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).

Theoretical Framework

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

Goethe’s “Wanderlieder” → Benedict Anderson → Globalization → Contemporary World Lit

Importance of reading works in translation but still rooted in distinct national literatures

My thesis traces World Literature: from Goethe’s coinage of the phrase to contemporary discussions of World Literature. Whereas Goethe’s idea of Wanderlieder 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.
   - 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.
     - Contradictions between memoir & fiction realize the feasibility of Walkowitz’s optimistic implications by focusing on the problems of translation and language

Chapter 1 - Memoir

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

Language belonging → Private language as opportunity: disrupts national criteria & 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 an “private” language disrupts nationalist ideas of language belonging and language betrayal, thus separating her from other Chinese diasporic authors. Li’s relationship with English would allow all English-speaking writers to understand 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 work.

“A Kind of Suicide”

Although Li is in a seemingly positive way, Li also calls her abandonment of Mandarin “a kind of suicide.” By choosing a path that inflects the most extreme version of self-harm, Li shows that there is inexplicable loss and pain in the adoption of another 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-traduced literature by arguing that Li depicts a contemporary, globalized U.S. fraught with misunderstanding and miscommunication.

Mr. Shi: Chinese Metaphor as Chinese Thinking

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

— Mr. Shi constantly puns his daughter’s problems into a Chinese cultural context and is unable to sympathize with her. He automatically assumes that his daughter is a “diseased” or “leftover woman” even though she left her husband.

Mr. Shi’s daughter: English and New Identities

“Mr. Shi has to 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 estraches her from her father. Even though English makes her a “new person,” it 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 abandoned Mandarin (her mother tongue). Li provides a translation of the pinyin phrases 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.

“A Thousand Years” is self-translated literature. 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.

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” (6). “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 too translated.

Example:

“In Chinese we say, Xia hui bie zhi tong zhe.” 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, 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 go to the most and talk to each other—must have taken a long time of good prayers to get us here.” he says in Chinese to Madam. (192)

Li provides a translation of the pinyin phrases 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.

Li uses tales in the dialogue when Mr. Shi speaks in Chinese. 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.

Works Cited


Acknowledgements

This thesis was partially funded by the Honors Undergraduate Research Award (HURA).

This thesis would not have been possible without Yiyun Li’s kindness and generosity in agreeing to do an interview with me—thank you.

Lastly, my Thousand Years mentor is not named here, Mr. Micah Stuck, and Dr. Edin Edgerton made this entire process both fulfilling and enjoyable.

Professor Daniel Ryan Morse, Honors Thesis Advisor
University of Nevada, Reno, English Department, Honors Program

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

Lynn Ruby Wang

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).