

University of Nevada, Reno

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

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

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by

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	i
Introduction	1
Contemporary Immigrant and Bilingual Writing in the Context of World Literature	
Chapter 1	17
Private Language and A Kind of Suicide: Li's Relationship to English	
Chapter 2	32
The Impossibility of Transnational Optimism in "A Thousand Years of Good Prayers": An Analysis of Language and Self-Translation	
Conclusion	48
Closing Reflection	
Appendix A	51
Transcript of My Interview with Yiyun Li	
Works Cited	60

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Introduction

Contemporary Immigrant and Bilingual Writing in the Context of World

Literature

My mother looked at a portrait of herself every day when she was pregnant with me, hoping I would be born looking like her. As I grew up, my mom referred to this fact frequently, although her purpose for telling me often changed depending on her mood. “My beautiful daughter is lucky I looked at that portrait when I was pregnant,” she said when particularly cheerful. *Too bad meimei looks more like her father*, she’d think when she was angry with me. I always thought this personal portrait story was mine, and I was shocked when I learned that it existed elsewhere, too. In her short story “Immortality,” Yiyun Li writes, “Of course there has always been the saying that the more a pregnant woman studies a face, the greater the possibility of the baby owning that face” (*A Thousand Years* 48). This intimate detail of my life was shared by Li, and it was the first time my experience as a second-generation Chinese American was paralleled in what I read. Although Li is more like my parents because she is an immigrant from China, I connected with the way she wrote about the Chinese experience in English.

My fascination with Li started around two years ago when I first read her novel, *The Vagrants* (2009). Since then, her works have been at the forefront of my research interests and the subject of various papers I have written as an undergraduate student. When I first became interested in Li, I was taking an introduction to literary theory and criticism course. I delved into postcolonial theory specifically after reading Chinua Achebe and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o as they debated the use of English in African literature, and I wondered how the language debates applied to Li and her abandonment of

Mandarin for English. Achebe argues that English is a universal language that should be utilized by African writers to convey their experiences to a global readership. Ngũgĩ, however, argues that the use of English reinforces colonial power structures and that African writers should write in their native languages to accurately tell their experiences. Knowing that Li is even more extreme than Ngũgĩ because she refuses to allow her works to be translated into Chinese, I wrote a research paper examining Li's abandonment of Chinese as indicative of a deeper feeling of exile and resentment towards China. However, I also knew that her decision to abandon her mother tongue was "so deeply personal" that she resists any interpretation—political, historical, or ethnographical ("To Speak" 141). Moreover, Li differs from Achebe in her use of English. Rather than viewing English as a universal language, Li claims that English is her "private language." Because of these discrepancies I encountered, I wanted to find new avenues to interpret Li's works.

It was a semester later when I came across Bharati Mukherjee's "Immigrant Writing: Changing the Contours of a National Literature" (2011). In this essay, Mukherjee argues that there is a new sub-genre of immigrant writing in the U.S., which she calls "Literature of New Arrival." As Mukherjee specifically includes Li as an example of a "New Arrival" author, I was excited about the possibilities of reading her works from this new perspective. In a research paper examining Li as a "New Arrival" author, I started to explore the distinction between "traditional" immigrant writing and contemporary or "New Arrival" immigrant writing by looking at Vladimir Nabokov and Li as exemplars of the respective categories. The work in that essay has helped inform my thesis, and parts of that essay have been revised and included in Chapter 1. Whereas I

was only concerned with discerning “traditional” and “contemporary” immigrant writing in that essay, my thesis now contextualizes immigrant and bilingual writing¹ in the broader context of World Literature. I see many similarities between Mukherjee’s discussion of “Literature of New Arrival” and contemporary discussions of World Literature, namely Walkowitz’s *Born Translated* (2015). While Mukherjee underestimates the scale of a shifting immigrant literature by focusing her discussion on changes in a U.S. national literature, both Mukherjee and Walkowitz take a similar stance when it comes to considering the significance of issues such as globalization and English use. Both authors seem to be recording the same phenomenon in contemporary writing, the only difference being the scale at which they are discussing it. Therefore, although I am still primarily concerned with immigrant and bilingual writing, I have positioned my discussion of contemporary immigrant writing in the broader context of World Literature.

Moving away from postcolonial and national debates, my thesis is concerned with English as a hegemonic world language and the implications thereof. Both my scholarly and personal interests in Li’s writing have culminated in my honors thesis. I am particularly grateful to have had the opportunity to interview Li, and a significant portion of my thesis was informed by our conversation. I have included a transcript of the interview in the appendix.

¹ In this thesis, I will be referring to Li as an immigrant writer and bilingual writer, using these terms interchangeably. As a bilingual writer, Li’s choice of writing in English is imbued with Chinese metaphors and proverbs. Additionally, under the subcategory of bilingual writing, Li is also an immigrant writer who focuses on the immigrant experience. Because I am primarily concerned with Li’s language, I am examining her as an immigrant-as-bilingual writer. Moreover, I will be distinguishing her from Chinese-diasporic writers who also fall under the categories of immigrant and bilingual writing.

World Literature: from Goethe to Li

When I started this project, the idea of a “World Literature” was incomprehensible to me. The term “World Literature” is so broad that it seems practically meaningless. Does every written work count as World Literature? If so, how can there be a set framework to examine all works? Are national literatures encompassed in World Literature? How do scholars approach reading World Literature if they only know a few languages? How does one account for cultural differences? As I began asking more questions that emphasized the various problems of World Literature in my mind, tackling this mode of criticism seemed increasingly impractical to me. A firm grasp on the concept of “World Literature” eluded me, and I did not know how to apply it to a contemporary novelist. However, as I continued to read and analyze Li’s works, I found myself drawn to the idea of “World Literature” and was unable to escape it. In looking at issues such as translation, national literatures, and language, I repeatedly arrived at readings connected to World Literature. As I researched further, I found that my concerns surrounding the topic were not unfounded. Since Goethe’s coining of the phrase *Weltliteratur* and into our contemporary age of rapid globalization, scholars have continued to probe what World Literature is and how we can examine World Literature in a contemporary context.

The term World Literature or *Weltliteratur*, as coined in the West by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe in Germany, first appeared as early as 1827. In *What is World Literature?* (2003), David Damrosch recounts Goethe’s conception of World Literature in the various conversations between Goethe and his pupil, Johann Peter Eckermann. The origin of Goethe’s World Literature was influenced by his interest in foreign works—at

the time, he was reading a Serbian poem and Chinese novel in translation and valued the various similarities and differences he was able to notice in comparison to German literature (Damrosch 10). Moreover, Goethe saw the benefits of reading his own works in translation. By moving away from a solely German national literature and shifting these works into a more global context, Goethe became interested in the relationships between different literatures. Damrosch writes, “Goethe reads English and French commentaries on German literature with great avidity, finding the foreign perspective sharper and clearer than German criticism can be. As he wrote in an article for his journal *Kunst und Alterthum*, ‘Left to itself every literature will exhaust its vitality, if it is not refreshed by the interest and contributions of a foreign one’” (7). One characteristic of World Literature then, is that it is not a set of works from various nations conglomerated into an all-encompassing “World Literature.” Rather, for Goethe, World Literature is more concerned with what different cultures and literatures can gain from translation. Therefore, translation serves as a productive means to compare and criticize literatures, and Goethe clearly sees the benefits of such intercultural communication.

Goethe’s idea of World Literature clearly distinguishes different national cultures and argues for the importance of comparing the various national literatures. Goethe argues that national literatures such as German and other “provincial literatures” can learn and strive to be like the greater traditions in Western Europe. Goethe proclaims, “We [Germans] are weakest in the aesthetic department...It is pleasant to see that intercourse is now so close between the French, English, and Germans, that we shall be able to correct one another. This is the greatest use of World Literature, which will show itself more and more” (Yadav 2). Although Goethe establishes Western Europe as “the

privileged modern world of reference” (Damrosch 12), his wide-ranging reading, evidenced by the Chinese novel and Serbian poem he was reading, also shows his interest in comparing *all* national literatures. Damrosch writes, “He loves foreign works as much for their ineradicable difference from his own practices as for their novel employment of themes and strategies that he finds familiar” (10). Goethe’s original conception is arguably more inclusive than later Eurocentric versions of comparative literature. Studying the significance of Chinese writers in a global context is latent in Goethe’s idea of World Literature, and I will expand upon this in my examination of Li.

Goethe’s early intervention in World Literature prompts further discussion about nationalism and national literatures. I draw from Benedict Anderson’s influential work, *Imagined Communities*, in which he establishes the connection between nation and language. Anderson’s chapter, “The Origins of National Consciousness,” argues that the interaction between capitalism, print technology, and “the fatal diversity of human language” gave rise to our modern conception of nation and national consciousness (46). Due to capitalism and the desire to maximize circulation of print books, a process also known as “print-capitalism,” print books were written in the vernacular, so that more people would be able to read them. As a result, a common discourse between speakers of different dialects who previously had no contact with one another emerged. Viewing themselves as part of a larger whole, Anderson argues that these nation-states were formed around their “national print languages.”

Anderson argues that these “print languages” facilitated national consciousness in three ways. First, Anderson writes, “They created unified fields of exchange and communication below Latin and above the spoken vernaculars” (44). Previously, Latin

was a sacred language that was exclusive to “literate Europe, a wide but thin stratum of Latin readers” (Anderson 38). However, since Latin is both sacred and a “language of bilinguals” Anderson shows how the hegemony of Latin dissipated as the population of Latin speakers fell, and the rise of print-capitalism emphasized the vernacular instead. This shift caused various language speakers to come in contact with one another through print. This unification of communication is particularly important because it also gave rise to the idea of “language belonging.” Those who were in the same “language-field” formed their own distinct “nationally imagined community” from which others were excluded. As a consequence, the notion of “language belonging” is still a widely discussed concern today and is particularly significant to my interrogation of bilingual and immigrant writers working in more than one national literature.

Second, Anderson writes, “Print-capitalism gave a new fixity to language, which in the long run helped to build that image of antiquity so central to the subjective idea of the nation” (44). Previous to print-capitalism, reading and writing was reserved for the privileged few who were taught Latin. However, due to the use of the vernacular in print-capitalism, language became the central glue that formed the idea of the nation. A shared language helped form a common discourse, which thus formed the earliest conception of nation. Anderson clearly establishes the connection between language and nation that has since shaped how literary works are classified and organized. Applying Goethe to our contemporary present, “literature scholars have generally relied on the distinctness of languages. That is how we organize our literary histories and how we construct world literature anthologies and syllabi” (Walkowitz 44). Lastly, Anderson argues, “Print-capitalism created languages-of-power of a kind different from the older administrative

vernaculars” (44). Because print-capitalism is situated between Latin and the spoken vernaculars, Anderson argues that these in-between languages established “languages-of-power.” The languages-of-power were different from Latin because they were widely read and accessible to many. However, the establishment of languages-of-power also contributed to the “fatal diversity of human language,” in which the various spoken vernaculars were assembled into fewer print languages. Relevant to contemporary discussions of English as a widely-used hegemonic language, Anderson’s work continues to reverberate in my exploration of World Literature.

A key phenomenon that impacts my discussion of World Literature and national literatures is globalization. Complicating Goethe’s original conception, “the dramatic acceleration of globalization” since Goethe’s time “has greatly complicated the idea of a world literature” (Damrosch 4). Goethe imagined each culture as completely separate and self-contained, whereas with globalization, the distinctions between cultures are increasingly blurred. For example, take Mukherjee’s discussion of the increasingly globalized United States:

In coming decades, we will all become just a little Asian and just a little Hispanic, because that’s the way America works. Grinding poverty in the face of plenty; faces pressed against the windows of the great American market-place; pinched lives in the midst of abundance; rejection, death, and madness in the face of tolerance: that is one near-universal aspect of early immigration fiction. (687)

With the influence of globalization since Goethe’s era, it is harder to say exactly what “Chinese” or “American” culture is anymore. While globalization has promoted more diverse cultural exchange and blurred the distinctions between different national cultures,

the issue of English as the new *lingua franca* is also centrally discussed in World Literature.

Anthony Giddens, in *The Consequences of Modernity*, defines globalization as “the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa” (64). Although globalization allows for more intercultural communication, many argue there is a necessity for sharing a common language to effectively have “worldwide social relations.” For instance, Maria Giorgieva and Allan James argue in their book, *Globalization in English Studies*, that “globalization is always closely associated with language, in particular, a shared code of communication, or *lingua franca*. It is the major symbolic instrument to mediate the free and easy exchange of thoughts and ideas in the intercultural context of the multitudinous global networks of activity and exercise of power occurring every day” (vii). The establishment of English as the current *lingua franca*, despite the benefits of allowing free and easy exchange of ideas, also brings forth various problems.

One problem with English as a hegemonic world language relates back to Anderson’s discussion of language and national consciousness. For instance, Giddens argues, “The development of globalised social relations may be causally involved with the intensifying of more localised nationalist sentiments...At the same time as social relations become laterally stretched and as part of the same process, we see the strengthening of pressures for local autonomy and regional cultural identity” (65). This can be applied to my discussion of contemporary bilingual writers who work in English. Because English use is so widespread (as a result of globalization), many writers either

choose or are forced to write in English. The establishment of English as the *lingua franca* is inherently tied to power, and this often engenders problems for bilingual and/or migrant writers who adopt English. From the perspective of preserving local autonomy and regional cultural identity, the spread of English as a world language is “a threat to the literary experience and the diversity of languages” (Thomsen 10). The hegemony of English particularly affects minority languages and their users. Writers who choose to write in English are often ostracized from their native countries due to such “localised nationalist sentiments.” A writer that adopts English is likely accused of “language betrayal” and viewed antagonistically. Globalization has given rise to a variety of new problems regarding World Literature that did not exist when Goethe first conceived of the term. Thus, contemporary discussions of World Literature situate globalization and English use as primary concerns.

Globalization has dramatically altered contemporary discussions of World Literature, a fact which is central to Walkowitz’s *Born Translated*. Since Goethe’s coining of the term, many scholars have tried to define World Literature. For example, take Damrosch’s definition: “I take world literature to encompass all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translation or in their original language” (4). This definition, which emphasizes works that start with a particular culture of origin and original language, is rooted in the existence of national literatures. Damrosch’s definition assumes that a text starts in an “original culture” with an “original language” which ties back to Anderson’s connection between nation and language. Walkowitz further complicates the issue when she writes, “If there is a residue of possessive collectivism in Anderson’s materialism, it is in his assumption that a text has an original

language and that the text's language will coincide with the language of its readers. What happens, we need to ask, when these languages are not the same? Or when there is no original language to speak of?" ("Comparison Literature" 574). For Walkowitz, the problem with Damrosch's definition and Anderson's argument is that there are now works that no longer subscribe to the notions of "original" nation and language. Instead, Walkowitz argues that many contemporary texts are what she calls "born-translated."

Walkowitz's idea of "born-translated" works argues that many contemporary works are now translated from the start. In the introduction, "Theory of World Literature Now," Walkowitz defines born-translated literature as works that are "*written for translation*, in the hope of being translated, but they are also often *written as translations*, pretending to take place in a language other than the one in which they have, in fact, been composed" (4). Paying particular attention to works written in English, Walkowitz demonstrates how a born-translated text "operates in many languages, even when it appears to be operating only in English" (24). Due to the absence of an "original" language, Walkowitz suggests that contemporary born-translated works have thus changed the definition of World Literature. Walkowitz writes, "What literature is now has to alter what world literature is now. Once literary works begin in several languages and several places, they no longer conform to the logic of national representation. Many born-translated novels signal this departure by blocking original languages, invoking multiple scales of geography, and decoupling birthplace from collectivity" (30). For Walkowitz, globalization and increasingly blurred national cultures help realize her definition of World Literature.

The implications of Walkowitz's argument complicate established concepts of nation, national literatures, and literary history. Walkowitz argues that born-translated literature, with its inherent focus on translation, calls for "new scales of literary history and new principles of literary belonging" (44). Clearly, the implications of Walkowitz's argument are vast and can be beneficial for writers who do not subscribe to national representation. Particularly relevant to my discussion of contemporary immigrant and bilingual writing, Walkowitz suggests new avenues for interpreting Anglophone writing. However, although Walkowitz's argument allows for "new principles of literary belonging," she is perhaps too optimistic about the implications of her argument. By focusing on the solely positive ramifications of born-translated literature, Walkowitz overlooks various problems of translation and English use for immigrant and bilingual writers. I suggest that, although born-translated literature calls for new approaches to examine contemporary World Literature, Walkowitz's wide-ranging implications are hard to attain, in practice. In order to demonstrate the problems of Walkowitz's argument, I will examine the works of Li, a contemporary immigrant author.

Li is a contemporary author who received an MFA from the prestigious Iowa Writers' Workshop and has since published two collections of short stories, three novels, and a memoir. Li is originally from Beijing and currently resides in the United States. She is a recipient of various awards including a Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award and a PEN/Hemingway Award for her first short story collection, *A Thousand Years of Good Prayers*. Li is also a MacArthur Foundation fellow and Lannan Foundation Residency fellow. She is currently an editor for the literary magazine, *A Public Space*, and is a professor of creative writing at Princeton University. As one who

has spent a significant amount of time in both China and the U.S., Li writes about 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 writes only in English (her adopted tongue) and has completely abandoned Mandarin (her mother tongue).

Despite Li's awards and accolades, few scholars have analyzed her writing. In the few existing scholarly works, Li is most often examined in the context of Chinese diasporic writing. In Belinda Kong's analysis of Li's novel, *The Vagrants*, is one example: "These writers go by an array of names, each with distinct connotations, to be sure: diasporic, exilic, expatriate, émigré, transnational, cosmopolitan, global Asian. Regardless of labels, though, they share a common trajectory, all having been born and raised in China and all now writing primarily or solely in the West, and many writing in the languages of the West" (111). In this context, Li is often compared to writers like Ha Jin and other Chinese diasporic authors who write about China in English. Kong argues that Li is a "relative newcomer but fits squarely within [this] lineage" (Kong 111). Similarly, Melissa Lam's "Diasporic Literature: The Politics of Identity and Language" compares Li to Jin as Lam "focuses on the challenges both writers face in re-writing the implications of their culture and identity in a 'foreign' language" (310). Again, Lam also groups Li together with Jin based on their biographical similarities and the fact that they both write in English. Because they focus on biographical similarities between the authors, Kong and Lam group Chinese diasporic writers together superficially and disregard significant differences between them.

In my interview with Li, I asked whether she viewed herself as belonging in a Chinese diasporic literary tradition, to which she responded:

But with that group of writers, I think we all came from somewhere else. We all write about the home country and the new world. Certainly, I can see myself fitting into that group. Does it matter if I fit into that group? It probably doesn't matter too much. And you asked if there's another literary tradition that I'd like to see myself in. I used to think I would like to see my lineage coming from say, Chekhov or Trevor. The short story tradition...But I cannot always say this is the only way I'm going to work. (Appendix A)

No author wants outside categorization to label their works. However, I think Li's response is telling in that a similarity in biography does not necessarily signify literary belonging or kinship. Despite Li's filiation with other Chinese diasporic writers, she clearly does not affiliate herself with that group of writers. Therefore, a significant aspect of my examination of Li is my attention to differences between her work and that of other Chinese diasporic writers, particularly distinguishing between her and Jin by looking at their distinct relationships with English and their native countries. Additionally, Li disregards national origin completely, and instead focuses her attention on literary genre. Situating herself in the tradition of the short story, Li's identification with Russian and Irish authors suggests that a more global interpretation of her works is appropriate. Rather than analyzing Li's works in the context of Chinese diasporic literature like others before me, I am concerned with how her works may be examined in a global context.

In the broader context of World Literature, I examine Li as an immigrant and bilingual writer who includes multilingualism in her works. Because I am primarily

concerned with Li's use of English and the role of self-translation in her writing, I will draw from Walkowitz's ideas on "born-translated" literature. However, rather than subscribing to Walkowitz's wholly positive implications of globalization in World Literature, my examination of Li's works demonstrates the problems immigrant and bilingual writers face when writing in English.

My discussion of Li's works includes an examination of two essays from Li's memoir, *Dear Friend, from My Life I Write to You in Your Life* (2017), and the title story from her first short story collection, *A Thousand Years of Good Prayers* (2006). In examining Li's memoir alongside her fiction, various contradictions arise in terms of the role that English plays in Li's writing. Whereas Li argues that English is a liberating "private language" in her memoir, an analysis of language in her fiction depicts the various failures and problems of language and translation at large. Especially relevant to discussions of World Literature and English as a hegemonic language, I argue that the contradictions in Li's memoir and fiction highlight the infeasibility of Walkowitz's optimistic implications of born-translated literature. Because I am particularly interested in Li's language, I am using the methodology of close reading to analyze specific instances of language use in her works.

In Chapter 1, "Private Language and A Kind of Suicide: Li's Relationship to English," I examine two essays from Li's memoir, "To Speak is to Blunder but I Venture" and "Either/Or: A Chorus of Miscellany." Li takes a similar stance to Walkowitz and disregards the problems of English as a hegemonic language—Li argues that English is her "private language" and carves out her own relationship with the language. Taking Li's own interpretations and balancing them against the Chinese-diasporic strain, I first

argue that Li's relationship with English disrupts nationalist ideas of "language belonging" and "language betrayal." Therefore, I distinguish Li from other Chinese-diasporic authors, most notably Jin, to whom she is often compared. However, by also analyzing Li's use of English as "a kind of suicide," it is clear that loss and pain are inherent to her adoption of a new language. Clearly, the ramifications of born-translated literature are not all optimistic, and I further explicate this idea in my second chapter.

In Chapter 2, "The Impossibility of Transnational Optimism in 'A Thousand Years of Good Prayers: An Analysis of Language and Self-Translation'" I close-read one of Li's short stories and focus on the problems of language and translation depicted in the story. I first demonstrate that the story is an example of "born-translated" literature. 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. Language barriers cause Mr. Shi and his daughter's relationship to deteriorate—Mr. Shi's "Chinese thinking" hinders his ability to sympathize with his daughter, whereas the daughter's adoption of English ostracizes her from her father. Even the most potentially optimistic and successful transnational relationship between Mr. Shi and Madam is based on a feigned understanding of one another. Therefore, an analysis of Li's language realizes the problems of being "born-translated." Although the implications suggested by Walkowitz are seemingly optimistic, in practice, such optimism is unattainable.

Lastly, I conclude with a short reflection on my interview with Li and how the interview influenced this honors thesis.

Chapter 1

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

“When a writer resorts to a language other than his mother tongue, he does so either out of necessity, like Conrad, or because of burning ambition, like Nabokov, or for the sake of greater estrangement, like Beckett.”

In the tradition of many bilingual and immigrant writers, Li is a contemporary author who abandoned her mother tongue for English. Li is extreme in that she claims she has completely banished Chinese from her brain and does not allow her works to get translated into Chinese. Li's memoir, *Dear Friend, from My Life I Write to You in Your Life*, published in 2017, is a collection of essays she wrote during the few years she was hospitalized for two suicide attempts. In this collection, Li often discusses her relationships with her mother tongue, adopted tongue, and the shift from one to the other, especially in the two essays that center on language, “To Speak is to Blunder but I Venture” and “Either/Or: A Chorus of Miscellany.” As one of the most prominent contemporary authors who writes in an adopted language, Li, like many other bilingual writers, faces various obstacles in her adoption of English. Accused of both language belonging and language betrayal, these bilingual authors who adopt English are criticized for not belonging in English and, simultaneously, criticized for their alleged disloyalty to their native country. Paying particular 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 distinguishing her from other Chinese diasporic authors. Rather, Li's relationship with English is aligned with Walkowitz's optimistic idea of contemporary World Literature. Not restrained by

national literatures, Li's personal relationship with language opens new avenues to interpreting her works. However, by also analyzing Li's use of English as "a kind of suicide," it is possible to examine the loss and pain inherent in her adoption of a new language.

Defining Contemporary Immigrant Literature

In this essay, I am examining United States "immigrant literature" as a subcategory of "bilingual writing." I will be using the two terms interchangeably as I am primarily concerned with immigrant writers and their relationships to language. Therefore, I am concerned with immigrant writers as bilingual writers. First, it is important to note the distinction between contemporary U.S. immigrant literature and previous U.S. immigrant literature in order to delve into Li's particular innovations as a contemporary immigrant writer. Mukherjee in her essay, "Immigrant Writing: Changing the Contours of a National Literature," argues that there is an emerging sub-genre of immigrant writing which she calls "Literature of New Arrival." In this essay, Mukherjee separates contemporary "Literature of New Arrival" from "traditional, canonical immigrant literature." Mukherjee argues that traditional, canonical immigrant literature consisted of "European immigrants in the early decades of the twentieth century—as economic, political, religious refugees [who] were grateful to the US for asylum and opportunities for self-betterment" (681). These canonical immigrants often focused on assimilation and the theme of the "American Dream." In contrast, "Literature of New Arrival" is made up of diverse immigrants with various backgrounds and histories "consonant with the effects of mass migration of non-Europeans over the last three decades" (Mukherjee 187).

Natalie Friedman further distinguishes between previous immigrant literature and contemporary immigrant literature in her essay, “From Hybrids to Tourists: Children of Immigrants in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*.” In her analysis of Jhumpa Lahiri (a contemporary immigrant author that Mukherjee also includes in her essay), Friedman similarly focuses on assimilation as the distinction between previous and contemporary immigrant literature. Friedman writes, “Lahiri is part of a vanguard of young, contemporary ethnic American writers whose novels, short fiction, and memoirs suggest that assimilation—cleaving to the hope of an ‘American Dream’—is no longer at the heart of the immigrant story” (112). Similarly, Gary Shteyngart, a Russian-American writer who teaches classes on immigrant writing at Columbia University, says in an interview, “Earlier American immigrant literature was about the American dream and assimilation. Now it’s more about loss and ambivalence” (Gleibermann 33). Shteyngart’s claim that contemporary immigrant literature is now concerned with “loss and ambivalence” echoes Mukherjee’s assertion that “‘The Literature of New Arrival’ simultaneously expresses the necessity for escape from the repressive institutions and the poverty that life in the homeland entails and the anguish of separation from family and homeland” (695). Contemporary immigrant writers are ambivalent towards the idea of assimilating into the US while simultaneously living the loss of leaving their native country. Because immigrant writers occupy this “third space” between their native country and the US, they are capable of experimenting with and changing the idea of the “immigrant experience.”

While time period and subject matter help differentiate between previous and contemporary immigrant literature, another way that contemporary authors are changing

the idea of the “immigrant experience” is by experimenting with the boundaries of writing in English and incorporating their native languages. In Manfred Jurgensen’s early exploration of immigrant writing in his essay, “Transformative Identities of Literary Multiculturalism,” he argues that the process of writing in a foreign language unfolds in three phases: 1) retention of native culture perspective, 2) mediation between cultural perspectives, which leads to 3) an “imaginative adaptation in a language of creative intercultural transformation” (269). The third phase encompasses the kind of multilingualism and linguistic fusion found in the works of contemporary immigrant and bilingual authors. For instance, Mukherjee discusses linguistic innovation as a characteristic of “Literature of New Arrival”:

Danticat’s generation of non-European immigrant American authors are also creating an expanded, elastic American English vocabulary capacious enough to embody the fusion of languages in which they live. And many among them are articulating their break with the narrative traditions of American immigrant fiction as it was practiced in the 1950s and 1960s, and, in speeches and collected essays, are announcing their transnational aesthetics. (683)

Whereas the subject matter of previous immigrant literature was often concerned with assimilation, the narrative traditions also emphasized linguistic assimilation and the need to “master English.” However, the shift to contemporary writing shows that the need for assimilation is no longer a priority. Instead, writers are creating their own “expanded English.” Mukherjee’s claim that “New Arrival” authors are “announcing their transnational aesthetics” mirrors Walkowitz’s discussion of contemporary novels as World Literature in *Born Translated*. Walkowitz writes, “Written for multiple audiences,

contemporary novels have developed strategies of multilingualism designed for the foreign, nonfluent, and semifluent readers who will encounter them” (44). There is now a significant body of scholarly works that examine language and how contemporary writers are innovative and creative in their use of English. While many view this “elastic English” as a positive change, there are still critics who uphold the notions of language belonging and national literatures. Based on ongoing discussions of contemporary immigrant and bilingual writing, I will explore the ways that Li’s particular relationship with language counters long-held beliefs about language belonging and language betrayal.

Language Belonging

I have already demonstrated that contemporary immigrant literature differs from previous immigrant literature in terms of its treatment of assimilation. Whereas previous immigrant literature was concerned with linguistic assimilation into English, contemporary immigrant literature often includes multilingualism and language fusions of English and the author’s native languages. Both Mukherjee and Walkowitz view this linguistic innovation as a positive distinction of contemporary writing; however, many contemporary authors are still critiqued for “language belonging”—the idea that they, as “foreigners,” do not belong in English. It seems, then, that even though contemporary authors are less concerned with assimilation, there is still an underlying assumption that they do not and cannot fully belong. This critique of language belonging is two-fold: others criticize bilingual writers for having “inauthentic” English and the writers feel as if they personally do not belong in English. Like other bilingual writers, Li has been criticized for not belonging in English. However, Li’s “private” relationship with English suggests a conception of language that is not dependent on “belonging.”

Li has been criticized by various readers for writing in English. Oftentimes, these critiques relate to language ownership and the notion that she does not belong in English. Li writes, “A professor in graduate school told me I should stop writing, as English would remain a foreign language to me” (“To Speak” 142). Li first moved to the U.S. in order to pursue a PhD in immunology and later attended the Iowa’s Writers Workshop. This professor’s nativist critique is reminiscent of previous immigrant literature and the necessity for linguistic assimilation. He views Li as a permanent “foreigner” who is incapable of writing well in English. Whereas this critique comes from the perspective of a native-English speaker, Li also receives criticism from other Chinese immigrants. Li writes, “Chinese immigrants of my generation in America criticize my English for not being native enough. A compatriot emailed, pointing out how my language is neither lavish nor lyrical, as a real writer’s language should be; you only write simple things in simple English, you should be ashamed of yourself” (“To Speak” 142). Both critiques emphasize Li’s “non-native” English and are rooted in longstanding assumptions of “native competency”—“the Romantic belief that those who are born into a language, as it were, are the rightful or natural users of that language” (Walkowitz 22). Similar to previous immigrant writers, contemporary writers still have to prove themselves as “capable” English writers, and this expectation often engenders feelings of personal inadequacy.

In “Inside the Bilingual Writer,” Erik Gleibermann interviews eight contemporary bilingual writers regarding their relationships to language and how language shapes their identities. Gleibermann finds that many of the bilingual writers personally feel as if they do not belong in English. Although some scholars argue that bilingual authors often

disrupt concepts of language-based and national literatures, many bilingual writers still feel a sense of estrangement from English:

Even today, some of the writers seem vulnerable, still caught between tongues, English remaining slightly alien even as it has been a primary voice. In our conversations, [Julia] Alvarez and [Edwidge] Danticat independently cited the epigraph to *Drown* that [Junot] Díaz quotes from Cuban American writer Gustavo Pérez Firmat: “The fact that I am writing to you in English already falsifies what I wanted to tell you. My subject: I don't belong to English, though I belong nowhere else.” In *Create Dangerously*, Danticat simply calls English “This language that is not mine.” (Gleibermann 34)

Despite arriving in America at relatively young ages (Alvarez at age 10, Danticat at age 12, Díaz at age 6) and using English as their primary language, all three authors do not feel that they belong in English. One would expect that Li, who moved to the U.S. at 24 and uses English as her adopted language, would feel further ostracized from English. However, Li claims that the issue of language belonging is “irrelevant” to her. As she puts it, “That I write in English—does it make me part of something else? The verdict of my professor in graduate school was that I was writing in a language that did not belong to me, hence I would not, and should not, belong. But his protest was irrelevant. I have not been using the language to be part of something” (Li 146). Li seems to take a stance that is similar to Walkowitz’s idea of world literature in which “writers addressing many places are less likely to believe that language confers belonging” (21). Li is not concerned with whether she belongs in English and she does not believe that her use of English signifies any sort of belonging. She writes, “Their concerns about ownership of a

language, rather than making me impatient like Nabokov, allow me secret laughter. English is to me as random a choice as any other language” (Li, “To Speak” 142).

While Walkowitz’s discussion of language belonging has the wider implications of altering how contemporary works are classified, Li’s indifference towards belonging in English is personal. Li does not view English as a hegemonic language that she needs to use in order to belong, nor does she deem herself a transnational writer whose bilingualism disrupts national borders. Instead, Li claims that English is her private language. She writes, “I often forget, when I write, that English is also used by others. English is my private language. Every word has to be pondered over before it becomes my word. I have no doubt—can this be an illusion?—that the conversation I have with myself, however linguistically flawed, is the conversation that I have always wanted, in the exact way I want it to be” (Li, “To Speak” 146-147). By examining English as Li’s private language—something individual to her—the idea of “belonging” is no longer relevant. Li already “belongs” to her private language regardless of how others interpret her use of English. For Li, language is a vehicle to express herself. By repurposing English as a means of self-liberation, Li marks a shift in how English is often perceived. This is especially significant for bilingual writers who are either forced to use English (as a hegemonic language) or criticized for not belonging in English. Li suggests that English works in various ways, and that bilingual writers have the capability of carving out their own path in spite of the criticisms against them.

Language Betrayal

Li’s distinct relationship with language also counters conventional beliefs about language betrayal. Bilingual writers are often accused of betraying their native language

and country for writing in an adopted language. Although this critique has been applied to Li and her works, Li's memoir suggests that her individual relationship with her native and adopted languages resists such criticism. Instead of betraying her native country, Li's use of English as her private language is instead, a betrayal of herself. In an analysis of how language betrayal affects contemporary bilingual Chinese diasporic writers, it is clear that language betrayal is often a criticism originating from the author's native country. Such accusations of disloyalty can engender feelings of guilt in which writers feel that they are betraying their native country by writing in an adopted language. Alternatively, as in the case of Jin, he turns the accusations around and criticizes his native country for betraying the individual—he claims that he was “exiled to English.” In both cases, the adoption of another language is viewed as a betrayal of the native country. Thus, this often results in the writers' works being read historically or politically. By reexamining English as Li's private language, she argues that her “betrayal” is directed only to herself; she refuses to have her adoption of English interpreted by others.

In Jing Tsu's “Bilingual Loyalty,” Tsu examines three twentieth and twenty-first century bilingual Chinese Anglophone writers and their relationships to English. In her analysis of Lin Yutang, Eileen Chang, and Jin, Tsu confirms that bilingual writers often feel a sense of guilt or betrayal when writing in their adopted tongue. Jin explains, “The antonym of ‘betrayal’ is ‘loyalty’ or ‘allegiance.’ Uneasy about those words, the migrant writer feels guilty because of his physical absence from his native country, which is conventionally viewed by some of his countrymen as ‘desertion’” (“Language of Betrayal” 31). This assertion touches upon both problems bilingual writers who adopt other languages face: they personally feel guilty while their compatriots accuse them of

disloyalty. Although Jin is vocal about his grievances against his native country, he has taken measures to address his guilt by having his works translated into Chinese and even doing some of the translating himself. Li, however, takes a different stance. She writes, “I have declined to have my books translated into Chinese, which is understood by some as odiously pretentious” (Li, “To Speak” 145). She goes on to explain, “Once in a while my mother will comment, hinting at my selfishness, that I have deprived her of the pleasure of reading my books. But Chinese was never my private language. And it will never be” (Li, “To Speak” 145-146). There is no hint of guilt when Li describes her adoption of English. For Li, her choice of language is tied to her individual livelihood and the ability to express herself. By focusing on what constitutes her private language, Li’s relationship with language is revealed as one that is personal and not tied to outside interpretations.

On one hand, Li’s essay, “To Speak” can be read as a defense against those who accuse her of language betrayal. Often linked to Jin, Li and Jin have both been accused of betraying their native country for writing in English. For example, prominent Taiwanese writer, Zhu Tianwen, condemns Jin’s English-language career as an “opportunistic venture” (Tsu 117). Tsu continues, “[his] experiences abroad are often painted by critics and colleagues at home as profiting from selling an inside story to the outside world” (122). Li similarly writes stories that take place in China and is criticized for writing in English. Li explains, “I am used to being seen by some Chinese—both in the West and in China—as a cultural traitor. Why can’t she write in Chinese? people ask; if she doesn’t write in Chinese, what right does she have to write about our country?” (“Either/Or” 157). The criticisms against both Jin and Li are made by Chinese people who accuse them of disloyalty because they write about China in English. By writing in English, both Jin and

Li have chosen to estrange themselves from their native language. Jin writes, “The ultimate betrayal is to choose to write in another language. No matter how the writer attempts to rationalize and justify adopting a foreign language, it is an act of betrayal that alienates him from his mother tongue and directs his creative energy to another language” (“Language of Betrayal” 31). Jin justifies his adoption of another language by noting that he was “exiled to English” and takes a political stance. Li’s decision is personal. She writes, “But my abandonment of my first language is personal, so deeply personal that I resist any interpretation—political or historical or ethnographical” (Li, “To Speak” 141).

Jin has written at length about his relationship to his native and adopted language in various essays. He addresses the accusations against him of “betrayal” and is vocal about his reasoning for adopting English. Namely, he discusses these issues in his book, *The Writer as Migrant*, in which there is a chapter titled, “The Language of Betrayal,” and in a separate essay titled, “Exiled to English.” In these essays, Jin is clear about his adoption of English: he had to separate himself from his repressive native country to preserve the integrity of his works. His explanations for adopting English revolve around an overarching critique of his native country—a place from which he feels exiled. In response to critiques of his “disloyalty,” Jin writes, “But loyalty is a two-way street, especially when the individual doesn’t rely on China for his or her existence. Why don’t we speak about how a country betrays an individual?” He continues, “Yet if a country has abused and oppressed its people, isn’t it tyrannical to demand their loyalty?” (“Exiled” 97). By flipping the accusation to critique the country instead, Jin has a clear political reason for adopting English. He accuses his native country for abusing and oppressing the individual; therefore, he must adopt English to create his own existence. Jin writes, “To

preserve the integrity of my work and to separate my existence from the powers that be, I could not but write in English” (“Exiled” 94).

Jin’s assertion that he was “exiled” to English is a central distinction between his adoption of English and Li’s. Jin does not shy away from being a political figure and acknowledges how this contributes to the controversy over his works:

When I began writing in English I didn’t expect to draw so much flak. Let me be candid about the controversy over me...The first is that publicly I have always been vocal about the Tiananmen massacre, which still rankles, and thus I have become a persona non grata to the Chinese government. Because of my feud with the Communist Party, its propaganda officials have orchestrated most of the personal attacks, including character assassination. (“Exiled” 5)

Although both authors have similar biographies and write about similar subjects, Jin’s abandonment of Chinese is easily interpreted as a political stance as he is vocal about his grievances against the Chinese government. Li, on the other hand, refuses to have her abandonment of Chinese interpreted at all. Li shows that her use of English does not need to be viewed as a political statement against her native country. Whereas Jin’s adoption of English can be read historically and politically like that of many previous bilingual authors, Li’s private decision ultimately signifies something individual to her. Li writes, “My decision to write in English has also been explained as a flight from my country’s history. But unlike Nabokov, who had been a Russian writer, I never wrote in Chinese. Still, one has little control over how one’s work is received, and one cannot avoid having a private decision, once seen through a public prism, become a metaphor” (“To Speak” 141). Li acknowledges her inability to control how others interpret her works, but there is

a kind of power in her insistence on not being interpreted. Despite Li's strong assertions about English as her private language, the unsettling idea that her abandonment of Mandarin is a "kind of suicide" remains. Li's relationship with English, despite its advantages, is still rooted in loss.

Private Language as Suicide

The implications of Li's use of English as her "private" language counters notions of language belonging and language betrayal used to criticize bilingual writers. However, by labeling her abandonment of Chinese as a "kind of suicide," Li shows that writing in a new language comes at a cost. Going back to Mukherjee and Shteyngart's idea of the contemporary immigrant writer as one who simultaneously embraces "ambivalence and loss," Li embodies this dichotomy in her ambivalence towards others' interpretations of her abandonment of Chinese while acknowledging that her adoption of a new language comes at the expense of erasing herself and others. By examining Li's use of English as both a "private language" and as a "kind of suicide," Li's distinct relationship with language emerges as one of liberation and loss. Countering Walkowitz's optimism in her implications of World Literature, Li shows that her abandonment of her mother tongue for English is imbued in sacrifices she is forced to make in the switch from one language to the other.

Li carves a path for bilingual writers to construct their own relationships with their adopted language; however, Li also warns others that the transition between languages often involves loss and pain. For Li, her adoption of English is deeply personal and she links it to a "kind of suicide." Li writes, "People often ask about my decision to write in English...Yes, there is something unnatural, which I have refused to accept. Not

that I write in English...It's the absoluteness of the abandonment—with such determination that it is a kind of suicide" ("To Speak 140). By linking her abandonment of Mandarin to suicide, Li shows that there is inexplicable loss and pain when she writes in another language. In choosing a path that inflicts the most extreme version of self-harm, Li's decision is not as easily explained as using English for opportunity or "betraying" one's native country. When language is so tied to one's existence and livelihood, pain is inevitable—only the writer knows the sacrifice they are making.

Li's abandonment of Mandarin is so absolute that she claims she dreams in English. In this abandonment, Li is not only hurting herself, but she claims that her decision also comes at the expense of others. Li writes, "Over the years my brain has banished Chinese. I dream in English. I talk to myself in English. And memories—not only those about America but also those about China; not only those carried on but those archived with the wish to forget—are sorted in English" ("To Speak" 145). In this switch from one language to another, Li claims that her "sorrow" is everything that gets lost:

In abandoning my native language, I have erased myself from that memory. I have often been asked if—or else told that—English allows me the freedom of expression. But erasing does not stop with a new language, and that, my friend, is my sorrow and my selfishness. In speaking and in writing in an adopted language I have not stopped erasing. I have crossed the line, too, from erasing myself and erasing others. I am not the only casualty in this war against myself. ("To Speak" 152)

Although Li's relationship with English is one that is "private," she suggests that loss and damage are inevitable. As one who marks a distinction in how English is often perceived

and used for contemporary bilingual writers, Li does not depict the journey as one that is easy. Like the experience of immigration itself, the writer's literary experience is also one of pain and loss. Mukherjee asserts, "Immigration is loss of community, of language, and of extended family. It is to give up on the dream of a better future in one's home country. It is to cut oneself off from history and to condemn oneself to a world of ghosts and memories" (689).

Chapter 2

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

In the title story of her debut collection, “A Thousand Years of Good Prayers,” Li depicts two transnational relationships and sets them in United States. Taking place in an unnamed Midwest town, this story centers around three characters—Mr. Shi, an older Chinese man; Madam, an older Persian woman who befriends Mr. Shi; and Mr. Shi’s unnamed daughter, a Chinese-American who lives in the United States. Originally written in English, “A Thousand Years” is an example of Walkowitz’s “born translated” literature. The text incorporates different languages but is already translated to English from the start. Although I am using Walkowitz’ idea of “self-translating” as Li’s method of writing in English, I argue that Li’s depiction of the contemporary, globalized U.S. is one that is fraught with miscommunication and misunderstanding. Language barriers cause Mr. Shi and his daughter’s relationship to deteriorate. Mr. Shi’s “Chinese thinking” hinders his ability to sympathize with his daughter, whereas the daughter’s adoption of English ostracizes her from her father. Even the most potentially optimistic and successful transnational relationship between Mr. Shi and Madam is based on a feigned understanding of one another; a close examination of Li’s language shows that their relationship is undermined by their inability to speak English.

Born-Translated

Walkowitz argues that born-translated works are “*written for translation*, in the hope of being translated, but they are also often *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 is both *written for translation* and *written as translation*. The book has been translated into several languages, and many of the stories incorporate translation from the start. The title story technically includes three languages; however, the story is written entirely in English (with one instance of Chinese pinyin). Mr. Shi is a Chinese man who speaks Mandarin, Madam is an Iranian woman who speaks Persian, and both of them occasionally speak a few English phrases. Additionally, Mr. Shi's daughter is a bilingual Chinese-American who often switches between English and Mandarin. 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. There are various ways that Li represents different languages in the text. She uses italics for Chinese metaphors and proverbs and to show when Mr. Shi is speaking in Mandarin to Madam. Whereas the use of italics brings attention to the translation, Li also incorporates subtler translations. "A Thousand Years" is written from the perspective of Mr. Shi in third person omniscient, and he is a Chinese man who thinks in Chinese. Therefore, Mr. Shi's thoughts are an example of subtle translation, rendered in unmarked English.

I will first demonstrate the various types of translation that are incorporated in the story via a close reading of the text. Li writes:

"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, 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,” he says in Chinese to Madam. (192)

The first indicator of translation is Li's use of italics for the pinyin phrase. Whereas most of Li's works are only written in English (besides characters' names and places), this is the only time pinyin is incorporated. Pinyin uses the Latin alphabet and is the official Romanization system for standard Chinese. Although the pinyin is not already self-translated, Li still provides a translation of the phrase afterwards, another type of translation in the story. Li writes the translation of the pinyin in unmarked English, and this is an example of Mr. Shi's thoughts. Mr. Shi is a Chinese man who is only fluent in Chinese, therefore, he most likely thinks in Chinese. Mr. Shi's thoughts are self-translated from Chinese to English in the narration. Lastly, italics are also incorporated in the dialogue when Mr. Shi speaks to Madam in Mandarin. This type of translation draws attention to itself by emphasizing the fact that he is not speaking English. Another type of translation that is not shown in this example is when Mr. Shi uses Chinese metaphors and proverbs in the dialogue. These are also written in italics to emphasize that they are Chinese metaphors spoken in Mandarin.

The depiction of Mr. Shi's language gets more complicated when looking at his dialogue with his daughter. The dialogue between Mr. Shi and his daughter is written in unmarked English, even though his dialogue is usually written in italics. For example, this is an exchange between Mr. Shi and his daughter:

That evening, Mr. Shi says to his daughter, "I met this Iranian lady in the park. Have you met her?"

"No."

“You should meet her sometime. She’s so very optimistic. You may find her illuminating for your situation.”

“What’s my situation?” his daughter asks without looking up from her food.

“You tell me,” Mr. Shi says. (Li 193)

Mr. Shi is speaking to his daughter in Mandarin even though there are no italics to indicate this. It is clear that Mr. Shi is speaking Mandarin and not English because he is not fluent in English and only knows a few words and phrases. Examples of his English speaking depicted in the story include: “My daughter, she make lots of money, too” and “America is young country, like young people” (Li 187). The dialogue between him and his daughter is different in that Mr. Shi sounds fluent and natural. The difference in Mr. Shi’s Mandarin and English dialogue suggests another type of subtle translation at work.

As a text that includes various forms of translation, “A Thousand Years” is a born-translated text that “approaches translation as medium and origin rather than as afterthought. Translation is not secondary or incidental to these works. It is a condition of their production” (Walkowitz 3-4). Despite fitting the technical description of being “born-translated,” the implications for Li are vastly different from Walkowitz’ proposed implications. Whereas Walkowitz seems naively optimistic about contemporary writing as World Literature, Li demonstrates that this process is not as achievable as Walkowitz’ makes it out to be. In Walkowitz’ examination of World Literature, she acknowledges that English is the “world’s dominant language” (20) and that “globalization bears on all writers working in English today” (4). By accepting these ideas at face-value, Walkowitz overlooks the various conflicts that arise for bilingual and immigrant writers who write in

English. As one who writes in her adopted language, Li depicts the various hardships of adopting a new language in her portrayal of Mr. Shi and his daughter's relationship.

Chinese Metaphors as Chinese Thinking

Mr. Shi is a Chinese man who visits America for the first time after learning of his daughter's divorce. Mr. Shi is unable to relate to his Chinese-American daughter, and his "Chinese thinking" is depicted as something that is detrimental to his relationship with her. This is significant because Li shows one negative consequence of an increasingly globalized and mobile world. As more immigrants move to the different places, cultural and generational differences become more prominent. For Mr. Shi and his daughter, these differences are heightened by language. Mr. Shi is a native Chinese man whose "Chinese thinking" is depicted through the use of Chinese metaphors and proverbs. He is unable to sympathize with his daughter's situation without placing her problems in a Chinese context. In doing so, Mr. Shi is blind to his daughter's actual problems, causing their relationship to deteriorate.

Stylistically, Li is similar to the author Jin in her use of Chinese metaphors and proverbs. They are both contemporary authors who write about China in English and emigrated from China to the United States. Various scholars argue that contemporary immigrant authors are contributing to an "expanded, elastic English vocabulary" by incorporating their native languages and linguistic fusions. Namely, Mukherjee argues that linguistic innovation is indicative of contemporary immigrant writing in her essay, "Immigrant Writing: Changing the Contours of a National Literature." Mukherjee argues that Jin "jettisons the options of writing in his mother tongue or in Chinglish in favor of simple, serviceable English prose that is easily accessible to American readers, whom he

has targeted as his primary audience” (683). However, various essays have been written on Jin’s linguistic creativity in English and the influence of Chinese on his works. For example, in Hang Zhang’s “Bilingual Creativity: Ha Jin’s *In the Pond*,” she specifically examines metaphors and proverbs as an example of how Jin creates a “hybrid language of his own” (308). Whereas Zhang argues that “metaphors transposed from the Chinese come with a rich load of cultural information” (310), Li’s use of metaphor is not loaded with significant cultural meaning. Rather, Mr. Shi is blinded by the cultural contexts of the metaphors he uses and cannot sympathize with his daughter.

Metaphors inherently reflect cultural difference because meanings are often inferred through references to shared cultural knowledge (Wang, et al. 10). Li includes metaphors and proverbs in both the narration and dialogue and these show cultural differences between Mr. Shi and his daughter. Mr. Shi often thinks using metaphors, therefore, these are rendered in unmarked English in the narration. For example, when describing what Mr. Shi thinks of his daughter’s divorce, Li writes, “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). This is a saying that is rooted in Chinese societal norms about when women are in their prime for marriage. Mr. Shi does not want his daughter to be a “shengnu” or “leftover woman”—a derogatory term for women in China who are still unmarried in their late twenties and beyond. However, because Mr. Shi is so caught up thinking about this cultural phenomenon in China, he is blind to his daughter’s issues and does not listen to her. He cannot fathom that there is a possibility that his daughter was the one who left her

husband (even though this proves to be true later). Therefore, Mr. Shi's "Chinese thinking" further prohibits him from understanding his daughter, despite the fact that he wants to help her.

Mr. Shi's "Chinese thinking" also harms his relationship with his daughter when he responds with Chinese proverbs. Mr. Shi is only able to frame his daughter's problems into a Chinese context and tries to apply his ideal Chinese cultural standards to her situation. The daughter finally tells Mr. Shi that she was the one who left her husband when she says, "Baba, my marriage wasn't what you thought. I wasn't abandoned... We were divorced because of this man. I was the abandoner, if you want to use the term" (198). Mr. Shi does not understand why she would have left her husband and responds, "*One night of being husband and wife in bed makes them in love for a hundred days. You were married for seven years! How could you do this to your husband?*" (198). Even though this saying is not true for Mr. Shi's own marriage, he still views this as the ideal Chinese standard to which his daughter should aspire. Instead of trying to understand why the daughter left her husband for someone else, Mr. Shi's thinking is limited to the idea that his daughter should still be with her ex-husband. Mr. Shi is stuck in his "Chinese" way of thinking and cannot sympathize with his daughter.

English & New Identities

Cultural differences between Mr. Shi and his daughter are caused by Mr. Shi's "Chinese" thinking as well as his daughter's adoption of a new language that he does not understand. As a Chinese-American, the daughter has a dual-identity experience that is distinct from her father's experience who is Chinese. Their differences are exacerbated through language—Mr. Shi is unable to recognize his daughter when she speaks English.

This is not only because Mr. Shi cannot understand English; rather, the daughter's use of English is tied to a different identity that Mr. Shi does not recognize. When the daughter speaks English, she becomes a "new person," and with this new identity, she meets a new lover. However, the daughter's adoption of English also causes her to ostracize her father, and this process is one that she cannot control. Immigrants are often viewed as having hybrid identities that are always in the process of forming. For the daughter, English helps her form her own Chinese-American identity, whereas for Mr. Shi, English separates him from his daughter.

This dual-identity experience is often shared by immigrants and their children. First- or second-generation immigrants who are bilingual and grew up speaking Chinese with their parents but English everywhere else often have vastly different experiences in the different languages. Jenny Zhang, a Chinese-American author who discusses this bilingual phenomenon, writes:

Being bilingual isn't just knowing two languages: it's having two different identities. You have a whole different personality in one language. I might have a much more vulgar sense of humour in Chinese. I might be more aggressive in one language. It's not just language. One's being is tied up in language. Memories are tied up in language. I've never fallen in love romantically in Chinese, but I have in English, and that's significant. (Chua)

Oftentimes, bilinguals have these distinct personalities in different languages because of fluency issues. When one language is primarily used at home and English is used everywhere else, fluency in the "home" language declines. In "A Thousand Years," the daughter is a first-generation immigrant who has spent a majority of her life living in

America. Like Zhang, the daughter's identity is tied to which language she uses. She becomes a "new person" when she uses English and this manifests in her personal relationships. Adopting English allows her to foster a relationship with another man—she leaves her Chinese husband for an English-speaking man. However, her use of English also leads to a decline in her Mandarin that causes generational and cultural differences between the daughter and Mr. Shi.

Fluency in language is a problem for the daughter because she grew up in the U.S. and is more fluent in English than she is in Chinese. Unlike Mr. Shi, who only really knows Mandarin, the daughter is bilingual and can speak both Mandarin and English, though she admits she is better at speaking English. She says, "It's different Baba. We talk in English, and it's easier. I don't talk well in Chinese" (199). An analysis of the language of this quote helps show the difference in fluency between English and Chinese for the daughter, whose awkward Chinese is emphasized in Li's rendering of her Chinese in English. The daughter's language is awkward when she says, "we talk in English" and "I don't talk well in Chinese." Noting that this conversation takes place in Mandarin, it makes sense why the English depicted sounds odd. Because the daughter is less fluent in Chinese, this is depicted in Li's translation of the daughter's awkward Chinese into awkward English.

Whereas the daughter's lack of fluency is depicted at the linguistic level, her lack of fluency in Chinese also affects her personal relationships. In the same quote, the daughter is explaining to her father why she cheats on her Chinese husband with a Romanian man. Unlike Mr. Shi, who claims not to see a difference between languages when he speaks to Madam, the daughter's main concern is whether she and her lovers can

communicate with one another. For her, sharing a common language is crucial for sustaining relationships—she is able to speak to her Romanian lover in English, whereas speaking Chinese to her husband was difficult. She says, “Baba, if you grew up in a language that you never used to express your feelings, it would be easier to take up another language and talk more in the new language. It makes you a new person” (199). The daughter tries to explain to her father how speaking a new language changes her identity. However, she also points out that her father has never had this experience. He cannot sympathize or understand her situation. Although the daughter’s adoption of English helps her become a happier and more open person, she is at risk of ostracizing her father along the way.

The daughter views her English identity as one in which she is able to become a new person who can express her feelings. Because she tends to emphasize the positive aspects of her “American/English” identity, this causes conflict in her relationship with her father. The discrepancy between her “Chinese” and “English” identities is most evident when Mr. Shi hears her speaking English on the phone for the first time:

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. Her voice, too sharp, too loud, too immodest, is so unpleasant to his ears that for a moment he feels as if he had accidentally caught a glimpse of her naked body, a total stranger, not the daughter he knows. (197)

When the daughter speaks English, Mr. Shi does not recognize her. Language is so crucially tied to her identity that she becomes a “new person” to Mr. Shi. Mr. Shi does

not recognize her when she speaks English because her “manner” is completely different from how she is in Chinese. When she speaks Chinese, Mr. Shi describes her as being “soft voiced and kindhearted, dutiful and beautiful, a younger version of her mother” (188). In English, he thinks her attributes are undesirable, emphasized by the negative adjectives he uses to describe her. He later says, “You just talked over the phone with such immodesty! You talked, you laughed, like a prostitute!” (199). The differences that he takes note of are indicative of generational and cultural differences between China (Mandarin) and the United States (English). By attributing “Chineseness” to adjectives such as “soft voiced” and “dutiful,” and “Americanness” to adjectives such as “loud” and “immodest,” Mr. Shi is emphasizing cultural differences between China and the U.S. English becomes the ultimate barrier between Mr. Shi and the daughter. The more she speaks English, the more she changes into someone that he does not understand. Even if Mr. Shi speaks the same language as the daughter, her new language has already changed her identity into something that is foreign to him. Therefore, English is not only a language barrier between Mr. Shi and the daughter, it is indicative of a larger cultural difference between the two.

Impossibility of Transnational Optimism

Li’s depiction of the transnational relationship between Mr. Shi and his daughter is one of misunderstanding as the cultural differences between the two become wider. In contrast to this problematic familial relationship, Li also depicts a seemingly optimistic transnational relationship in which Mr. Shi and Madam become friends in the U.S. despite their disparate backgrounds and inability to speak a common language. Mr. Shi points out the difference between his relationship with Madam and his relationship with

his daughter when Li writes, “He feels disappointed in his daughter, someone he shares a language with but with whom he can no longer share a dear moment” (194). In contrast, Mr. Shi and Madam’s relationship is the opposite when Li writes, “Despite the fact that they both speak little English, they have no problem understanding each other, and in no time they become friends” (186). Mr. Shi primarily speaks Mandarin while Madam speaks Persian. They both feel comfortable talking to one another in their native languages interspersed with the little English they know. Whereas this seems to depict the ideal globalized United States where different people can understand one another despite their differences, a closer analysis of their interactions suggests otherwise. Although their relationship is depicted as one of understanding, this is told from Mr. Shi’s limited perspective. Madam rarely speaks in the story, and when she does, the reader cannot see what she says because Mr. Shi does not understand her. A closer examination of their conversations suggests that they are unable to truly understand one another because they cannot communicate reciprocally.

It is indisputable that Mr. Shi likes talking to Madam and feels joy in talking to her even if they do not understand one another. However, this story also asks whether it is possible to have a true friendship without speaking the same language. For instance, Mr. Shi never learns Madam’s name and that is why she is called “Madam.” Throughout their brief friendship, they do not know each other’s names—something that is a crucial to who someone is. Additionally, even though Mr. Shi is sure that Madam understands him, their conversations are not reciprocal, whether they are speaking English or their native languages. They both seem to be having their own conversations, and the other is merely there as company. For example, when Mr. Shi says, ““A rocket scientist I am in China.

But very poor. Rocket scientist, you know?’ Mr. Shi says, his hands making a peak” (187), Madam does not respond to his question but says, “I love China. China a good country, very old” (187). This also happens whenever they speak in their native languages—they never actually respond to what the other is saying. Even if Mr. Shi feels better after talking to Madam about his problems, she was only there as someone to talk at—she never responds to what he says. Their relationship, then, seems less of a friendship and more like a time for self-reflection. If Mr. Shi and Madam do not actually communicate with one another, it is hard to say that they understand one another and are friends. They are unable to continue to be friends beyond seeing each other in person, and Mr. Shi acknowledges that he will not see Madam anymore once he leaves. Li writes, “Mr. Shi sits in the park and waits to say his farewell to Madam” (200).

In addition to Mr. Shi and Madam’s fleeting friendship, Li’s depiction of language unveils a layer of alienation for the two characters. Even though they feel comfortable talking in their native languages in the U.S., Li’s rendering of Mr. Shi’s language is “othered” and depicted as “foreign.” Earlier in my discussion of this text as born-translated, I demonstrated the various types of translation that are depicted in the story. First, there is a discrepancy of language in Mr. Shi’s dialogue: some of it is rendered in italics and some not. There is also a discrepancy between his dialogue and his thoughts. Li only uses italics for Mr. Shi’s Chinese dialogue when he is speaking to Madam and leaves the English unmarked when he is speaking to his daughter in Chinese. The difference then, seems to be dependent on when Chinese is used naturally in the story. Both Mr. Shi’s thoughts and his Chinese dialogue with his daughter are not written in italics. These are instances in which Chinese is the primary language spoken and it is

natural for Mr. Shi to speak Chinese. This makes sense because his primary language (Chinese) is not foreign to him, therefore Li's rendering of Chinese is written in unmarked English. Once he starts speaking Chinese to Madam, however, his Chinese-speaking is emphasized with the use of italics. In this instance, Li seems to suggest that Mr. Shi's Chinese dialogue with Madam is something "foreign" and unnatural and is set apart from the rest of the text.

An analysis of the various types of translation that Li incorporates fosters discussions about the issue of English as a hegemonic language. By emphasizing Mr. Shi's "unnatural" Chinese with Madam (as compared to the unmarked English used for himself and conversations with his daughter), Li shows that there are instances where speaking in one's native language is unnatural in the story. This "unnaturalness" does not stem from Mr. Shi's own feelings of "foreignness" when speaking to Madam because he says that he "feels more at ease speaking to her in Chinese" (195). Instead, the italics are an indication language belonging—or lack thereof. Li does not italicize Mr. Shi's English dialogue even though English is the foreign language to him. By putting Mr. Shi's Chinese (the language he is fluent in) in italics when speaking to Madam, Li suggests that Chinese is the foreign language in this situation. In doing so, Li shows that English is still the dominant language that Mr. Shi should use to speak to other people in the U.S., and he does not truly belong when he speaks Mandarin. Therefore, a close examination of language contradicts the plot of the short story—Mr. Shi and Madam's "positive" transnational relationship is also undermined because English is still the dominant language in which they both do not belong.

Although the analysis of Li's language shows that Mr. Shi's Chinese-speaking is depicted as foreign when he is with Madam, this language barrier allows Mr. Shi to speak freely to Madam. I want to reframe their relationship as one that does not consist of mutual understanding despite the fact that Mr. Shi says Madam "listens to him with more understanding" (193). Their "positive" relationship relies on misunderstanding and miscommunication to function. This is evident when they first become friends and Mr. Shi is dishonest to Madam. Mr. Shi tells Madam that he is a rocket scientist. As the story progresses, however, we find out Mr. Shi is not who he says he is. He wants everyone to believe that he is a rocket scientist, and this is a lie that he has told for most of his life. The only personal trait that Mr. Shi tells Madam is not true. Therefore, their relationship started with a misunderstanding of who Mr. Shi is. Although dishonesty was at the root of their friendship, Mr. Shi's dishonesty is not limited to Madam. Therefore, this is not a misunderstanding that is due to language or communication—he tells everyone the same lie.

Whereas Mr. Shi lies to everyone, there is a type of miscommunication and misunderstanding that is only characteristic of his friendship with Madam. Mr. Shi relies on Madam's inability to understand him to tell the truth. When Mr. Shi first gets confronted by his daughter for his dishonesty, he is unable to tell her the truth:

"You never talked, and Mama never talked, when you both knew there was a problem in your marriage. I learned not to talk."

"Your mother and I never had a problem. We were just quiet people."

"But it's a lie!"

“No, it’s not. I know I made the mistake of being too preoccupied with my work, but you have to understand I was quiet because of my profession.”

“Baba,” Mr. Shi’s daughter said, pity in her eyes. “You know it’s a lie, too. You were never a rocket scientist. Mama knew. I knew. Everybody knew.”

Mr. Shi stares at his daughter for a long time. “I don’t understand what you mean.”

“But you know, Baba. You never talked about what you did at work, true, but other people—they talked about you. (199-200)

Even though the daughter is the one who confronts him, Mr. Shi does not tell his daughter what happened or tries to explain himself. He only confirms what she says when Li writes, “Mr. Shi takes long breaths and tries to maintain his dignity. It is not hard to do so, after all, as he has, for all his life, remained calm about disasters. ‘You didn’t hurt me. Like you said, you were only talking about truth’” (200). Mr. Shi cannot tell his daughter because he wants to “maintain his dignity.” However, he goes and tells Madam everything because he knows that she does not understand what he says. Once Mr. Shi is forced to come to terms with his own dishonesty, he chooses to be entirely honest with Madam instead of his daughter—he is only able to tell someone that cannot understand him to preserve his dignity. Although Mr. Shi cares about his friendship with Madam, their transnational friendship is only possible because they cannot understand one another.

Conclusion

Reflecting on the last few years of focusing on Li and her works has shown me how much I've grown as a reader, writer, and thinker. I feel fortunate to have had a specific research focus for an extended period, particularly in the period when I was developing the most as a writer. Li's work has acted as a sort of stable point of comparison for me in that I've had the ability to change how I read Li's works multiple times and I've been able to track the progress of my interpretation. Through this process of ongoing reinterpretation, I feel that I've accumulated significant knowledge of her works and also increased awareness of my writing and scholarship. This thesis is a culmination of various things I've learned and thought about and is an accurate indication of how my thinking has changed over time. One of the highlights of working on this thesis was getting to interview Li. After being invested in her works for so long, the experience of getting to talk to her was almost surreal. I spent a significant amount of time refining my interview questions, and Li's answers were both thoughtful and enlightening. In the initial planning stages, I thought that my interview with Li might be the focal point of my thesis. But as language became my thesis' primary concern, it was clear to me that Li's interview would serve a supplemental purpose. Although I only quote the interview once in my introduction, her responses have guided me throughout the entire thesis writing process.

While working on this thesis, I've become increasingly interested in examining language and form. While this thesis is centrally focused on the former, a writer as prolific and competent in multiple genres as Li provides ample opportunity for looking at how form functions in her works. In our interview, Li told me about the process of

depicting the different languages in “A Thousand Years” and how she wrote the screenplay for the movie adaptation of the short story. I am interested in examining the different mediums of Li’s works, and perhaps already have relevant material given my work in this thesis. Although I have still not seen the movie adaptations of both “A Thousand Years” and “Princess of Nebraska,” I am interested in what we can gain from comparing the adaptations to the short stories. Similarly, I hope to more closely examine form in Li’s works. I did not pay close enough attention to the differences between memoir and short story as genres in this thesis (not to mention her three novels, which deserve scholarship in their own right); however, I think there could be a rich body of work that explores Li’s use of form.

A hard part of doing research on a contemporary, living author is the fact that they have the ability to refute your interpretations. This was a challenge I didn’t much consider before starting my thesis. I found this to be especially true when I was in the process of refining my argument. I was constantly thinking about whether Li would approve of what I was writing about her. In many ways, I think this underlying fear changed how I interpreted her abandonment of Mandarin for English. It became my default mode to accept her words at face-value when I could have pressed certain issues more. I certainly do not regret what I’ve written in this thesis, but I realize I am still learning how to push back against what the author says. Moving forward, I hope to continue to analyze Li’s works but with a more skeptical eye. Although I cannot say that her works will always be the subject of my research interests, I know that this honors thesis has informed what kind of work I will do in the future. Li’s works were my first

foray into exploring Asian American, immigrant, and global literature, and I'm excited about the opportunities for learning more about these different groups of writers.

From my first encounters with Li's work, I've been personally invested because I felt more seen as a reader than I ever had before. Beyond the personal connection I felt though, Li's voice felt unique and unlike anything I had read up to that point. I think Li, and perhaps her use of language, in particular, is perhaps evidence of the rapidly changing world we inhabit. In our interview, Li mentioned a survey she and other authors took several years ago that pertained to language. Li indicated in the survey that she did not trust language and received criticism from a reader for her stance. Li maintained her view point on the issue and told me, "But I think language always falls short." After spending several years with her work, I still believe that her staunch individualism distinguishes her from other contemporary authors. I think Li and her work will continue to be sources of profound puzzlement for readers, critics, and writers alike for the rest of her career.

Appendix A: Transcript of My Interview with Li

RW: What are you currently reading?

YL: I was reading a novel before you called. It's by a British author—Elizabeth Taylor. I would say post WW2. She's quite good, but she's not well read. She's underappreciated in this country.

RW: Do you read any contemporary authors?

YL: I mean I don't read contemporary authors as much as I read authors one generation, two generations, three generations ahead of me. I do read contemporary authors when there's a reason—if I'm judging a prize or if someone says you must read this. In a way, I think you want to rely on time to do some selections for you.

RW: Current writing process?

YL: I'm writing much more slowly than I used to. When I was younger, I was quite a fast writer, and I would work on stories and novels at the same time. In the morning and the afternoon. At this moment I feel I'm not in a rush to do anything. I want to think. I want to write things that are, I think by the time you publish 4, 5, or 6 books, you want each book to be different from the previous book. That requires a lot of thinking, so that's what I'm doing. I think probably more than I write.

RW: Do you ever assign your own writing to your students?

YL: Never! Not only do I not assign anything, I do not allow my students to talk about my work.

RW: Do you read scholarly works written on your works?

YL: Never. Although, let me revise. I would say never, but once. I have a friend in England, and one time when I was in London she said can you meet a friend. Someone I

guess introduced a friend of a friends' daughter to her and said her daughter was working on a master's thesis. I met her. And later I think her father's friend who was this journalist passed her thesis to me. And I thought, okay. The reason I read that thesis, it's a thesis not only about my work, partly about my work. But it's a thesis on my work and William Trevor's work.

I think for that reason I read the thesis, which is scholarly work. Mostly, I don't know where the scholarly work would be.

RW: In one interview on "A Thousand Years of Good Prayers" someone asks you about your thoughts on becoming a new person in a new language. You answer, "You have gained a lot of new skills with the language. You have gained a vocabulary you don't have in your mother tongue, and those things are important."

This reminds me of a contemporary Chinese American writer, Jenny Zhang, who says, "Being bilingual isn't just knowing two languages: it's having two different identities. You have a whole different personality in one language. I might have a much more vulgar sense of humour in Chinese. I might be more aggressive in one language. It's not just language. One's being is tied up in language. Memories are tied up in language. I've never fallen in love romantically in Chinese, but I have in English, and that's significant."

Do you agree with this idea of having two different identities in Chinese and English?

You've spoken about English being your private language in "To Speak is to Blunder"—and a similar idea shows up in "A Thousand Years of Good Prayers" when Mr. Shi does not understand his daughter's manner when she speaks in English—are you able to express yourself differently in one language compared to another?

YL: Yes. I also feel that over the years, my thinking has evolved a little. I mean, “A Thousand Years of Good Prayers” was published in 2005, so if you ask me 10 years ago. I would say yes. I can positively say, coming with each language there is a different personality, a different identity. Now, I would say the situation is a little murky. It’s not as clean cut as English versus Chinese, Mandarin Chinese or me in English versus me in Chinese. I mean I agree with Jenny Zhang. She’s absolutely clever and smart and to the point. There are certain things you can only do in one language. And there are certain things you can do in another language. I think some writers can do it in both. I’m just imagining Nabokov probably can do it in both.

RW: I’m second generation, so I feel like I am more like Jenny Zhang. I feel like in Chinese, I don’t even know how to say anything besides what I want to eat for dinner. I feel like I’m very different in English from who I am in Chinese.

YL: And I imagine for your generation too that the Chinese is probably more connected to home. You use that in the home setting whereas English is much more outside the home. It gets complicated, although I would say because language is an interesting thing. I’ve certainly written a lot about language and memories. My current thinking is that if I can introduce another language into my world, that would turn English into something different for me. That’s something I’ve been experimenting with. But I haven’t done it yet.

RW: In this short story, one theme that I see is the inadequacies of language. For example, even though Mr. Shi shares a language with his daughter, he cannot share a dear moment with her. However, he is able to have open and honest conversations with Madam who doesn’t speak the same language as him.

Especially as a writer, what are your thoughts on what language can and cannot do or convey?

YL: A few years ago, I did this interview. Not only me, I think a bunch of writers did it. And one reader got so upset. I think he wrote me and he wrote to someone else, “how can you not trust language if you’re a writer?” And I think well yes, it’s a questionnaire. It only asked me to answer yes or no. I don’t have the space to elaborate! But I think language always falls short. I don’t think what we can say is always what we want to say. Which is why I think writing is interesting and why writing is important. We are always looking for new ways of saying the old things that we haven’t found words for. And whoever says, “well he gets the language all done and all to the point,” I think that’s a little suspicious.

RW: In the same story, I know that a way Mr. Shi doesn’t use language to communicate is when he cooks a meal for his daughter. I know that my parents don’t really say sorry to me, my mom just makes me dinner.

YL: There are many ways to say things, yes. Spoken language, written language, it’s one of them.

RW: The way you use language is also interesting because I know Mr. Shi does not speak English very well. I’m assuming he’s speaking Chinese to his daughter but this is written in unmarked English. However, you use Chinese set phrases, and there are instances where Mr. Shi speaks to Madame in Chinese, but these are rendered in italics. So, what’s the difference between these instances? And why do you use italics or not?

YL: Right. I hate to use italics. Unless I absolutely have to, I don’t want to do it. But in that story, there are three languages going around. He and she don’t actually speak the

same language other than pretty easy, simple English. It's always a struggle to say, how do you convey another language? I think it's a personal choice by the writer. Some writers would say they just would put Chinese words spelled out or they would put Spanish or French in there. And then somehow get the sense translated. And my thinking is, he thinks in Chinese fluently. Which is the same as someone who thinks in English fluently. The fluency in thinking should not be hindered by language. So that's why I think I put all his words, I did not do a lot, I did a little, as you said, the set Chinese phrase, but mostly I didn't want to do translations of his thoughts. I wanted his thoughts to be natural.

Although it's funny you ask about the language in that. Because when Wayne Wang made the movie, I also wrote the script! I wrote the script in English, and then I had to translate the dialogue back to Chinese. And I said I didn't want to do it, so he hired someone to do it.

RW: Did you like the process of seeing your characters on screen?

YL: I'm not a visual person so it's a little surprising to see what I made up here, become real characters on screen. But I did learn one thing from him [Wayne Wang], it has something to do with how to write fiction. I think when I write fiction a lot of things come naturally to me. But then when he asked me to write that script, I thought, in a movie, people have to talk to each other, right? After I gave him the first draft, he said, I can't direct this! This is not a screenplay this is a radio play. The characters just talk all the time. So I said how do I do it? He said I want 40% of silence. Which is so interesting because I tell my students, I know we all learn in middle school and high school, show don't tell. And I've never believed in that. I said you have to tell, not show. And telling in

fiction is easy, you just narrate. It turns out in movies, I'm just curious when you see the movie you'll realize a lot of the movie is telling, instead of showing! So it's the same in movies, you don't have to show everything!

RW: I know you've spoken about not wanting to be categorized by external standards—in an interview you talk about how you don't group your characters as Chinese, American, immigrants, etc. I wanted to know if you are familiar with the author Bharati Mukherjee.

YL: Yes.

RW: Have you read her essay, "Immigrant Writing: Changing the Contours of a National Literature?"

YL: I have not read that essay. I know her work a little bit.

RW: In this essay, she includes you as an example of one of her proposed authors. And she calls them "Literature of New Arrival." She argues that there is a body of contemporary immigrant literature in the US that is distinct from "traditional, canonical" immigrant literature of the past. I want to know whether you see yourself like this group of writers.

I'll give you some characteristics that Mukherjee writes:

"Language fusion in which the non-native English immigrant writer creates an expanded, elastic American English vocabulary."

I think that's what you were talking about earlier when you said Mr. Shi thinks fluently in Mandarin, but you write it in English. But other authors would include their native language.

“To read recent US "Literature of Arrival" is to immerse oneself in the history of the homeland the immigrant author has left.”

“Many of these authors are less a petitioner for inclusion in America and more an edgy critic.”

Would you place yourself with this group, or would you place yourself as part of a different literary tradition, if there is one for you at all?

YL: Did she give any other examples of authors?

RW: Yeah, she includes you, Junot Díaz, Edwidge Danticat, Ha Jin, and Amy Tan as a few examples.

YL: Yes, I think in a way. I'm just thinking, what did she say about the canonical immigrant literature? To me, it's Amy Tan's generation.

RW: So mostly, she said that these were European immigrants who moved to the US who sought assimilation, but it's somewhat unclear.

YL: It's interesting because right away I was thinking of Willa Cather. For instance, she wrote in the 1920's and 30's in Nebraska, which was immigrant literature! All these people from Sweden and they came to this country, to the Midwest. But I think people would not call her an immigrant writer. Mostly, she would not be called an immigrant writer. So, in a way, I don't quite know...she certainly was born in this country. So maybe that's why she was not an immigrant. But she was a second generation like you.

RW: Yeah, and so is Amy Tan.

YL: Amy Tan is second generation. It's a confusing term. But with that group of writers, I think we all came from somewhere else, we all write about the home country and the new world. Certainly, I can see myself fitting into that group. Does it matter if I fit into

that group? It probably doesn't matter too much. And you asked if there's another literary tradition that I'd like to see myself in. I used to think I would like to see my lineage coming from say, Chekhov, Trevor. The short story tradition. And of course, Trevor also writes novels, and Chekhov has never written a novel. Again, I think my thought has changed a little on this, too. For myself, I write realistic short stories in the tradition of Chekhov and Trevor. But I cannot always say this is the only way I'm going to work. There are moments when I think, Oh I'm going to break away from that. I'm going to say goodbye, not goodbye, but a temporary goodbye to that tradition and go somewhere else, and then come back. I guess it's more a hodgepodge at this moment.

RW: Talking again about these authors that she includes. Many people look at Amy Tan and they're like, yeah, she's a Chinese American author, just like Maxine Hong Kingston. So how do you view yourself in relation to these Chinese American authors?

YL: I think Maxine and Amy did one thing for Chinese American writers, for Asian American writers and that's when there was no Asian American literature. They were there to open the door for all the writers, like all of us. Like Jenny Zhang, me, Ha Jin, all of us coming after them. I think we are indebted to those two for doing that. On the other hand, I think not every single Chinese American writer or Asian American writer female should be compared to the two. And that is still sort of a mainstream thing. If you ever write, "huh, this person writes along the lines of Amy Tan." That is ridiculous. You never say, you don't do that to other people.

RW: So, you're familiar with Ha Jin. Are you familiar with his works?

YL: I've read *War Trash*, *A Free Life*, and *Waiting*.

RW: I think a lot of the scholarly articles I've read on you also include him. Many people like to compare both of you. Have you read his essay, "Exiled to English"?

YL: I have not read that. Maybe I read a draft of it.

RW: Rather than focusing on your use of English (I know it is something private to you), I have a few specific questions from the essay.

For example, Ha Jin views himself in the tradition of Nabokov and Conrad—you've also mentioned both of them in "To Speak is to Blunder." Despite the fact that unlike Nabokov, you've never written in Chinese, do you view him and Conrad as your predecessors in any way?

YL: Conrad is too complicated of an issue. This is not a good comparison, maybe Beckett? Beckett could not write in English, the only way he could write was to leave Ireland and take up French. I'm so far from being Beckett or sharing anything with Beckett, but I do think that's probably, I would say if you want me to pick someone, I would imagine Beckett.

RW: Additionally, in his essay, Ha Jin talks about his choice of writing in English. He writes:

"But for a beginner and an immigrant like me, the only choice was English, in which I would have to make my solitary journey and turn my back to our menacing native land whenever it becomes too exacting and too overpowering. This alienating stance is essential for artistic survival, because one cannot afford to let politics overwhelm one's art. As a writer, I must not be responsible for a country or a group, and I can be responsible only for my characters and for the words I use."

I've seen similar sentiments from you in *Dear Friend* and other interviews concerning your characters and the language you choose to use. In one interview with Noreen Tomassi you were asked about writing about a very particular time in Chinese history for *The Vagrants*. You responded, "I don't feel the obligation to represent China, but I would hate to misrepresent it. I'm a fiction writer; it's very hard not to make up things. But I think that the historical period has to be right, has to be accurate, in so far as I can do that. My only response to either group is that I'm only able to represent how I, as an individual writer, understand that world."

This reminds me of T.S. Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent" in which he says the individual artist must take history into account.

I am interested in your thoughts on being an author and an individual.

YL: I think there is a difference between me, the writer, and me, the person, in the world. Even the person who teaches. I think if I teach or if I walk into the street, I always have to, this is everybody, you always have to have some sort of opinions, beliefs, and system. You have to have your system. I think that is dangerous for the director. If you start with already having a system, whether it's a religious system, political system, or ethic system, all those things can make you rise above the characters and become the god or goddess to play their fates, to suit your goal. So, I want to be careful when I'm a writer. I don't have that. I think what Ha Jin said, yeah my goal is to be responsible, is to do right by the characters.

RW: Do your characters live on?

YL: They do live on.

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