



Opportunity and Estrangement in Born-Translated Literature: An Analysis of Yiyun Li's Language and Self-Translation

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Author Biography



Yiyun Li is a contemporary author who has published two collections of short stories, three novels, and a memoir. She is a recipient of various awards, including the MacArthur "Genius" Grant and PEN/Hemingway Award. Li is originally from Beijing and now resides in the United States. Li's writing is largely focused on the experiences of native Chinese, Chinese immigrants, and Chinese-Americans living in the United States. Although Li's subject matter is situated in both the U.S. and China, she only writes in English (her adopted tongue) and has completely abandoned Mandarin (her mother tongue).

Chapter 1 - Memoir

Private Language and 'A Kind of Suicide': Li's Relationship to English

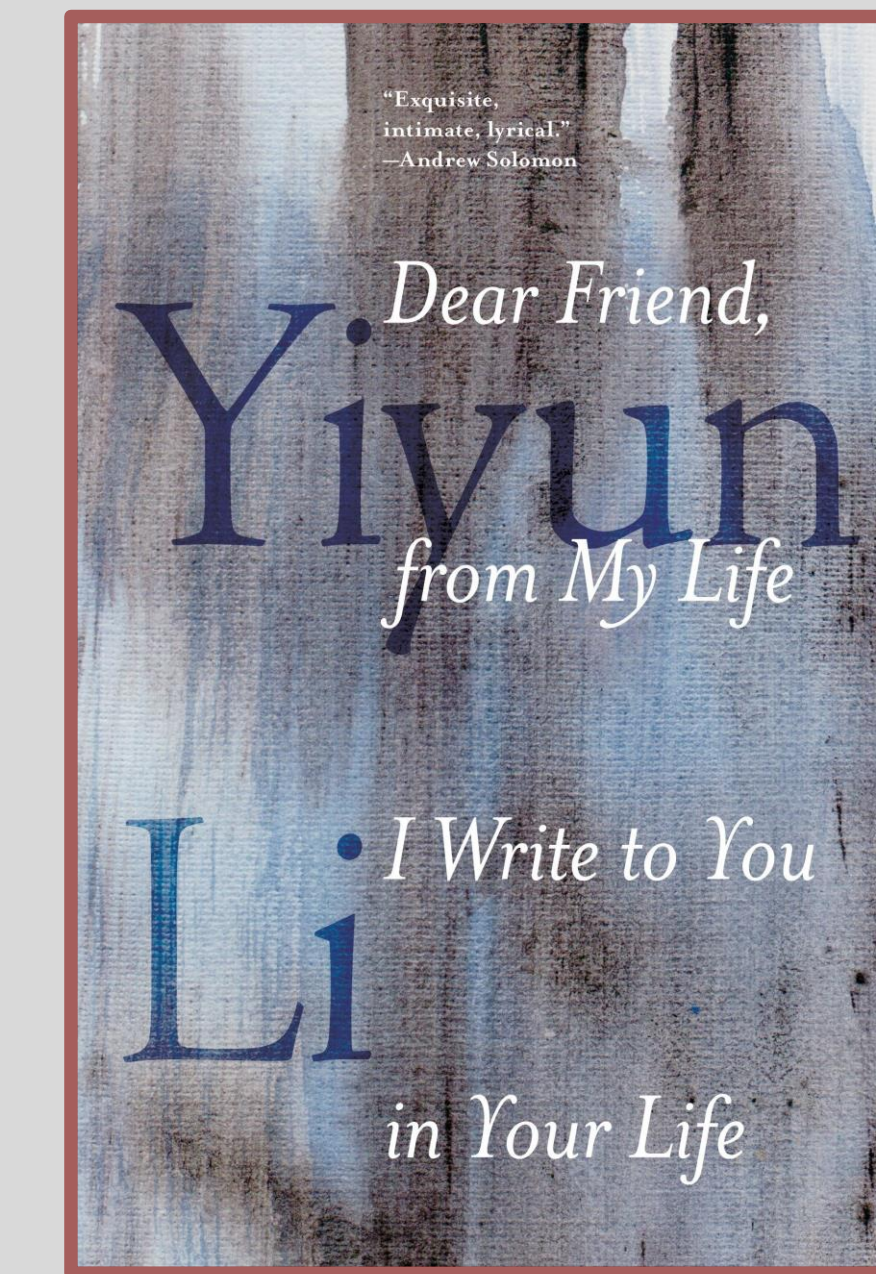
Language belonging
Language betrayal

Private language as opportunity: disrupts national critiques & distinguishes Li from Chinese diasporic writers

Bilingual authors who adopt English are often criticized for not belonging in English while simultaneously criticized for their alleged disloyalty to their native country. Paying attention to Chinese-diasporic bilingual writers, I argue that Li's personal relationship with English as a "private" language disrupts nationalist ideas of language belonging and language betrayal, thus separating her from other Chinese diasporic authors. Li's relationship with English is more aligned with Walkowitz's optimistic idea of contemporary World Literature. Not restrained by national literatures, Li's personal relationship with language allows for new avenues to interpret her works.

"A Kind of Suicide"

Although English is used in a seemingly positive way, Li also calls her abandonment of Mandarin "a kind of suicide." By choosing a path that inflicts the most extreme version of self-harm, Li shows that there is inexplicable loss and pain in the adoption of another language



Li's memoir is a collection of essays that was published in 2017. Of the essays, I examine two that are directly concerned with language:
- "To Speak is to Blunder but I Venture" &
- "Either/Or: A Chorus of Miscellany"

Methodology

Close Reading

I am using the methodology of close reading to examine Li's texts. Because I am specifically focused on language and the different types of translation that function in her fiction, I am closely analyzing how language functions at the textual level.

Born-Translated – Different Types of Translation in "A Thousand Years"

Walkowitz argues that born-translated works are "written as translations, pretending to take place in a language other than the one in which they have, in fact, been composed" (4). "A Thousand Years" technically has three languages that circulate in the story; however, the story is written entirely in English. While it is clear that the characters are speaking different languages, the story takes place entirely in English. Therefore, "A Thousand Years" is self-translated by Li.

Example:

"In China we say, *Xiu bai shi ke tong zhou*," Mr. Shi says when Madam stops. It takes three hundred years of prayers to have the chance to cross a river with someone in the same boat,¹ he thinks of explaining to Madam in English, but then, what's the difference between the languages? Madam would understand him, with or without the translation. "That we get to meet and talk to each other—it must have taken a long time of good prayers to get us here,"² he says in Chinese to Madam. (192)

¹ Li provides a translation of the pinyin phrase as part of Mr. Shi's thoughts. As a Chinese man, he is clearly thinking in Mandarin, but this is rendered in English. This is an example of subtle translation because the text is unmarked.

² Li uses italics in the dialogue when Mr. Shi speaks in Chinese proverbs. This is an example of overt translation where Li is bringing attention to the translation—this is a Chinese set phrase translated into English on the page.

Theoretical Framework

Contemporary Immigrant and Bilingual Writing in the Context of World Literature: from Goethe to Li

Goethe's "Weltliteratur" → Benedict Anderson → Globalization → Contemporary World Lit

Importance of reading works in translation but still rooted in distinct national literatures	Shows how language is tied to nation – why literatures are categorized by nation-states	Distinctions between national cultures are blurred, more diverse cultural exchange, English as <i>lingua franca</i>	- Mukherjee: "Immigrant Writing" (2011) is too nationalistic & narrow - Walkowitz: <i>Born Translated</i> (2015) is too optimistic & global
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My thesis traces World Literature from Goethe's coining of the phrase to contemporary discussions of World Literature. Whereas Goethe's idea of *Weltliteratur* is situated in the distinction between different national literatures, the dramatic acceleration of globalization has complicated and changed our contemporary notion of World Literature. Drawing primarily from Bharati Mukherjee's interrogation of contemporary immigrant and bilingual writing, and Rebecca Walkowitz's examination of the contemporary novel as World Literature, my work on Li is situated at the intersection between Mukherjee and Walkowitz.

Argument

Argument is three-fold:

1. New context | Separate from Chinese diasporic writers

-- Most scholarly works written on Li position her in the context of Chinese-diasporic writing, whereas I am examining her in the context of World Literature

2. Li disrupts notions of language belonging and betrayal | new usage of English

-- Similar to Walkowitz's optimistic implications, Li argues in her memoir that English is her "private language" and suggests new avenues for writing in English.

3. Contradictions between memoir & fiction realize the infeasibility of Walkowitz's optimistic implications by focusing on the problems of translation and language

Chapter 2 - Fiction

The Impossibility of Transnational Optimism in "A Thousand Years of Good Prayers": An Analysis of Language and Self-Translation

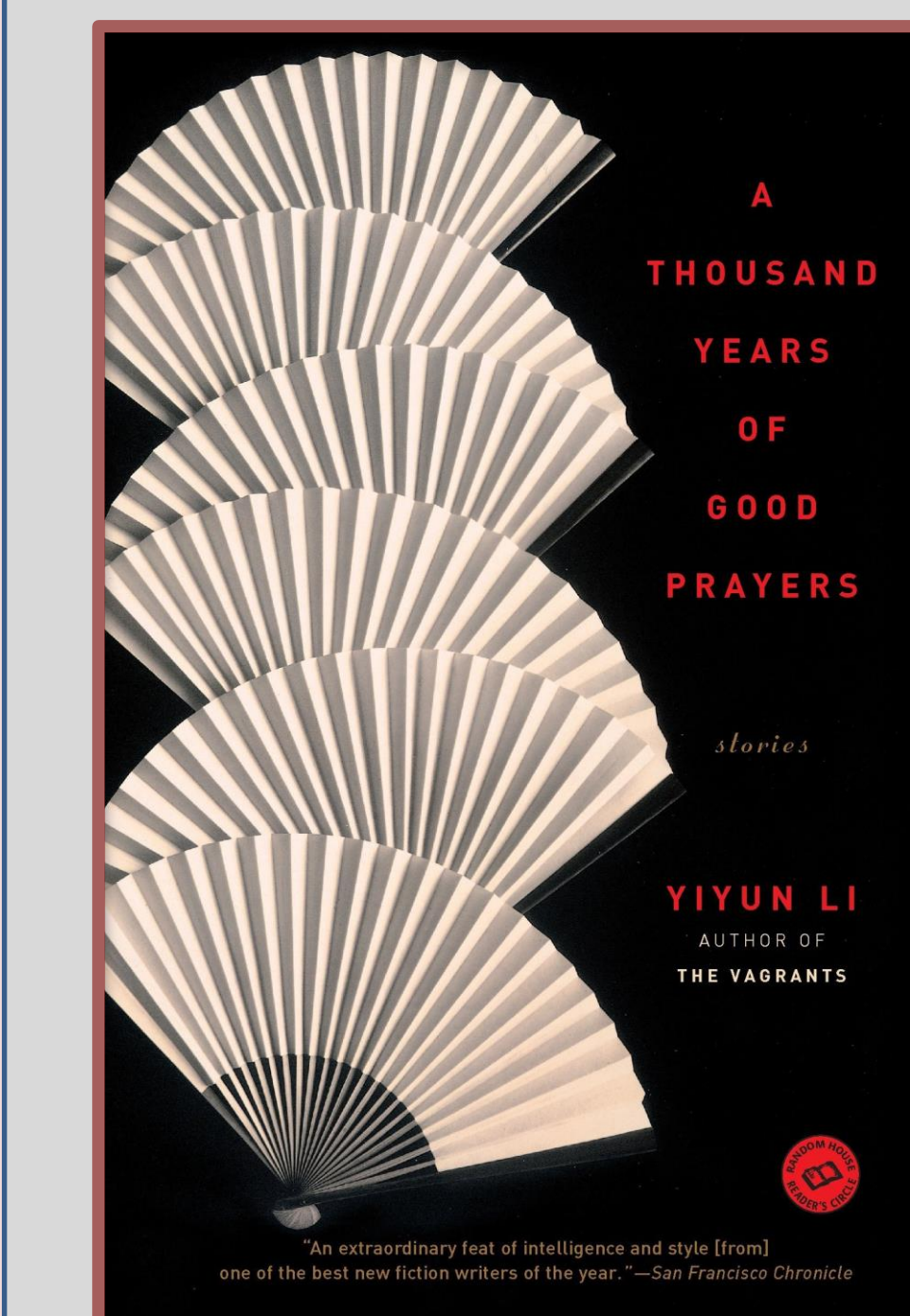
Drawing from the idea that English is both a "private language" and "kind of suicide" from Li's own relationship with language in her memoir, I examine how language functions in her fiction. I specifically focus on the title story, "A Thousand Years of Good Prayers," because it is centrally concerned with language and translation, both on a textual and thematic level.

I first demonstrate that the story is an example of "born-translated" literature by examining the different types of translation that Li incorporates. However, I continue to dismantle the optimism surrounding born-translated literature by arguing that Li depicts a contemporary, globalized U.S. fraught with miscommunication and misunderstanding.

Mr. Shi: Chinese Metaphor as Chinese Thinking

"Women in their marriageable twenties and early thirties are like lychees that have been picked from the tree; each passing day makes them less fresh and less desirable, and only too soon will they lose their value, and have to be gotten rid of at a sale price" (189-190).

-- Mr. Shi constantly puts his daughter's problems into a Chinese cultural context and is unable to sympathize with her. He automatically assumes that his daughter is a *shengnu* or "leftover woman" even though she left her husband.



This is Li's first collection of short stories (2005). I focus on the title story, "A Thousand Years of Good Prayers."

Mr. Shi's daughter: English and New Identities

"He listens to her speak English on the phone, her voice shriller than he has ever known it to be. She speaks fast and laughs often. He does not understand her words, but even more, he does not understand her manner" (197).

-- The daughter's adoption of English further ostracizes her from her father. Even though English makes her a "new person," this is at the cost of alienating her father.

Mr. Shi and Madam: Impossibility of Transnational Optimism

Mr. Shi and Madam have the most potentially optimistic and successful transnational relationship. They both speak their native languages (Mr. Shi – Mandarin; Madam – Persian), but are somehow able to communicate. However, by analyzing their language, it is clear that they have a feigned understanding of one another and are "othered" for not speaking English.

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