REVIEW

# Yan Geling: Crossing the Red Line

*The acclaimed novelist and screenwriter hails an audience in China for her powerful historical narratives. Then, somewhere, she crossed a line. Where it is she is banned from publishing in her mainland China?*

KAREN HAI • MAY 1, 2022

FICTION | HISTORY

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Yan Geling's *Hua Yan* (2019). | Pan Xiaozhen

Yan wild one in an interview that her decision to go it alone follows a de facto Chinese ban on her works, after she repeatedly criticized the Chinese government. In March 2020, she wrote a heart-bleeding *Caixin* piece that was suppressed the early warnings of Covid whistleblower Dr. Li Wenliang, who was reprimanded by police and subsequently died of the disease. Two years later, she posted on social media an essay about a mother who was forced to be chained to a bed in a shack by her disabled, psychotic adult son. The essay, about China's indifference to the woman's plight in a video interview. After the video was published, she discovered that large swaths of information about her life and achievements had disappeared from Chinese social media. She publishing deal for Hua Yan was shelved.

Yet in many ways, Yan's clashes with Beijing started much earlier, their parting of ways was all but inevitable given who she is and what she writes. Best known for her dramatic ability to depict the suffering and stirring of Chinese women against brutal historical backgrounds, Yan is among today's most acclaimed Chinese language novelists and screenwriters. She has written over 20 novels, and more than 40 novellas and short stories. And she has seen numerous prizes including an Independent Chinese PEN award in 2022 that recognized her efforts to "persevere in telling the truth, not submitting to authority, ten percent against the state".

Here is the story of a writer who grew up in the shadow of China's political unrest, saw her family persecuted, and took a turn as a soldier and artist for China's military before starting to write — only to become increasingly outspoken about the rule of truth in modern China, the country she still loves.

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Yan Geling in 2010. | Zhihui Pengo

Born in Shanghai in 1959 to a family of writers and scholars, Yan Geling's childhood was marked by the horrors of the Cultural Revolution, which broke out when she was seven years old. "I no longer recognized, suicides were a very common occurrence," she told an interviewer, adding, after a pause, that she once witnessed an elderly couple jumping hand-in-hand off a tall building.

Four years later, at age 11, she saw her father, accused of being a counterrevolutionary, dragged out of their home. With schools closed and adults pulled away for political studies or struggle sessions, she was left alone at home. Her father's library was her only comfort. She poured over works by Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Turgenev, Cervantes and Victor Hugo, as well as Chinese classics such as *Romance of the Western Chamber* and *Dream of the Red Mansions*.

At year later, to escape the fate of becoming a sent-down youth, Yan joined a People's Liberation Army (PLA) art and ballet troupe as a dancer. Although stationed in Chongqing, she spent much of her time giving performances at army camps throughout China, including in Tibet. In 1979, when the Sino-Vietnam border war broke out, Yan volunteered to work as a reporter, and was sent to a field hospital in Yunnan to interview wounded soldiers. The cruelty of war, and the smell of blood and death on the front lines, made her rethink her career. "There are many things I could not express through dance that I could with a pen," she said.

In 1983, Yan published her first novel, Green Prince (綠色), based on her experiences in the art and ballet troupe. She left the PLA not long after to become a full-time novelist, and followed her debut with two more novels inspired by army life: Women of Mount Sailen (一个女兵的传说史), 1987 and Female Generals (女将军), 1989. The books, known as The Female Soldier Trilogy, launched her writing career.

When the Tiananmen protests and crackdown happened in 1989, Yan was a creative writing graduate student at the Lu Xun Literary Institute in Beijing. She heard reports that students would soon end and the students would be required to report on each other. "I can't stay in this place," she recalled thinking. Instead, Yan moved to the U.S. in the fall of 1989, where she received a scholarship to an MFA creative writing program at Chicago's Columbia College. "In the 80s," she said, "we all thought this liberal atmosphere would last forever, but in retrospect, it was so fleeting and impossible."

That "foreshadowing decade of the 1980s" is the setting for *Mihei*, the central theme of which, the artist's desire to be true to oneself, her loyalty to Chongqing, nurtured by a young female novelist named Mihei, the novel follows two generations of Chinese artists, writers and intellectuals, struggling with their relationships with their families, their country and their art. Filled with playful fictitious expressions, *Mihei* details this unique period in Chinese history, when the country underwent radical change. As the book launch, Yan joked that China in the 1980s was all about hormones; she was in her 20s while her father was in his 50s, yet "we both were through puberty at the same time." Those were the days of optimism, tolerance, free-thinking and possibilities, she said, "a period rather like the Renaissance of Europe."

At one point, Mi Kao — Mihei's father, also a novelist — is tormented to see his manuscript returned to him covered in red ink. The relentless editing killed several of his favorite passages. "In their place," Yan writes, "he found phrases and words that have one barely scrutinizing an itch from the outside of the book [頭腦發達, literally, 'overheated']. Mihei sighed, shaking his head repeatedly, and cross irritim him home for dinner in hope of getting him to relent, but Mi's efforts are futile. He concludes: "Some things are only allowed to happen, but you cannot write them down."

Yan with her father, Yan Huiminan, in Beijing, 2010. | Zhihui Pengo

Yan told me Mihei's character was loosely based on her own experiences in the 1980s, while the character was modeled after her painter and novelist father, Yan Huiminan, author of *Brides Well Chronicle* and *Paper Marriage*. Yan Huiminan's work, published in the novel, the elders Yan struggled to write so paint creatively after years of toiling for the Mao Zedong Thought Propaganda Team, "Mi's father's generation is mangled with a mental handicap for the rest of their lives," Yan said, "and it's impossible for them to make it off."

Deciding to self-publish, she expanded her manuscript, and included an epilogue describing how Mihei, Mi Kao and several key characters learn Chinese to safeguard their artistic integrity. Yan herself has chosen to return to China anytime soon, but acknowledged her privilege compared to writers living in China who must face the consequences "At least I don't have to worry about my physical safety."

Yet after her own run-in with China's censors, Yan lost her support network of professional editors and publishers. It's also unclear how her legions of readers back home will be able to get their hands on Mihei. At the Yan Geling Fan Club Facebook page, the novel, translated into "Chinese people," she said, "then my work will surely find the right set for growth." Yan told me she has no desire to be a political activist — but added that intellectual honesty is "one of the most basic qualities a responsible writer must possess."



Yan Geling's *Hua Yan* (2019). | Pan Xiaozhen

## Yan Geling's childhood was marked by the horrors of the Cultural Revolution, which broke out when she was seven years old.

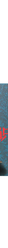


There are two broad themes in Yan's work. The first is the joys and sorrows of ordinary individuals in the face of political upheaval, as in one of her best known works, The Flower of Hair (頭發的花語), 2007, adapted into a 2011 film starring Christian Bale. The second is the experience of the Chinese diaspora, for example in *The Lost Daughter of Martinique* (馬島, 2002), in which a young woman is abducted from China and sold into prostitution in 19th century San Francisco.

Yan also draws on her personal experiences in many of her stories. The 2006 novel *The Fate of a Woman* (一个女人的命运) is based on her parents' tumultuous marriage, while *The Fate Cafe* (天涯咖啡馆, 2008), about a Chinese female international student romantically involved with an American diplomat and historian, based on her own relationship with her husband.

A recurring theme in her books is the Cultural Revolution, which Yan calls a "life-time obsession." Writing about the horrors of that period allows her not only to make sense of the past, but to provide a window into humanity's dark underbelly. Even though the Cultural Revolution ended in 1976, Yan feels it is still relevant some five decades later. "As a nation," she told me, "we have not been a democracy and are very forgetful. We don't know how to reflect and learn little self-awareness." Yet she fears this history and its lessons are being repeated. "Its just unbelievable, I'm really from history is repeating itself and how Chinese intellectual have always been subjugated. What my father and grandfather's generations went through in recent history as intellectuals is what we're facing today as writers and artists."

In 2011, Yan set a new course when she published *The Criminal of La Guoxi* (拉郭记). Set in 1950s, it follows a Chinese intellectual life across decades of political unrest. It was Yan's first novel with a male protagonist, Lu Yanshi, who is partially based on her paternal grandfather, Yan Jiachun. Part of the reason she tackled the project was a little she discovered between her own maternal grandfather and Yan Jiachun, who was also a Yan family ancestor, who lived in Yan's ancestral hometown of Jiaxing, Zhejiang, in the early years of the People's Republic. The second half of the protagonist's life was based on another elderly male relative, a former middle-school principal who was incarcerated in a Qingdao province reeducation through-labor camp for nearly three decades after being branded a counter-revolutionary during the Anti-Rightist Campaign of the 1950s.



Yan with her father, Yan Huiminan, in Beijing, 2010. | Zhihui Pengo

Yan maintains his spiritual freedom even in jail, relying on his conviction that he would eventually be freed. When he is finally released, however, he cannot find his former home or beloved wife, realizing that he has been addled by his family and life itself It's the story of an intellectual who cannot find his place, and in the process is ended — mirroring a generation chewed up and bamboozled by destructive political winds that are critiqued in Lu's politics Chinese intellectuals persecuted.

Writing the novel, Yan said, was a journey of self-discovery. It took her ten years to research, including several field trips to a decommissioned Qingdao prison, and interviews with surviving labor-camp inmates and children of former guards. "It's more difficult to write only one hero," she said, adding, "then she was to be it." The first book marked the beginning of Yan's discovery with Beijing. When she submitted the manuscript in 2010, the People's Literature Publishing House (人民文学出版社) wanted it over its focus on political unrest — a difficult topic at the time, and the recent Arab Spring protests had made China's leaders nervous. It was eventually published by one of the more liberal Writers' Publishing House (作家出版社).

Kong Zhongqian, author of the memoir, Confessions of a Internet Life in Communist China (2017), told me that *The Criminal of La Guoxi*'s genius lies in her depictions of complex human relationships, as well as the embarrassing fate of Chinese literati throughout history. In one passage, Lu's stepmother berates him for his nature:






> What kind of place is China? Engage in your academic learning for 30 percent, but devote 70 percent to mastering how to be a human. Study the classics, study how to be a human, study how to be a human. Here in the Chinese, what really matters is your light with ear and I'll back at you. If you haven't learned this art of being a human, then in China, you are nothing but a useless person.

To Kong, Lu's fate as a political prisoner reflects the tragic loss of so many Chinese scholars. Lu Yanshi was not a meaningful critic of either the Nationalist Party or the Communist Party, but merely "guilty of the crime of not knowing how to play politics."






## As a nation, we tend to have a bad memory and are very forgetful. We don't know how to reflect and have little self-awareness.






— *Yan Geling*

Half a set born for her success in Hua, Yan Geling might have remained below the censors' radar. Her books' portrayals of the Cultural Revolution caught the eye of Chinese directors, especially those from the so-called "fifth generation," who had lived through the same frenzied era. Across turned directors Joan Chen was among the first to approach her about film rights, and Zhang Yimou (张艺谋) in 1994, a story about a young woman who is resisting to prostitution in the hope of being sent home. In 1998, the story was adapted into a film called Keep Cool (活着).

Big name directors Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou followed. The latter adapted *The Criminal of La Guoxi* into his critically acclaimed 2014 movie Coming Home (归来). While the film, starring Gong Li, generally looked to be Yan 2011 novel, it also drew Beijing's attention and ire. Soon after its release, a Party website published a scathing article, comparing Coming Home to Georgian director Tengiz Abuladze's 1987 art film Repentance, which was seen as a critique of Stalinism, of the sort that Chinese authorities believed ultimately led to the collapse of the USSR.

"It is clear that Ed purchased the envelope," Yan told me. The book and film's focus on the Cultural Revolution, and relentless attacks on intellectuals under Mao, were particularly sensitive amid the newly chilling political climate since Xi Jinping's ascendance in 2012.






Her battles with the gatekeepers intensified when, in early 2017, she submitted the manuscript of Fairy Glass (雪棠), which revisits PLA dancers during the Cultural Revolution. Editors made numerous revisions, one of which particularly incensed Yan. The novel's opening chapter originally had a group of handicapped war veterans in talented clothes begging in Beijing's Wangfujing shopping area — something Yan personally saw as being cute now in the early 2010s. "They would salute you if you gave them a man 50 cents," she said. Editors asked her to remove the scene, that the change the veterans to handicapped children.

Following the book's release, Yan felt growing hostility from the authorities. This mentioned when she went on promotional trips for Fong Kongong's 2017 film adaptation of the novel, Fairy Glass, for which she had written the script. At one point, the men took on short notice to cancel several appearances, with specific instructions that Yan not appear on stage. Film industry friends told her that they heard from the censorship bureau some version of "Ed Yan is an unhappy with China, she should just leave."

Fong Hao eventually gave Yan the inspiration to write Mihei, which she considers a sequel, several dancers who appear in the earlier book find new lives in her latest work. It quickly becomes clear to the reader that Mihei's Mihei is a more mature version of Fong Hao's Yanzi. "Mi finally got to see what becomes of all those young dancers after they leave the military and return home to their families," Yan said, in 1990s," Yan noted.

The ironic tone of Mihei is Yan's attempt to temper the heavy subjects of censorship and freedom. Early in the book, for example, Mihei compares the widespread elation at the end of the Cultural Revolution to a satisfying bowel movement:

> Be it long-suppressed syrupy or great serious, people must find a way to release it. Mi Kao felt that the Cultural Revolution was a tight-fudge enough to hold the pent-shit contents of their shitting stomachs. With a bond, just spear it out. That way, you can make room for the next shit. Shit is shit, but it's better to grasp some critics. In the end, shit holding over a decade or even longer, whether it's fun, bad or grievous, is nothing other a bit more. Yes, the moment is over — right — it's time to make room.






Through Mihei's perspective, the book provides a canvas to remember the lasting psychological scars sustained by Chinese intellectual and artists, who were attacked and imprisoned during the 1960s and 1970s. Despite the brief reprieve they experienced in the 1980s, Yan makes it clear in *Mihei* that the scars inflicted by suffering during the Cultural Revolution continues to haunt these decades later. In that sense, the book is not only a conclusion to *Fong Hao* but a continued study of the fate of the Chinese intelligentsia following The Criminal of La Guoxi — the three books offer a family portrait of three generations of persecuted intellectuals.

## Being censored has restricted Yan Geling's audience, but also gives her a new freedom to write the books she wants to.






Yan Geling's blacklisting in China has cut her off from many opportunities. Once a sought-after screenwriter, she can no longer sell movie rights to Chinese directors and studios. Yan said she can no longer work with Chinese publishers, and claimed she doesn't make money from ongoing sales of her titles books in China. Yet she told me she is at peace with this. "The thing I like most I discover that the direct feedback I get from readers about how I live to do with the family I was born and raised in. If realized I don't have it in me to behave another way, to trouble through, or to write about what is not in me."

If she didn't speak out when she needed to, she was afraid she would despise herself.

China will always be Yan's homeland, and her feelings toward the country remain positive. But China's attitude toward her work has changed. She is not a political writer, but politics and history inevitably form the context of her deeper exploration of our shared humanity. Being censored has restricted her audience, but she gives her a new freedom to write the books she wants to, where "no one will limit for me on what to write."

Currently, Yan is finishing another novel about the history of her extended family. This time, it will be more directly autobiographical, reflecting events experienced by her family. She plans to dedicate it to her 20-year-old adopted daughter, Tianyan, and to focus on China's one-child policy, which led to girl like Tianyan to be abandoned. Most of all, she wants her daughter to learn about the family she has become part of the struggles that have been through, and how they "continue to experience the ups and downs of fate, even today."

*Hongo Yan Geling's Hua Yan (2019) [Flower/Tai-Gift] Translation from Mistel and The Criminal La Guoxi by Karen Hai.*

Karen Hai is a New York based writer and film scholar specializing in Chinese cinema and literature. Based in Hong Kong and Japan, she is the author of the novel *Kaiju Girl* (2015) and a book of interviews with young Chinese film directors, *Chinese Millennial Cinema* (forthcoming 2020). Her articles have appeared in NPR, PBS's The World, Inside Chinese *Meetings* and *The Japan Times*, among others. She is a lecturer at Chinese language and film and gives frequent talks on Chinese film media.