

“Ethnic Credibility” and Post-Tragedy Chinese Fiction

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Fiction and memoir offer a space for authors to reaffirm, reconstruct, or reject aspects of the self. The ongoing creation of the Asian-American canon (the recognition of certain authors, subjects, and stories as “Asian-American literature”) has spurred debates within the Asian-American community about how Asian-American stories are told. Popular representations have historically contributed to Chinese and Chinese-Americans being objects of both anxiety and desire. This summer, I used theoretical frameworks to understand how traumatic events in Chinese history are reflected in the fiction that has emerged in the post-Cultural Revolution era. This project investigated specific literary and linguistic techniques of representation to consider what constitutes a literary canon within Chinese-American fiction/memoirs.

In completion, the project will be tripartite, with each section focusing on one author and topic. Chinese-American writer Li Yiyun’s ideas of self-effacement in memoir and autofiction offer a masterful navigation of the double bind between historicization and idealization. Both *Kinder Than Solitude* (2013) and *The Vagrants* (2009) unfold in clear political subtexts: the former taking place after the Tiananmen Square Massacre, the latter set a decade after the Cultural Revolution. Li’s fiction reflects on periods of Chinese history rife with political upheaval, yet also delves into the mystery of private lives and people. These intimate portraits of post-tragedy life probe at the timelessness of themes like home and history.

Both novels begin with the death of a politically radical woman, one at the hands of the state and the other as a suspected poisoning. In *The Vagrants*, the public denunciation and execution stirs up the small provincial town of Muddy River, an unremarkable town of small factories and shacks housing a number of migrant workers from the countryside. The devastating effects of the public execution are told by a cluster of unique, marginal characters: streetsweeper Old Hua, a deformed girl called Nini, the idealist Teacher Gu, 7-year-old Tong who wonders how young a boy can be to sacrifice his life for the Communist cause. Titles like “(counter)revolutionary,” “martyr,” and “hero” have particular implications in post-socialist contexts, and within the novel, characters frequently debate the impact of Maoist canon on Gu Shan’s posthumous reputation. Regarding *The Vagrants*, Li has explained that heroism is a prevalent notion in China, but is not one that writers can embrace since it is “absolute,” allowing no room for the “grayness of human beings.” Li remarks that “If you think the book was a rebellion, the only rebellious thing...was that I really wanted to question [this culture of heroism] and say, ‘Really, there’s no hero.’” As the intelligent but impotent Teacher Gu observes, “what marks our era...is the moaning of our bones crushed beneath the weight of empty words”.

The self-imposed isolation of characters in both *The Vagrants* and *Kinder Than Solitude* can be simultaneously admired and scorned. Both are spaces that resist easy comprehension, posing questions of how post-tragedy selfhood can be located through memoir and fiction. “My characters are not activists in life, but they protest by being solitary,” Li revealed to the Guardian. “They are very stubborn and don’t want to be in the spotlight. I think their loneliness is partly a choice, and I really, really respect them for making that choice.”

Faculty Mentor: Belinda Kong

Funded by the Surdna Foundation Undergraduate Research Fellowship Program

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