts, he labels himself a "philanthropist." Left without coffins, those dying in Ding Village ransack the school for blackboards and desks to build their own. The transformation of the school into a funereal supply yard carries particular poignancy given China's storied reverence for learning and scholarship.

Yan sometimes paints the villagers as comical rubes, easily placated by even the smallest self-serving kindness from Ding Hui and other officials. The tone of this portrayal borders on patronizing and is surprising given Yan's training as an anthropologist. Yan's academic background comes across more clearly in his perceptive description of how the sick villagers reproduce Communist Party bureaucracy in the way they handle a stream of small dramas, including prosecuting petty thieves, supplanting Qiang's grandfather as school overseer, and legislating morality among amorous (unwed) HIV-positive couples. AIDS quickly infiltrates every level of Party, village, and clan politics.

Unsurprisingly, the Chinese government levied a "three nos" ban—no sales, no distribution, and no promotion—against *Dream of Ding Village* after its publication in 2005. Though the storytelling relies heavily on dream sequences, Yan takes little poetic license when exposing the depth of the state's culpability in spreading HIV among poor, medically-naïve farmers. He is just as uncompromising when detailing how officials denied responsibility for the ensuing AIDS epidemic, even as they profited from its human tragedy. No one in Ding Village receives medical care, mental health counseling, food assistance, or a chance to hold the blood heads legally accountable. Cast adrift by government administrators, the sick villagers quarantine themselves in the school and wait to die.

Yan's novel dares to imagine the early years of China's AIDS epidemic, when farmers in central China awoke from visions of wealth and prosperity to find instead incurable illness and death. Aside from a few stories in newspapers, academic articles, and the memoirs of activist-physicians like Dr. Gao Yaojie, we have few personal accounts from the earliest victims of the blood disaster. Many of these individuals passed away before the Chinese government began

offering free anti-retroviral treatment for AIDS in 2003. While the language is sometimes sentimental, Yan's novel offers powerful testimony of the suffering victims of the blood disaster, their families, and communities have endured in the wake of a wholly preventable tragedy.

Mike Frick is a China program officer at [Asia Catalyst](#), a US-based nonprofit that does training, research and advocacy on health and human rights in Asia. Together with the Korekata AIDS Law Center in Beijing, Asia Catalyst recently released a [report](#) on the difficulties victims of the blood disaster have faced in getting compensation from the Chinese government.