

Narrative of Marginalized Communities in Yiyun Li's "Extra": A New Historicist Approach to the Deconstruction of Undoing Language

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Abstract

This paper employs a new historicist approach to analyze Yiyun Li's short story "Extra" from her collection *A Thousand Years of Good Prayers*, examining the impact of Chinese Reform and Opening-up on marginalized communities. Through the technique of undoing language, Li deconstructs historical events and narratives, thereby delaying the attainment of ultimate truth. By recounting the story of Granny Lin, a factory worker who was laid off, Li sheds light on the challenges faced by marginalized communities during China's Reform and Opening-up period. Ultimately, "Extra" is a poignant and thought-provoking work that illuminates the inherent complexities in both history and human experience.

"Undoing language" is a technique that employs language to extend the temporal and spatial dimensions of our narrative, thereby deferring the attainment of ultimate truth (Prosperi, 2023).^[1] Yiyun Li employed this technique in her short story "Extra" skillfully weaving together the narratives of marginalized characters and the historical events that shaped their lives. "Extra" comes from Yiyun Li's first short stories collection *A Thousand Years of Good Prayers*. The story tells an old factory worker, Granny Lin who is "honorably retired" from Beijing garment factory, goes through several trials and tribulations as a laid-off worker and finally learns what love is. By examining the story, we can discern that Li situates the historical context of the story in the period of Chinese Reform and Opening-up. The reform of China's state-owned enterprises resulted in a large number of workers losing their jobs (Gu, 1999).^[2] Therefore, Granny Lin as an unemployed factory worker also became one of the members in marginalized communities. Adopting a new historicist approach, this paper aims to analyze Yiyun Li's usage of undoing language to deconstruct historical events while narrating stories of marginalized communities.

The CCP introduced market reforms in the late 1970s and early 1980s, which allowed foreign capital to enter the market and non-state entrepreneurs to start business. More and more state-owned enterprises underwent mergers and restructuring, which, while stimulating the country's economic development through policy implementation, also resulted in the full privatization of the state sector in 1998. This led to a significant number of factory workers being laid off from former state enterprises (Gu, 1999).^[2] The underlying cause of this phenomenon lies in the "full employment" policy implemented within the state-owned enterprise sector, which operates under a centrally planned economic system. This policy imposed a significant burden on the majority of state-owned enterprises (1999), resulting in the emergence of laid-off workers as a pressing social issue under the triple pressures of foreign-funded enterprises, individual businesses, and employment policies.

In order to mitigate the social impact of laid-off workers, media outlets have been focusing

on promoting successful re-employment stories. For instance, CHINANEWS published an article on November 17th, 2008 titled “30 Years of Reform and Opening-up: The Remarkable Transformation of a Laid-off Female Worker”.

Yiyun Li aptly portrayed the issue of this historical process through Granny Lin, a laid-off worker whose age of fifty-one precluded her from undergoing another “magnificent metamorphosis”. Just as the title of the story “Extra” suggests, she became a peripheral figure in the process of social development and a member of marginalized communities. The use of deconstructive language in her narration also provides a powerful critique of China's Reform and Opening-up policy.

For the concept of “undoing”, Slavoj Žižek posits in his book *Event* that every event has an inherent tendency to remain incomplete or unfinished, and thus any political interpretation thereof is inherently limited and narrow (2014).^[3] Meanwhile, in deconstruction, the phenomenon of “difference” involves a delay and undoing of meaning-making in language which suggests that meaning is never fixed or complete, and a final comprehension of meaning within language itself remains elusive (Rivkin and Ryan, 2017).^[4] This “undoing” concept has been also applied in Prospero's analysis of Yiyun Li's language. According to her, Li employs “undoing language” as a strategy for deferring the confrontation with reality, thereby creating a space-time for communication purposes (Prospero, 2023).^[1]

In “Extra”, Yiyun Li provides a relatively straightforward description of Chinese Reform and Opening-up. When she explained the background of Lin's “retirement”, she described that “Being honorably retired, Granny Lin will not receive her pension. Of course, it does not provide such information, for these facts are simply not true. ‘Bankrupt’ is the wrong word for a state-owned industry. ‘Internal reorganization’ is what has been kindly omitted from the certificate. And, mind this, Granny Lin’s pension is being withheld only temporarily.” (Li, 2003).^[5] This description offers a subtle fact of the great pressure experienced by the factory during that period of restructuring and reform. The factory had to terminate the service of extra workers, who were given an option of a “retirement” without subsequent benefits.

Moreover, Yiyun Li also mentioned the classic slogan of Toyota when it entered the Chinese market in 1985: “‘There is always a road when you get into the mountain,’ Auntie Wang, Granny Lin’s neighbor, says to her upon being informed of Granny Lin’s situation. ‘And there is a Toyota wherever there is a road.’ The second line of the Toyota commercial slips out before Granny Lin realizes it” (Li, 2003).^[5] The irony of the slogan lies in the fact that while Toyota brings roads, its introduction may also bring about the end road of state-owned factory workers like Granny Lin.

The story reaches its pinnacle of irony as Grandma Lin falls victim to a robbery on the road. “Granny Lin sits on the street and hugs the lunch pail to herself. Hungry as people are, it is strange that nobody ever thinks of robbing an old woman of her lunch” (Li, 2003).^[5] Upon a cursory examination of the past, one may attribute Granny Lin’s success to mere luck; however, there exists a distinctive interpretation of the “lunch pail” image. The Chinese term can be compared to the English concept of a “job for life”, and individuals holding such positions are typically comprised of military personnel, civil servants, and employees of various state-owned enterprises (BBC, n.d.).^[6] To put it differently, even the mugger refrains from considering robbing an elderly woman's lunch box. Her sarcastic yet non-committal words effectively convey the harshness of a society that callously strips away an old lady's livelihood while feigning empathy.

Yiyun Li’s narration, whether of “honorably retired”, Toyota’s initial slogan when it entered

the Chinese market and the “lunch pail”, is bland and ironic. She did not interpret these historical events but just narrate them without political tendency. She was undoing language to make historical events have more meaning rather than narrow criticism.

Yiyun Li not only employs language to undo the political events, but also masterfully undoes language in her portrayal of social marginalized characters. Li's description of the conversation between Grandma Lin and Kang, a little boy abandoned by his father and stepmother, also uses undoing language to express the inner struggles and hopes of people on the edge of society:

“My mom said she would come and get me back one day.”

“When?”

“She said soon.” (Li, 2003).^[5]

In this conversation, Kang is already aware that his biological mother will not visit him again. However, when Granny Lin directly inquired about the timing of her return, Kang responded with ambiguity by saying “soon”. Yiyun Li's use of undoing language in the story adds depth and meaning to its interpretation. Similarly, when Old Tang died, Li describes his funeral like this: “Nobody pays any attention to Granny Lin at the funeral. She sits in a corner and listens to the men and women who come up to talk about Old Tang's life” (Li, 2003).^[5] In a straightforward and concise manner, Li adeptly conveys that Grandma Lin is an outsider and “extra” one in this sham of a marriage until the very end. No one held her accountable for anything, yet she remained seated alone in a corner, leaving everyone to wonder whether she truly desired to be part of her husband's funeral or if she simply found herself there as an “extra” person who stray into here.

This is how Yiyun Li's “Extra” portrays the life stories of marginalized groups in society whose lives have been impacted by political and historical events. For Kang, a young boy, he remains “extra” to his family and will never be able to reunite with his birth mother. However, Li undoes language in her depiction, which delays his confrontation with reality. The description, devoid of excessive emotional expression, renders the reader unable to discern the true intentions or thoughts of the characters. The same can be said for Granny Lin's quest for love as an elderly laid-off worker - a preposterous and sorrowful tale that was ultimately impossible in terms of feasibility and time constraints. Undoing Language also delays Grandma Lin's encounter with harsh reality. An old lady pondered on a little boy what love looked like. The boy loves his own mother, but will not fall in love with Granny Lin, and she knows that her separation from Kang is inevitable. However, Yiyun Li undoes language to extend the temporal and spatial dimensions in which characters transition from idealistic imaginings to harsh realities, thereby engendering a beauty of character and art that arises from this process.

In conclusion, Yiyun Li's “Extra” is a potent work of fiction that utilizes Granny Lin's narrative to shed light on the impact of Chinese Reform and Opening-up as well as the predicament of marginalized communities. By employing a new historicist approach and utilizing the technique of undoing language, Li deconstructs historical events and endows readers with complete autonomy in interpreting their significance. While emphasizing the challenges faced by marginalized communities and their sense of powerlessness in the face of economic and social change, the narrative also illustrates how individuals like Granny Lin can find solace and even discover what love truly means despite their struggles. Overall, “Extra” is a poignant and thought-provoking work that serves as a reminder of the complexities inherent in history and human experience.

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