

From Short Story to Film: Wayne Wang's Film Adaptation of "A Thousand Years of Good Prayers"❖

Wei Miao*

ABSTRACT

This article focuses on Wayne Wang's film adaptation of contemporary US-based migrant writer Yiyun Li's short story "A Thousand Years of Good Prayers." I will first briefly recount Yiyun Li's life story as it emerges through her published articles and interviews, although I am primarily concerned with how these autobiographical fragments provide a way to unlock Wayne Wang's film *A Thousand Years of Good Prayers*, for which Li developed the screenplay. The expansion of the original short story into a feature-length film allows for a more vivid representation of the long-term emotional consequences of the political and social violence of the Chinese totalitarian regime. At a glance, the alternatives the film seems to present are, on the one hand, a life of silence under political totalitarianism, or on the other, migration to a developed western country that boasts democracy and freedom of speech. On closer inspection, however, it is revealed that the decision to be made between silence and speech is not an easy one, particularly in terms of familial intimacy.

KEYWORDS: emotional, political, silence, language

* This article was made possible with the support of 2015 Fudan University Research Start-Up Grant for New Faculty (JH3152041).

* Received: April 8, 2014; Accepted: December 12, 2014
Wei Miao, Lecturer, College of Foreign Languages and Literatures, Fudan University, China
E-mail: miaowei@fudan.edu.cn

從短篇故事到電影： 王穎對李翊雲《千年敬祈》的電影改編

苗偉*

摘 要

本文聚焦王穎對當代美國移民作家李翊雲的短篇故事《千年敬祈》的電影改編。論文首先從已發表的文章及採訪中回顧李翊雲的人生經歷，主要目的是關注王穎是如何在由其執導、李翊雲編劇的同名電影中利用這些自傳體片段的。文章認為，將短篇小說改拍成故事片可以更加生動地再現中國極權統治下政治與社會暴力所造成的長期的情感孽債。影片乍看似乎呈現了兩種選擇。一個是極權政治下沈默的生活，另一個是移居到以民主和言論自由為傲的西方發達國家。但仔細審視電影後發現，它揭示了在沈默與發聲之間做出選擇並非易事，尤其是涉及家庭親密關係的時候。

關鍵字：情感的，政治的，沈默，語言

* 苗偉，復旦大學外國語言文學學院講師。
E-mail: miaowei@fudan.edu.cn

We do not always proclaim loudly the most important thing we have to say. Nor do we always privately share it with those closest to us, our intimate friends, those who have been most devotedly ready to receive our confession.

——Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*

Autobiography is a popular genre among female writers of Chinese origin in the US, although it remains critically controversial for a number of reasons. Frank Chin attacks autobiography for its role in promoting narratives of salvation which he links to a longer historical process of “Christian conversion” (11). Citing Brian Niiya’s argument that autobiography is a non-progressive genre because of the assimilationist themes it frequently conveys, King-Kok Cheung also expresses misgivings about the inhibition of literary creativity through a publishing market that favors ethnic personal narratives drawn from life (18-19). It is noteworthy, however, that all these critiques of autobiography, and the assimilationist ideology with which it is associated, are based on the analysis of works by American-born writers rather than foreign-born migrant writers.

In her comparative study of first-generation Chinese and Italian immigrant autobiographies published in the US, Sau-ling Wong points out that Chinese immigrant narratives downplay the process of Americanization because their focus is predominantly on China, a place exotic enough to arouse the interest of American readers (156-57). Likewise, in his recent study of the autobiographies by two “1.5 generation” Vietnamese American writers, Chih-ming Wang identifies the dominant “theme of physical return” (163).¹ Instead of continuing to critique the self-Orientalizing project of ethnic autobiography, Wang holds that these ethnic writers recount personal stories that mirror a larger national history that has shaped the fate of their entire generation (166-67).

Wong and Wang’s insights shed light on my study of Yiyun Li, a

¹ As early as 1976, Rubén G. Rumbaut coined the term “one-and-a-half” generation to refer to “children of Cuban exiles who were born in Cuba but have come of age in the United States,” thus distinguishing them from both their parents’ generation and second generation peers who were born in the US. See Rumbaut 338. Now the term “1.5 generation” has been widely used in migration studies to designate children who migrate to another country before adolescence.

contemporary US-based Chinese migrant writer writing in English. China, rather than America, contributes the key thematic material to her narratives. Moreover, Li is interested in life writing which is not autobiography in the strict sense but combines autobiographical elements with fictional storytelling. In 2007, Wayne Wang, already well-known for his film adaptation of Amy Tan's highly popular novel *The Joy Luck Club* (1989), directed *A Thousand Years of Good Prayers* (hereafter *Prayers*), an adaptation of Yiyun Li's short story of the same title.² In the next section, I will briefly recount Yiyun Li's life story as it emerges through her published articles and interviews, although I am primarily concerned with how these autobiographical fragments provide a way to unlock Wang's film, for which Li developed the screenplay. The expansion of the original short story into a feature-length film allows for a deeper exploration of the long-term emotional consequences of the political and social violence of the Chinese totalitarian regime. At a glance, the alternatives the film seems to present are, on the one hand, a life of silence under political totalitarianism, or on the other, migration to a developed western country that boasts democracy and freedom of speech. On closer inspection, however, it is revealed that, as my epigraph from Benjamin points out, the decision to be made between silence and speech is not an easy one, particularly in terms of familial intimacy.

I. Yiyun Li, Voluntary Migration, and Writing

Yiyun Li has a complicated relation to her voluntary migration to the United States as well as to her successful writing career and the audience it presupposes. When considering her fictional renditions of her own life story, we need to remain attentive to those notes of ambivalence that remain in her account of the diasporic intellectual's escape from an oppressive regime and her successful attainment of a post-migration lifestyle in an ostensibly freer political order. Instead of breaking neatly into pre- and post-migration experiences, the intimate dimension of silence and constraint is shown to be continuous across different political regimes and involve similar mechanisms

² *Prayers* won the Golden Shell Award for Best Film and Best Actor Award at the 55th San Sebastián International Film Festival.

of subjugation, all of which are explored in Wayne Wang's domestic melodrama.

Michel Foucault was among the first to observe the relation between social power and internalized mechanisms of self-discipline and elective constraint:

Panopticism is one of the characteristic traits of our society. It's a type of power that is applied to individuals in the form of continuous individual supervision, in the form of control, punishment, and compensation, and in the form of correction, that is, the molding and transformation of individuals in terms of certain norms. This threefold aspect of panopticism—supervision, control, correction—seems to be a fundamental and characteristic dimension of the power relations that exist in our society. (*Power* 70)

In the peculiar space of the panopticon, the prisoner assumes the invisible presence of an omnipotent surveillant force and disciplines his/her own conduct in relation to that assumption. Foucault extrapolates from the example of the panopticon a more general form of self-surveillance that he associates with modern regimes of social regulation. The key operating mechanism of this kind of regulation is the mobilization of an individual-based form of self-supervision, self-control, and self-correction. Since each individual acts as his or her own watchdog, everyone is constantly reminded or conditioned to conduct themselves in accordance with the accepted norms of their society. In other words, each human subject voluntarily subjugates themselves to written and unwritten social rules and is responsible for their own social regulation and ideological indoctrination.

For my purpose, what is interesting in Foucault's account of self-regulation is that he uses "non-corporal" forms of power to delineate the way that panopticism fulfills its role as a system of social control (*Discipline and Punish* 203). It is when subjugated bodies measure themselves against behavioral norms and voluntarily initiate self-vigilance that they are most embedded in relations of power. However potent panopticism seems to be, we should note that the processes of self-subjugation work through physical bodies and behaviors that potentially disturb regimes of normativity, as

Foucault's later work underscores. Since subjects, either individuals or collective groups, are "faced with a field of possibilities in which several kinds of conduct, several ways of reacting and modes of behavior are available," they retain a degree of agency and freedom to resist the powers that are trying to subjugate them (*Power* 342).

Foucault's insights into how individuals voluntarily discipline themselves in modern social systems as well as their residual capacity to rebel against power and control shed light on Yiyun Li's account of her experiences in communist China. According to David Robinson's introduction to Li's first short story collection *A Thousand Years of Good Prayers* (2005), Li was born into an intellectual family in Beijing in 1972. By her own account, from an early age and within the confines of her extended family she learned the importance of self-censorship in daily life. The need to monitor her speech was related to the fact that one of her maternal uncles had fought for Chiang Kai-shek's nationalist army and fled to Taiwan after the Mao Zedong-led Communist troops won the civil war in 1949 (Robinson 5). Until the Chinese government adopted reform and opening-up policies in the late 1970s, anyone who had relatives in Taiwan or abroad risked being denounced or persecuted as a spy. The persecution was especially horrific during the years of the Cultural Revolution, which is why Li's parents warned her at a very young age that she had better not mention her uncle even among her relatives, let alone in public. Retrospectively, we can understand the injunction issued by Li's parents as a fearful response to the overwhelming and sometimes irrational will of the Chinese authorities. Under a regime like the Cultural Revolution, self-surveillance and self-censorship are the best ways to shelter oneself and one's family from the scourge of political terror. In this context we might reflect that Li's parents' lived memory of vulnerability to a random political force that originates outside the family leaves its legacy within the family among the next generation. It is the process through which political regimes of power are incorporated into intimate domestic structures as a learned silence that is the focus of many of Li's accounts of her early life.

The need to keep one's lips sealed and behave circumspectly is given further proof in relation to Li's experience of the Tiananmen Square Incident on June 4th, 1989, a foundational moment in contemporary Chinese history. Since the Chinese government effectively blocked dissemination of information about the event to its citizens, any Chinese who dared to leak

details about the slaughter of unarmed student protestors and civilians might be incarcerated as a saboteur. Though she did not participate in the demonstration, Li, then a sixteen-year-old student at one of the most prestigious high schools in downtown Beijing, received information about the brutality of the military from friends. She recalls, for instance, one friend's eyewitness account of how tanks ran over demonstrators in their tents (Robinson 6). Li herself also saw dead bodies of the student martyrs piled high in a hospital (Walsh). As Li's friend was eventually arrested for spreading "rumors" about the nation, the need to hold her tongue in order to protect her own future was frighteningly close and real to Li.

Yet, despite the continued high risk of publicly talking about the Tiananmen Square Incident in the post-Tiananmen period, Li did speak at least once about the event because she could not cope with the psychological torment that ensued from the act of self-censorship. Around the second anniversary of the Tiananmen Incident, Li was admitted into Peking University, which is often referred to as China's Harvard. Peking University has a long tradition of progressive student movements from May Fourth to June Fourth. In order to prevent a repeat of the student protests and bloodshed of 1989, Li and her fellow students were mandated to attend a one-year ideological re-education camp before beginning their college education. Prior to her departure from Beijing, Li's mother warned her not to divulge anything about her knowledge of the Tiananmen Incident at the re-education camp. She cautioned her daughter, "Imagine a zipper on your mouth. Zip it up tight" (Robinson 6). However, in a 2006 interview, Li recalls the difficulty of adhering to this advice. She states that the effort to restrain herself from speaking the truth pushed her into "a suicidal mode all year" until she finally broke down and confessed what she knew in the military-run camp (Walsh). Although Li was exempted from punishment, it is clear from her interviews and writing that this experience was a formative one that continues to shape how she perceives her past and, in particular, her writing practice in her non-native language.

First experienced as her depressive response to the need to be cautious in her speech, Li's difficulties with self-censorship escalate around the process of writing. In a 2005 interview she states, "I couldn't write in Chinese. When I wrote in Chinese, I censored myself" (Thompson). As an example of her fraught relation to her first language, Li recounts how, while still at high

school, no sooner did she go to hand in a piece of writing about the Tiananmen Square Incident to her teacher than she tore it into pieces. Moreover, during the year of her ideological re-education, she found she could only describe natural scenery in her diary and was unable to compose descriptions of human interactions or feelings. Interestingly, Li attributes her inability to write freely to both the repressive political regime and to her family, which she claims was never good at getting across emotions forthrightly. This combination of state and familial, political and emotional restraint deserves further inquiry. From one perspective it is the very real looming threat of punishment and persecution that deters Li from writing candidly. But, from another perspective, this order of restraint also derives from a familial culture in which withholding information, particularly emotionally charged information, maintains the safety of the family. In view of this double legacy of silence, it is perhaps understandable that Li celebrates her conversion to writing in English: “I feel very lucky that I’ve discovered a language I can use” (Thompson). In other words, Li associates expressive freedom with the English language rather than Chinese precisely because it is not her native tongue, which she continues to associate with silence and, more specifically, a silence around emotion that is difficult to distinguish from the need for political silence.

Due to these self-imposed restrictions in speech and writing, and the psychic difficulty she had in managing them, Li had a clear objective for herself after graduating from her studies in biology at Peking University—she wanted to go to the United States for further studies (Walsh). Her objective was not unrealistic since Peking University functions as one of the largest preparatory schools for Chinese students undertaking subsequent postgraduate programs in the United States. In 1996, Li went to the University of Iowa to pursue her doctoral degree in immunology. As Li has retold in numerous interviews since achieving minor celebrity status with the success of her first fiction collection, in order to dispel the loneliness she experienced in the US before she was reunited with her Chinese boyfriend, she signed up for a community adult writing course. As the deadline of her PhD study was approaching, Li decided to exit with a Master’s degree because she realized her passion was to become a writer rather than a scientist, the role she bestows on the father figure in the story “A Thousand Years of Good Prayers” who as a young man is excitedly involved with China’s rocket development program.

Li embarked on a successful writing career after receiving two MFA degrees in fiction and non-fiction writing from the University of Iowa's extremely selective writing program. In 2005, Li published her debut collection, *A Thousand Years of Good Prayers*, which immediately won numerous awards including the Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award, PEN/Hemingway Award, Guardian First Book Award and California Book Award for first fiction, while also being shortlisted for the Kiriyama Prize and Orange Prize for New Writers. In 2009, Li brought out her first novel, *The Vagrants*, which depicts the bleak situation of a small city under the lingering impact of the Cultural Revolution. *The Vagrants* went on to win the California Book Award for fiction. Her latest book is another anthology of short stories, *Gold Boy, Emerald Girl* (2010), which covers the barren terrain of emotional connection within Post-Mao families. By virtue of her literary talents, Li was selected by *Granta* as one of the 21 Best Young American Novelists under 35, and was named by the *New Yorker* as one of its top 20 writers under 40. She is at present an Associate Professor of creative writing at the University of California, Davis.

While it is hard to imagine a more successful launch to a literary career in English, the question still remains as to Li's relation to her first language, especially given her decision not to have her books translated into Chinese. Regarding her refusal to make her work available to a Chinese-language audience, Li has explained that she is not ready to expose herself to the vehement attacks that Ha Jin, another US-based Chinese migrant writer, has experienced when his works are commented on by critics in China (Edemariam).³ Li's political circumspection is consistent with the thematic concerns of her fiction in which she chooses to explore an internal dissonance that plays out in the intimate landscape of domestic worlds and familial or romantic relationships. Li's dexterity in portraying domestic issues against a Chinese sociopolitical background is prominently displayed in her script for Wayne Wang's film *Prayers*.

³ The main accusation of Ha Jin in China is that he adopts self-Orientalizing writing to cater to the expectations of English readers. For detailed discussion of the reception of Ha Jin in China, see Miao.

II. Wayne Wang's Film Adaptation of "A Thousand Years of Good Prayers"

In his article analyzing Ang Lee's film *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), Chris Berry points out that while Hollywood melodramas highlight the protagonist's struggle for personal happiness against the demands of the family, in Chinese family-ethics films the protagonists often have to renounce individual desires in order to fulfill their responsibilities for the family under the influence of Confucian ideology (33). Interestingly, Wang's film *Prayers* combines both the Hollywood and Chinese melodramatic templates. On the one hand, the father-daughter relationship is the central focus of the film, whereas the romantic relationship the daughter is involved in remains peripheral; on the other hand, the romantic relationship is necessary to establish the degree to which the daughter is prepared to transgress both the female virtues preached by Confucianism and the virtue of silence upheld by her communist father.

The film starts with the arrival of the widowed Mr. Shi, a self-professed retired rocket scientist, in the US. Assuming his divorced daughter Yilan has been abandoned by her Chinese husband, Mr. Shi wishes to help her overcome this shame and, if possible, find another suitable man for her. Yilan is in her mid-thirties and works as a university librarian. Separated from her father for more than a decade, Yilan does not seem very happy reuniting with him. She seldom smiles, talks little and keeps her distance from him. In the hope that his daughter will open up to him, Mr. Shi buys a wok and prepares a sumptuous dinner every day. However, Yilan ignores his good intentions and continues to shut him out of her life. The extremely slow-paced film reaches its emotional climax when Mr. Shi and Yilan, for the first time in their life, talk candidly about the secrets each has concealed from the other for a long time.

Critics generally comment on the film in relation to Wang's low-key depiction of the generation gap between father and daughter. For instance, the *New York Times* reviewer holds that this film shows "the subtle day-to-day tensions between Mr. Shi and Yilan before building, in its circumspect way, to a big emotional resolution" (Lee). The commentary in the *New Yorker* similarly observes that the film deals with "cultural and generational issues between father and daughter" (Diones). *Variety* considers that Wang's film

shares its theme with Yasujiro Ozu's *Tokyo Story* (1953), a masterpiece about adult children's neglect of the emotional needs of their aging parents under the pressure of modern life (McCarthy 71). Although all these points are valid, none of these critics link the emotional repression communicated in Wang's film with a specific Chinese experience but instead consider it to be a more generally held generational problem that exists across different cultures.

In *Prayers* Wang uses silence or one-way talking via telephone to emphasize the non-communication between Yilan and her father. In the airport reception scene that inaugurates the film, their greetings are reserved and formulaic. If the audience understands Chinese, they will observe that the father-daughter pair talk like two strangers who use a tone that filters out the emotions one might expect after a separation of twelve years. Once Mr. Shi gets into Yilan's late-model sedan for the ride home, they do not speak to each other for the next two minutes of screen time. All that fills the silence is Mr. Shi's observation of the changing landscape of Spokane, a mid-sized regional town seen through the car window. When the camera cuts to a generic urban street there are a series of close-ups on roadside signage, all of which display a rich profusion of words in a variety of fonts. In this way Wang visually deploys the graphic slogans of American consumer culture to underscore the chilly verbal void between father and daughter.

As the film progresses and Mr. Shi renews his efforts to initiate various topics of conversation over dinner, Yilan keeps her head down, preferring to look closely at her own plate rather than verbally or visually engage her father. In subsequent scenes the deadening silence is amplified by the quiet surrounds of Yilan's suburban condominium, which is broken only by the friendly but inane chatter of a bikini-clad neighbor who talks to an embarrassed Mr. Shi at the edge of the communal pool. Wang's understated direction makes it abundantly clear that Yilan keeps her thoughts to herself even to the point of making her appear a cold and unsympathetic character. This, and much else in the film, runs against the Hollywood tradition of melodramatic expression that visually emphasizes female emotionality and speech.

As previously noted, Wang resorts to one-way telephone conversations to portray the emotional distance between father and daughter. In one scene, when Yilan calls to tell him she will not be returning home for dinner, Mr. Shi takes the opportunity to mention his daytime excursion to the train station. This prompts him to recount the origin of Yilan's name because it is also

related to a train station. Despite Yilan's reminder that she must leave for a party, Mr. Shi continues to indulge his sentimental memory. The scene is comprised of rhythmically alternating shots between Mr. Shi and Yilan, who is neatly turned out in a suit, sitting in her spartan office. From Mr. Shi's slow and nostalgic narration, which does not exist in Li's original story, we learn that the name of Yilan is taken from a small train station in Shaanxi Province in central China. According to his narration, on his way to his work base in the north-western Gansu Province, Mr. Shi once saw a little girl selling pickled eggs on the platform at Yilan station. He felt sad at the sight of her frostbitten hands. Since Yilan's mother was pregnant at that time, Mr. Shi had an urge to adopt that girl so as to provide a better life for her. However, that was the last time that Mr. Shi passed the station. Yilan is touched hearing her father's story and the occasional choking sobs with which he delivers it. In one close-up on Yilan's face, tears are seen brimming in her eyes at this account of how much the thought of her arrival in the world filled her father with love before she takes a deep breath to repress her turbulent emotions and turns her back against the camera. The frame then shifts to Mr. Shi who continues expressing his regret at having only one child because, had he had others, he could have named them after the different towns he passed on the way to the base in further acts of remembrance, not for his daughter or her imaginary siblings, but for his journey to honorable work. Before the camera again cuts to Yilan, we hear her clear her throat. When the actress playing Yilan turns back to face the camera, she looks agitated and embarrassed by her father's speech with its combination of emotional disclosure and obtuseness while, oblivious to her reaction, he has already moved on to tell her that he has cooked her favorite dish and reminds her to come home early.

In a second telephone scene, Yilan and her father switch their roles with Yilan as the main speaker and Mr. Shi the listener. When Mr. Shi does not answer the phone in time, Yilan leaves a message saying she will not be back home because she has missed the last bus. When he recognizes Yilan's voice on the machine, Mr. Shi immediately picks up the receiver and tries to talk to her. However, Yilan quickly finishes her message and hangs up, avoiding a direct conversation with her father. Mr. Shi looks disappointed because Yilan does not respond to him. At this point the audience can keenly feel how Yilan's alienation from her father has escalated, though we still do not know its cause. Beginning with her initial silence at home, through to her late night

returns, and finally to her overnight absence, Yilan moves further and further away from her father. However, the distance she puts between them does not seem to secure her happiness, even though her absences are later revealed to have a romantic dimension.

Across the film the audience gradually begins to understand that Yilan's distance from her father is related to their shared familial culture of withholding emotionally charged information. It is only during her father's visit to America, for instance, that Yilan learns about her grandfather's sharp vicissitudes of fortune. At yet another superficially benign yet deeply fraught dinner with her father, Yilan learns that her grandfather first worked for the English and then as a manager in an American bank during World War II. For these capitalist activities he was dispossessed of property and demoted to the position of doorman after the Chinese Communist Party seized power. Because he did not belong to the main social stratum of workers, peasants and soldiers, neither did her grandfather escape persecution during the Cultural Revolution. When Yilan ventures to ask her father why he has never mentioned her family's experience of persecution before, Mr. Shi replies, "I don't want to talk about bad things. It's hard enough to just survive." We can perhaps understand the regime of self-censorship in Yilan's family as a form of denial of psychic trauma or a more rationally motivated attempt to stay safe. Whatever the impulse, it is clear that Yilan has grown up in a family marked by extreme emotional reticence. What remains unclear, however, is why she continues to reject her father's attempts to discuss her life in America, a place where freedom of speech is purportedly highly valued.

At the beginning of the film, when Yilan opens the door to her home so that her father can enter it, the curtains in her living room are closed and the apartment is dark and desolate. The drawn curtains in broad daylight symbolize Yilan's reluctance to communicate and connect with the outside community. Similarly, she closes the door of her room when she leaves for work, delivering an unmistakable message to her father that he is not welcome in her private space. Driven by his curiosity about his daughter's concealed world, Mr. Shi eventually pushes open the door and enters Yilan's room while she is at work. A slow camera movement exposes Yilan's room which contains a messy single bed on which some miscellaneous things are scattered. Paper cartons lie disorderly on the floor. The camera then picks out a dressing table covered with dust on which two sets of ever-smaller Russian dolls nest

inside each other. Apart from the enigma of the dolls, the interior of the room lays bare what we already know of Yilan's life in America: it is full of material goods but few signs of intimate bonds.

In another scene, after an open conflict with her father who has urged her to remarry and have a baby soon, Yilan makes an excuse and leaves the house. In the frame that follows Yilan is seen sitting alone in a corner of a movie theatre dotted with a few middle-aged and elderly viewers. In the beam of light flashed from the movie projector, Yilan's face looks grim and her eyes are glassy—she is not watching the film but brooding over her father's attempt to dictate the terms of her life and happiness, although the audience still doesn't know from whence her deep sadness and anger comes.

The first time the film touches on Yilan's intimate life is in the final dinner scene between her and her father. Once again father and daughter sit in unnerving silence. When the phone rings Yilan nervously puts down her chopsticks and dashes toward her room. Even though she knows her father cannot totally catch her words since she is talking in English, she semi-closes the door to prevent him from hearing the conversation. Judging from her tone alone, Mr. Shi can hear that Yilan is more verbally expansive and energized in talking with whoever has rung than she has ever been with him. After the call Yilan leaves the house wearing an elegant cheongsam-style blouse completely unlike anything she has worn before, saying she is going to see a film with a friend. Not only is the top pink, a color associated with romance and femininity in stark contrast to the neutral colors of the professional dress in which she has appeared thus far, but the fact that it is a Chinese dress seems out of character in someone so obviously annoyed by her father's attempts to bring Chinese tradition into the house. One possible explanation is that Yilan is dating a westerner who might respond to the exotic and sensual aura of her blouse. Whatever the reason, it is clear that Mr. Shi understands the sensuous implications of his daughter's dress but does not inquire further.

In contrast to the communication barriers that exist between Yilan and her father, Mr. Shi finds it easy to introduce himself to strangers. For example, at the beginning of the film when Mr. Shi waits to claim his luggage, an American lady comes up to him and wishes him a pleasant time in America. As she withdraws from the scene, she cheerfully tells her sister who comes to meet her that Mr. Shi has told her compelling stories on the plane about his career as a rocket scientist. Similarly, in the poolside scene at the

condominium the vivacious sunbathing girl is interested in knowing more about Mr. Shi's fascinating career as a rocket scientist. Though he is the one to have brought this up, Mr. Shi has to keep turning his eyes away from her because he feels uneasy seeing her bare body. In the end Mr. Shi ends the conversation brusquely, leaving the physically unselfconscious girl perplexed. This comic scene of cross-cultural mismatch between his Chinese sense of decorum and her American shamelessness prepares the viewer for the park bench conversations between Mr. Shi and an elderly Iranian woman that provide the sustained counterpoint to the film's main father-daughter plot line.

Immediately following Mr. Shi's scene with the bikini-clad girl, the camera cuts to a wide view of an open green field before zooming in for a close-up of a park bench where Mr. Shi is sitting with a grey-haired woman in her seventies. In the three-minute scene that follows, the two talk to each other uninhibitedly despite the elementary and ungrammatical English they share. Though they have a language barrier between them, they nonetheless seem to infer from the other's gestures and countenance what they are talking about even when they revert to their native language. This scene reveals that successful communication is not necessarily based on a common language or a common cultural heritage but rather can be realized through sincerity and emotional empathy.

In the next two bench-conversation scenes, Mr. Shi and the Iranian woman manage to construct a strong emotional bond even though they are constrained to speak in very simple English, a language alien to both of them. For instance, after the friction with Yilan over her not having children, Mr. Shi confesses to his new friend that he feels guilty about having failed to establish a close relationship with his daughter. Affected by Mr. Shi's concern for Yilan, the Iranian lady goes on to show a photograph to Mr. Shi while melancholically telling him that she lost her daughter in the eight-year-long war between Iran and Iraq in the 1980s. Mr. Shi first looks startled and then sorrowful before the camera cuts to a long shot of a group of ducks swimming in a man-made lake, then to another group dashing towards the water, and finally to the green trees and manicured grassland in the distance. These tranquil shots of a benign but essentially artificial natural landscape imply that America knows nothing of the heartache of its migrant communities and the ongoing trauma of their pasts.

It is thought-provoking that Yilan and her father cannot communicate

well even though they speak the same language and share the same blood, while Mr. Shi and the Iranian stranger can overcome linguistic and cultural barriers to develop quickly a shared if unspoken understanding of the pain they carry in their hearts. Wang's film uses the three park-bench scenes not only to reveal the possibility of building an emotional attachment through non-verbal language but also to establish a precedent by which the conflict between Yilan and her father might be obliquely resolved outside the usual dialogue-driven templates of Hollywood melodrama.

The reconciliation between father and daughter is first precipitated by the eruption of silence into angry speech. Mr. Shi discovers that Yilan has been dating behind his back and interrogates her about it. Despite her reluctance to share her intimate life, Yilan opens her mouth in order to blame her father for the breakdown of her first marriage. From her explanation we learn that it was because she was not good at communicating in Chinese that her ex-husband always suspected she was hiding something from him. She filed for divorce not only because her marriage had no language in which to express itself, but also because she relished talking with her current lover on first meeting him. As she states, intimate communication in English gives her a kind of rapture that she cannot experience while speaking in the emotionally constricted Chinese she has learned from her family: "If you grew up in a language in which you never learned to express your feelings, it would be easier to talk in a new language. It makes you a new person." The gist of Yilan's remark is that people cannot establish a strong sense of self, or communicate with one another, in a language that fails to deliver what they think and feel about themselves or each other. For Yilan, learning another language and being able to communicate in English is an opportunity to reconstruct and reconfirm her own identity or, in Martin Heidegger's words, to build "the house of being" (254).

As the scene continues, Yilan goes on to accuse Mr. Shi of lying about his career and hiding an adulterous affair when he was married to her mother. Although Yilan attributes her subsequent marital silence to her parents' original marital silence, this is the first time that Mr. Shi becomes aware that he was the subject of gossip in his Chinese neighborhood and that his late wife and daughter have been tortured by the rumor of his adultery. The following day Mr. Shi is given his own confession scene with Wang's camerawork effectively splitting the screen vertically through the placement

of a wall that separates father and daughter in different rooms. On the left side of the screen Mr. Shi sits on the bed holding his head low. He speaks with marked sincerity having finally abandoned his usual cheery admonishments. On the right side of the screen Yilan sits down and listens attentively when she hears her father's voice travelling towards her from the other side of the wall. The wall not only maintains Mr. Shi's patriarchal dignity—insofar as it screens him from his daughter, we might say it is a face-saving device—but also symbolizes the difficulty of revealing one's secret to those who are too close to us.

From his difficult narration we learn that Mr. Shi used to be a rocket scientist but was demoted to a clerk at the age of 32 because he refused to admit to a falsely imputed affair with his female assistant. Proud of contributing to the development of China's first rocket, Mr. Shi and his assistant spent a lot of time talking with each other at work, establishing an intimacy that was evident to his superiors if still not to him. When Mr. Shi's Communist Party leaders coerced him to recognize that he had fallen in love with his assistant, he refused because he insisted the allegation was ungrounded and no wrongdoing had occurred.

In Yiyun Li's original story, it is clear that due to the secrecy of his job, Mr. Shi is not allowed to talk about his work with his family. As a result, Mr. Shi speaks very little at home and never develops an intimate bond with his wife and daughter. Eager to share with someone his excitement and pride in his work as a rocket scientist, Mr. Shi turns to the unmarried female card-puncher because, unlike when he talks with his wife at home, he feels he does not need to "hide anything" while talking to her (Li 202). Despite Mr. Shi's insistence of the innocence of their relationship, his frequent talking with the card-puncher is interpreted by his superiors as their having an extramarital affair and both are punished for their "moral transgression." The puncher is banished to the countryside while Mr. Shi, who denies the accusation and refuses to make a public self-criticism, is demoted to the lowest-rank of clerk.

Although Mr. Shi maintains that they were wronged, those around him as well as the reader can see what he could not, namely that his effervescent talking with his female colleague might be a form of love, especially in comparison with his verbally stunted relationship with his wife and daughter. Besides this example there are other moments in the story that show Mr. Shi's

lack of self-knowledge or awareness of his own male chauvinism. For instance, he projects the image of “a preoccupied and silent” scientist at home (Li 203) because he wants his wife and daughter to assume his silence was the requirement of his profession not camouflage for his disgraceful relegation. In the story Mr. Shi mentions a couple of times that his deceased wife was a good woman because she was “soft-voiced” and “dutiful” (Li 188), “quiet and understanding” (Li 203), and never “confrontational” like his daughter is currently (Li 194). Moreover, the story reveals, he has never expected the changes he sees in his daughter since he has always regarded her as “a younger version” of his wife (Li 188-89). The story makes it clear that, due to his patriarchal criteria of female virtues, Mr. Shi is insensitive to his wife’s “questioning look” (Li 190) and takes his daughter’s obedience and silence for granted. Equally subject to male-centered gender rules, his wife has never confronted him with the rumor of adultery. What is poignant in this situation as it unfolds in the story is that not only has his wife not survived to hear his clarification but his daughter remains “uninterested in his words” (Li 193) and cannot accept his efforts to amend for his past mistakes because she has grown accustomed to their lack of communication.

The film adaptation, however, takes a slightly different tack, dropping some of the story information and adding different details. Generally speaking, the film is less interested in the past accusation of an affair by the Chinese Communist Party (hereafter CCP) overlords. Rather, it concentrates on the present-tense emotional conflict and resolution between Mr. Shi and his daughter Yilan.

The closing sequences push the restrained emotionality of the film to another height. Following Mr. Shi’s confession there is a montage of objects that have appeared previously in the film. These include: the red fan-shaped wooden plank whose center is inscribed with an inverted Chinese character for good fortune (*fu*), which Mr. Shi has hung on the entrance door of Yilan’s apartment to her initial irritation; the Russian dolls signifying Mr. Shi’s crushed expectations of an extended family and also Yilan’s knowledge that her Russian lover will ultimately go back to his wife; and a sham totemic bear that Mr. Shi buys from a smooth-talking dealer in Native American artifacts in the hope it can dispel his daughter’s gloominess.⁴ After this montage of

⁴ Although in the press release that accompanied the film, Wayne Wang explains that the different layers of the Russian dolls signify the veiled aspects of Yilan’s life, I hold that Mr. Shi also projects

Chinese, Russian and American-Indian objects, all of them invested with hope, the sequence ends in a medium shot of the two transparent window panes in the living room that were seen covered by curtains at the beginning of the film. This newly acknowledged transparency is further corroborated by the following cut to Yilan sitting on the familiar park bench smiling at her father who is looking back at her. This image provides *Prayers* with minimal emotional closure, though it is not yet the end of the film. It keeps in careful balance the needs of the individual and the needs of the family, neither of which can be easily satisfied.

In the final scenes of the film as the soundtrack plays Joe Henry's "Wave," a sentimental song about bygone love, Mr. Shi is seen sitting on a train on his way back to Beijing. From his animated body language demonstrating a rocket flying from a launching pad, we know he is yet again talking about his former job to the woman sitting opposite him. Although the song is about a man who visits his old lover after a long separation, the romance it evokes is lost on Mr. Shi who is still obsessed by his glory days as a rocket scientist in thrall to the party and any woman who buys into that cause. The scene then cuts to a medium shot of Yilan who is in her office working in front of her computer. She is wearing her trademark professional suit with no obvious signs of emotion on her face. Compared with Mr. Shi's passion for his work for the CCP, Yilan's attitude towards her job implies a work ethic held only for its capacity to fill an otherwise empty life. In this visual postscript, the film once again offsets our expectations of a melodramatic conclusion that will come down either on the side of the feeling individual or the side of the family.

III. Conclusion

Compared with Yiyun Li's original eighteen-page story, the film adaptation achieves a richer texture by adding more characters and interactions to develop its theme. Moreover, it downplays the short story's emphasis on repression under the communist totalitarian regime in favor of

his yearning for an extended family onto the multilayered Russian dolls. The proof is that Mr. Shi juxtaposes the largest male doll with three female ones in different sizes on the table, an action that precedes his disclosure to Yilan about wanting to become a grandfather. See "*A Thousand Years of Good Prayers*."

bringing the difficulties of emotional communication between father and daughter to the fore. It can be argued that compared with the original story on which it is based, the film *Prayers* alters plot points and character perspectives to make itself more melodramatic and less explicitly political. It investigates the personal and largely emotional consequences of acceding to a regime of secrecy by highlighting the emotional tension and communication barriers between a father and daughter in the diasporic setting. Where human language fails to establish an affective and communicative bond between characters, the film brings to the fore the eloquence of non-verbal language, objects, sounds, and, above-all else, silence. On the whole, Wang's *Prayers*, like Yiyun Li's fiction more generally, departs from established models of dissident narratives insofar as it tries to show that the gendered emotional legacy of Chinese totalitarianism continues even after that political regime has been escaped through migration.

Works Cited

- “A *Thousand Years of Good Prayers*: A Film by Wayne Wang.” 2007. Web. 16 May 2013.
 <http://filmplusplus.com/wp-content/uploads/dl_docs/THOUSAND_YEARS-NotesEnglish.pdf>
- Berry, Chris. “The Chinese Side of the Mountain.” *Film Quarterly* 60.3 (2007): 32-37. Print.
- Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations*. Trans. Harry Zohn. Ed. Hannah Arendt. 1969. New York: Schocken Books, 2007. Print.
- Cheung, King-Kok. “Re-viewing Asian American Literary Studies.” *An Interethnic Companion to Asian American Literature*. Ed. King-Kok Cheung. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997. 1-36. Print.
- Chin, Frank. “Come All Ye Asian American Writers of the Real and the Fake.” *The Big Aiiiiiiii! An Anthology of Chinese American and Japanese American Literature*. Ed. Jeffery Paul Chan, Frank Chin, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Wong. New York: Meridian, 1991. 1-92. Print.
- Diones, Bruce. “A Thousand Years of Good Prayers.” *New Yorker* 29 Sept. 2008. Web. 14 May 2015.
 <<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2008/09/29/movies-67>>
- Edemariam, Aida. “Found in Translation.” *Guardian* 6 Dec. 2006: G2. Print.
- Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. London: Penguin, 1991. Print.
- . *Power: Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984*. Trans. Robert Hurley et al. Ed. James D Faubion. Vol. 3. London: Penguin, 2002. Print.
- Heidegger, Martin. *Pathmarks*. Ed. William McNeil. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998. Print.
- Lee, Nathan. “Friends and Family.” *New York Times* 19 Sep. 2008: E. 16. Print.
- Li, Yiyun. *A Thousand Years of Good Prayers*. London: Harper Perennial, 2006. Print.
- McCarthy, Todd. “A Thousand Years of Good Prayers.” *Variety* Sep. 2007: 71. Print.
- Miao, Wei. “Translatability and Untranslatability: Reexamining the Trans-Pacific Reception of Ha Jin.” *Cross-cultural Studies* 1.11

- (2014): 1-21. Print.
- Robinson, David. "If I Go Back." *A Thousand Years of Good Prayers*. By Yiyun Li. London: Harper Perennial, 2006. 2-6. Print.
- Rumbaut, Rubén G. "The One-and-A-Half Generation: Crisis, Commitment, and Identity." *The Dispossessed: An Anatomy of Exile*. Ed. Peter I. Rose. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005. 337-43. Print.
- Thompson, Bob. "Will Words Fail Her? Immigration Officials Snub Literary Sensation Yiyun Li despite Her Peers' Praise." *Washington Post* 21 Dec. 2005: C. 01. Print.
- Walsh, Bryan. "Truth in Another Tongue." *Time* Feb. 2006. Asian ed. Web. 16 May 2013.
<<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1161325,00.htm>
>
- Wang, Chih-ming. "Politics of Return: Homecoming Stories of the Vietnamese Diaspora." *Positions* 21.1 (2013): 161-87. Print.
- Wong, Sau-ling Cynthia. "Immigrant Autobiography: Some Questions of Definition and Approach." *American Autobiography: Retrospect and Prospect*. Ed. Paul John Eakin. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1991. 142-70. Print.