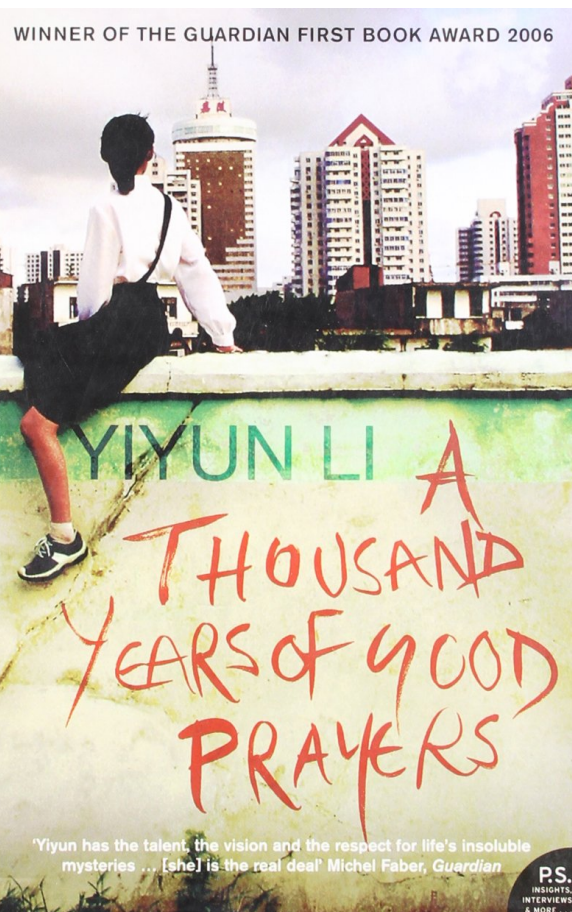


REVIEW

Change and Tradition in "A Thousand Years of Good Prayers" by Yiyun Li — A Review

by Qing Xu



***A Thousand Years of Good Prayers* (2005) by Yiyun Li seeks to carve a middle way for Chinese-American literature, between relentless political engagement and aestheticized entertainment. The intricate mosaic these ten short stories compose portrays traditional Chinese cultural tropes, moments of comical relief, vignettes of family life, and layered political insights to form a complex and yet approachable vision of Chinese life and culture at the turn of the 21st century.**

As a mainland Chinese, reading English books about China outside the place itself has always been an interesting experience. I could still remember the time when I watched the movie *Joy Luck Club*, teary-eyed and fumbling for tissue papers in the dimmed classroom. That was my initiation into Chinese American Literature. Years later in the library of the School of Oriental and African Studies, I ran into a novel called *Beijing Coma* with the author's autograph on the first page. I googled his name — Ma Jian — and realized why I had never heard about him in China and probably never would. These two examples could generally categorize my encounters with English books about China: one exotic and mythical, the other more political than literary. When I first learnt Yiyun Li's name, I had wondered which category she would belong to and had guessed probably the second, because like Ma Jian she immigrated to the West after adulthood. But as soon as I read this book, *A Thousand Years of Good Prayers*, I realized she had carved out a third option for reading English books about China.

A Thousand Years of Good Prayers is Li's debut short story collection and it was published in 2005, the same year that she graduated with an M.F.A. in fiction writing and creative non-fiction from the University of Iowa.

Despite it being her first book, it has been well-received in the English-speaking world, winning multiple awards, including the Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award, the PEN/Hemingway Award, the Guardian First Book Award, and the Paris Review's Plimpton prize. Some of the ten stories in this collection have been published in the *Paris Review* and in *The New Yorker*.

Small People in a Rapidly Changing Time

The ten stories take place at the turn of the 21st century. Abroad there was the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Soviet Union. In China, transitioning into a state-led capitalism, the society witnessed great changes in all aspects of life. There was the State-owned Enterprise Reformation, where large numbers of state-run factories were closed and

tens of millions of workers laid off. As the country began opening up to the world and to foreign goods and culture, private-owned business sprouted up.



"A Thousand Years of Good Prayers" by Yiyun Li

These changes can be keenly felt in many places of the stories. For example, in the beginning of the first story, "Extra", the main character, Granny Lin has been laid off from the garment factory. There is also

mentioning of Granny Lin subsisting on a single radish in this story and in fact, due to the ill-equipped social welfare system, laid-off workers (many of whom were women) were usually plunged into destitute poverty. In "Son," Han, who has just returned from the US to Beijing, uses the Internet Cafe, drinks coffee at Starbucks, and tries to persuade her mother — a former Communist — out of Christianity with a *New York Times* article.

However, the difference between Li and dissident writers, as represented by Ma Jian, is that the former's writing is less politically charged. Although the presence of a clear historical context is palpable in her stories, Li is more focused on the inner worlds of her characters rather than the grand history. Their predicaments are universal, able to be understood by people from other cultures. For instance, in the book, there is a granny having a "crush" on a little boy ("Extra"); a couple whose marriage has gone sour because of their disabled daughter ("After a Life"); a newly converted Christian mother and her gay son ("Son"); and a young woman who is betrayed in love ("Love in the Marketplace").

In the choice of protagonists, Li favors those who do not mix in with the rest. They are people "who really are not at the centre." One distinctive feature of her protagonists is that they are often single, whether it is Granny Lin in "Extra" or Sansan in "Love in the Marketplace". In a collectivist society where the rate of people staying single is extremely low, that gesture is actually a silent rebellion. Those who don't follow suit suffer unimaginable pressure, for example Sansan has for years been the object of ridicule of the townspeople for being single. And her mother even blamed her for having caused her father to drown himself due to shame — the old man's body was found one day in the pond with no other obvious cause of death.

Proverbs and Communism: Self Annihilated

The use of language is never innocent, which is the case not only for Li, but also for her characters in this book. Li has chosen her second language — English — to write and even

refused to let her books be translated into Chinese. In her autobiographical essay “To Speak is to Blunder,” published in *The New Yorker* in 2016, she writes about the hidden implications of her writing in English. For her, it is not only a linguistic commitment, but also an important choice in life: to banish her mother tongue also banishes the past self, memories, and personal relationships.



Yiyun Li, by Don Feria/Getty Images / ©? cc by-nc-nd

Likewise, the language her characters speak also communicates more than the verbal messages. One major characteristic of their speech is the frequent use of Chinese proverbs. As a side note, unlike Amy Tan or Maxine Hong Kingston, whose books treat “Chineseness” more like an exotic element, Li incorporates things about China into her stories with spontaneity. All of the proverbs are translated faithfully and concisely. Moreover, there are no brackets or footnotes to overcomplicate it and distract readers from the story itself.

Characters often cite proverbs to explain their ideas and to persuade others. Comically, they even use proverbs to defend themselves in quarrels. For example, below is Han having an argument with his mother over Christianity in “Son”:

‘It’s never too late to know the truth. Confucius said: If one gets to know the truth in the morning, he can die in the evening without regret.’

‘Confucius said: When one reaches fifty, he is no longer deceived by the world. Mama, you are sixty already, and you still let yourself be deceived...’

With the same faith in ancient wisdom, characters also use a lot of Communist language in their daily speech. In “After a Life,” after Mr. Fong suggests to Mrs. Fong that his mistress live with them, Mrs. Fong gets into a rage, recounting that to Mrs. Su: “It’s the marriage revolution, he said. Revolution? I said. It’s retrogression. You think yourself a good Marxist,

I said, but Marx didn't teach you bigamy. Chairman Mao didn't tell you to have a concubine." When Mr. Fong uses the political term "revolution" to rationalize himself having an affair, Mrs. Fong counterattacks by quoting Chairman Mao and Marx. Like the quibble between Han and his mother, this dialogue is also amusing in the jarring effect it has created in a post-Mao era.

Yiyun Li has acknowledged a sense of "resignation" in using proverbs frequently in one's speech and paralleled it with worshipping communism: "With that attitude it was easier for communism to do what it did." They both suppress people's feelings and desires, annihilating one's true self. Although time has changed, the remnants of the past transform themselves into the form of language and continue to control the way people think and behave, which is also why the book is permeated by a sense of sadness.

Now a decade and a half after the publication of the book, both China and the world have undergone immense changes, but the book's characters, with their whimsicalities and seriousness, their perseverance and loneliness still remain vivid with the passage of time.