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# A Chinese Immigrant Reads Yiyun Li

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*Among the twenty-three people who received MacArthur Fellowships last month was Yiyun Li, a fiction writer based at the University of California, Davis. Born and raised in Beijing before coming to the United States for graduate work (first in immunology, later in creative writing), Li is one member of a growing community of Chinese authors now writing in English. We asked Xujun Eberlein, also part of that group, to reflect on Li's writing.*

By Xujun Eberlein

I first encountered Yiyun Li's work in the fall of 2003, in the form of "Immortality," a longish short story published in [The Paris Review](#) that was the first piece of writing by her to make a splash in the literary world. It is about the ups and downs of a Chinese man who is born with a face resembling Mao's. He makes good use of his unusual feature and enjoys a fortunate life when others are suffering during the Cultural Revolution, but becomes a loser in the post-Mao era. Coming from an area that produced many eunuchs for the imperial court, the man castrates himself in the end.

In that story, Li's English could well be mistaken for a native speaker's, with only the Chinese content belying that perception. I was impressed by her language, but not the content. The narrative is loaded with knowledge common to Chinese that might be unfamiliar to Americans, and the Chinese clichés overwhelm the story the author is trying to tell. To me, it gave the impression that the story, loud as could be, was relying mainly on foreign oddities — not to mention a gimmicky ending — to appeal to American readers. While there's nothing wrong with an immigrant writer taking advantage of the information discrepancy between two countries (I do the same), a good literary work must offer insights into the human condition regardless of the reader's familiarity with cultural backstories. But "Immortality" says nothing new to a Chinese immigrant like me. In all fairness, it is not a bad story, but hardly a great one to my Chinese eye. The writing, though fluent, lacked the natural and unrestrained strokes displayed by some other immigrant writers I was reading at the time, such as the Nigerian-born author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Nonetheless, "Immortality" showed promise and it went on to win Li the Plimpton Prize for New Writers, the first in a long string of top literary prizes lining up to crown her works.

Shortly after that, another story of Li's, "Extra," appeared in *The New Yorker*. Its main character, a widowed Chinese woman in her 50s, falls in (sexual) love with a six-year-old boy in the nursery where she works. At first I was glad to see that, unlike the previous story, this one wasn't overloaded with common Chinese knowledge. However a doubt soon arose in my mind: could the author write without relying so much on gimmicky oddities? Toward the end of "Extra," the protagonist, fired by the nursery, puts all her money (about 3000 Yuan) in a lunch pail, which she holds in her hand. On her way out of the nursery, she is robbed by a man who grabs her duffel bag and runs away. Shocked to have been mugged yet relieved to still have her small fortune, she "sits on the street and hugs the lunch pail to herself." Next, this line caught my eye:

"Hungry as people are, it is strange that nobody ever thinks of robbing an old woman of her lunch."

What a sharp observation! Now that is an insight into human nature. The line sheds a whole new light on the story; it made me thump the table. This writer is up to something, I thought.

During the next a few years I read more of Li's short stories and personal essays here and there, in magazines and newspapers. While I shook my head at some of her essays, I nodded more often with her fiction. Increasingly in her stories, the role of foreignness (or the use of Chinese information) moved from serving as the main attraction to being an unobtrusive prop, helping mold the characters who, like Li's language, began to display a subtle complexity. The early loudness in Li's narration was also fading into dispassionate observation.

One of my favorite pieces of hers is a story titled "The Proprietress," which was published in a 2005 issue of *Zoetrope: All-Story*. The protagonist is a private businesswoman in her late sixties who lives next to a county jail and collects hapless wives and children of prisoners into her own house. The

contradiction in the character's personality, the co-existence of kindness and self-righteousness, the simultaneous desires to help and to control, is at the same time unbelievable and true. I was once again impressed by the author's discerning eye in observing human nature; whether the character is Chinese or not no longer mattered.

As much as I was impressed by Yiyun Li's writing, however, some public behavior of hers made me wary. The Chinese say, "The writing is like the writer." I had always believed the wisdom of that saying while in China, but it seemed less true about many writers here (or perhaps just now).

From December 2005 to spring 2006, major papers — the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, and others — made a big deal of the fact that Yiyun Li's petition for permanent residency in the United States on the grounds of "extraordinary ability in the arts" had been denied by the Immigration Services, even though Li had requested many big-name authors to provide testimonials to her "extraordinary ability." Li turned to the press and more writers for further support.

The fuss in the media struck me as over the top. Numerous Chinese students have successfully gone through the normal immigration process after graduation: first find a job, then obtain a green card through that employer. Li certainly had no trouble getting a teaching job. I didn't know what made her so keen to get the special visa instead of going through the normal process — I'm sure she had her reasons. After all, she has talked more than once about her longing for America since childhood. But to take the matter to the press and — as a writer friend put it — make it sound like she was a victim? And to publicly involve many other writers who hardly knew her? The seeming egoism of the whole matter certainly contradicted Li's description of herself as an "always shy and private" person. Was gaining too much of a name at a young age going to have a negative impact on Li's writing as well?

But Li proved to be exceptional as a writer. It seems that her curiosity about human nature, more than anything else, plays a dominant role in the evolution of her writing. I once read an interview with her in the *Michigan Quarterly Review*, as part of a special issue on China where my own personal essay "On Becoming an American" also appears. When answering a question about her literary influences, Li speaks of William Trevor:

"He doesn't carry a message in his writing, he's an observer, and I like that because I know so many writers who are not observers but who have an agenda. He doesn't have an agenda, he's just very curious about human beings. I share that curiosity and I share his interest in the mysteries of human nature."

This deeply resonates with me as a fiction writer: writing without an agenda other than an interest in human nature. I suspect it is William Trevor's influence that has made Li's transition from her early ethnic-driven fiction to a more universal exploration of human nature.

Li's writing is getting more mature in recent years and she goes ever deeper into her characters' insides, even though some of them no longer sound Chinese to me. That is much less a problem, I think, than a story holding true ethnically but lacking inspiration and universal resonance. A story of Li's published in a 2008 issue of the *New Yorker*, for example, portrays a gay man who has lived in the US for two decades before returning to Beijing for good and obeying his widowed mother's wish for him to marry a female student of hers. Knowing the much less favorable social conditions for homosexuals in China, this character's behavior does not ring true to me. Nonetheless, the different — yet somehow shared — loneliness of the three characters in the story is rendered in such intimate detail and emotional depth, and in such markedly dispassionate language, that I was practically swallowed by their moods. The characters, though Chinese, seem to have transcended their ethnicity. In comparison, Ha Jin, another heavyweight Chinese immigrant author who writes in English, has repeatedly claimed that loneliness is the biggest burden of an immigrant, yet that remains a claim he has never made me feel intimately in his characters.

Coincidentally, Li's early literary talent was first celebrated by *The Paris Review*, the same magazine that first published Ha Jin. Unfortunately, after Ha Jin went on to win the 1999 National Book Award for his excellent novel *Waiting*, his later works such as *The Crazy* and *A Free Life* have disappointed. I don't know if the fame of a top literary award played a role in this deterioration, but I'm happy to

see that Yiyun Li seems to be on a different path. I look forward to reading her new collection, *Gold Boy, Emerald Girl*.

*Xujun Eberlein is the author of [Apologies Forthcoming](#), a story collection set in China. Her reviews of China-themed books can be found in [Foreign Policy](#), [Women's Review of Books](#), [The China Beat](#), and elsewhere.*

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