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Review of Yan Lianke's *The Explosion Chronicles* (trans. Carlos Rojas)

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Yan Lianke. *The Explosion Chronicles*. Translated by Carlos Rojas. Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2016.

———. *Zha Lie Zi*. Shanghai: Shanghai Wenyi Chubanshe.

Yan Lianke, arguably the most controversial literary figure in contemporary China, is widely considered the most likely Chinese candidate for another Nobel Prize for literature (after Mo Yan, the Nobel laureate of 2012). Yan, who started publishing in 1979, has authored more than a dozen full-length novels and nearly a hundred novellas and short stories. As a writer, he was initially affiliated with the Chinese army; when his military career concluded in 2004, he became an independent novelist.

In addition to the many literary awards he has secured in China and Asia, Yan won the prestigious Franz Kafka Prize (an international literary award presented in honour of Franz Kafka, the German language novelist) in 2014. It was the first time a Chinese writer was awarded the prize, but ironically, the winning novel entitled *si shu* (四书, translated title *The Four Books*) was actually banned in China. In March 2017, Yan received his third nomination for the renowned Man Booker International Prize for the book *Zha Lie Zhi* (literal translation “Explosion Chronicles”, which was preserved as the title of the English version), together with his English translator Carlos Rojas.

Explosion Chronicles is a fictional work modelled on the ancient Chinese system of documenting traditional local history. The novel is set in an unknown village in the central China province of Henan, *Zhalie* (炸裂, or “Explosion”), which expands within a matter of decades into a town, then a county, a metropolis, and eventually, a mega metropolis. Its economic transformation is accompanied (or rather driven) by all kinds of material pursuits: politicians at all levels go to every extreme –organizing large-scale theft and sex bribery – to secure their promotion, while moral standards are completely ignored along the way. The ordinary citizens care about nothing else but the wealth they accumulate, regardless of the means of such monetary gains. They admire the wealth a fellow villager gained from prostitution to such a degree that they openly encourage their own daughters to follow suit.

The English translation, *The Explosion Chronicles*, was devised by Carlos Rojas, a professor of Chinese Studies at Duke University. Having previously translated two of Yan’s full-length novels, Rojas came to appreciate the experimental nature of his works, and thus the significance of Yan’s narrative structure and voice. In the *Explosion Chronicles*, the mythorealism advocated by Yan found its way not only in its narrative mechanism, but also in such descriptions as the following:

When he walked over from the village street, the spring sun had flowers bloom for him and enveloped him in tints of tender green and fresh red. The scholar tree to the north of the village was covered in flowers in his honor, including red roses and white peonies.

(Yan 72)

The translator has rendered, with great ease, the narrative force of the source text, where descriptions are frequently employed in the stead of the conventional depiction of the natural environment. Rather than reflecting the state of mind of the protagonists, they are used as a literary device for the author to make satirical comments on the events in question. In this regard, both the form and the effect of the authorial comments disguised as descriptions have been transferred intact into the target text.

Interestingly, there are several different published versions of the Chinese source text, some with footnotes to supplement the main text with additional information, and some without. While it is not regular practice to include footnotes in translated fictional works, Rojas, who emphasized (in an interview from 2015) the importance of footnotes in an earlier work of Yan, opted to keep them in his translation. English readers will appreciate his efforts to do so, for expressions such as “China’s Three and Five Overturnings campaign” (9) and “ten-thousand yuan households” (19) allude to particular historical events or moments, which are by no means universally comprehensible – even to some of the source text readers.

The footnotes in the translation serve to enhance the visibility of the translator (whose name, following Anglophone norms) is missing altogether from the front cover, back cover and the spine of the book. But there are other means available for the translator to reinforce his presence in other ways – through negotiation with the publisher, for example. Here, we can count the inclusion of footnotes and translator’s note, either as preface or postscript. Rojas was able to take advantage of both in his translation. While the footnotes in the English translation are mainly a faithful reproduction of the Chinese source text, the *Translator’s Note* is a product and a reflection of Rojas’s ethos as a Chinese specialist, as demonstrated by the scale of knowledge about Chinese literature and history that he effortlessly incorporated into his *Translator’s Note*.

Despite the fluent, vibrant and exotic reading experience provided by Rojas’s target text, his rendering – as in any other translated work – has certain shortcomings. Culturally-bound terms, which are often considered a high-risk area for translators, are among the few flaws in the English target text. For instance, the Chinese system of kinship terms is so complicated that an equivalent English term does not always exist. On page 29 of the English text, a character named “Zhu Damin” is described as: *Zhu Qingfang’s nephew, Zhu Damin. He is Zhu Ying’s uncle*. The corresponding Chinese source text is 朱庆方的侄儿朱大民，他是朱颖的叔哥哥 (literal translation: *It’s Zhu Qingfang’s nephew, Zhu Damin, who is the older cousin of Zhuying*). The misinterpretation happens with the term “叔哥哥”，which does not make literal sense: the first character, 叔 *shu* (one term for uncle), refers to the younger brother of one’s father, the second, 伯 *bo* (another term for uncle), is used to address the elder brother of one’s father, and the third one, 哥 *ge*, is “elder brother” in English. When the three characters are combined, they form a term used to refer specifically to the son of a paternal uncle who is older than oneself, aka “an older cousin”. In this example, Zhu Ying is the daughter of Zhu Qingfang and the cousin of Zhu Damin. Therefore, when a simple linguistic transfer fails to convey the key message, extralinguistic knowledge is needed in order to settle the translational issue.

In a similar vein, there are some occasional omissions which, at first sight, seem fairly trivial, but are actually critical for the intended effect of the source text. An example can be found on page 273: *He stood for a moment in front of the wall of books and then suddenly he pulled down a well-thumbed copy of The Carnal Prayer Mat [...]*. This is a description of the younger brother visiting the grand office of the protagonist, the city mayor Kong Mingliang. As the mayor was out at the time, the brother looked casually around while waiting. The source text reads: [他]站在那一大排书前呆了很大一会儿，猛然间，从那一面墙的新书中抽出一本被看久了的《肉蒲团》[...] (literal translation: *He stood in front of the large shelves of*

*books for a long time, and then suddenly pulled out a well-thumbed copy of The Carnal Prayer Mat from the wall of **brand new** books).* The only major omission with the translation, really, is the expression “brand new”, without which, however, the exaggerating, satirical effect achieved through comparison is pitifully lost: there are thousands of canonical works, classical and contemporary from China and elsewhere in the mayor’s office, but they all remain unread and are thus only decorative; the only one that gets “well-thumbed” over time is an obscene book full of graphically explicit sexual descriptions. Apparently, the epithets in the source text are deliberately arranged in such a way to highlight the satirical effect. With “brand new” being left out, that sharp contrast, though not totally disappearing, is to a large extent, weakened.

Nevertheless, when the translation is evaluated as a whole, luckily, very few flaws – even those as subtle as mentioned above – are found. This is partly, one would assume, due to the translator’s background as a specialist in Chinese Studies. For those who expect to learn more about Yan, his writing mechanism or about the Chinese literary movement of mythorealism, Carlos Rojas’s translation provides an enjoyable and insightful read. The development of the village Explosion, together with its accompanying throes, chaos and absurdity, is a true representation of China’s fast-developing society. But – bear in mind that real life in China can sometimes be even more preposterous than the stories in this novel!