

國立臺灣師範大學英語學系
碩士論文
Master's Thesis
Department of English
National Taiwan Normal University

酷異離散：
李翊雲短篇小說中的親屬關係
Queer Diaspora:
Kinship in Yiyun Li's Short Stories



指導教授：李秀娟 博士
Advisor: Dr. Hsiu-Chuan Lee
研究生：蘇揚傑
Yang-Chieh Su

中華民國 108 年 6 月
June 2019

摘要

本論文探討李翊雲兩部短篇小說集《千年修得共枕眠》與《金童玉女》中的三個短篇：〈千年修得共枕眠〉、〈內布拉斯加公主〉與〈金童玉女〉。論文著重於故事中多元的親屬關係如何呼應或悖離傳統對親屬關係的想像。為了理解李翊雲作品中的親屬關係是如何產生與維繫，我主張將性別以及離散身分納入討論。藉由「酷異離散」的概念探討李翊雲的作品，我主張她的作品展示另類的、「酷異」的親屬關係形式，這些關係將有重新定義與重新想像親屬關係結構的潛能。

論文分成五章。第一章首先爬梳現存探討李翊雲的研究。雖然這些研究中有些曾談及親屬關係，但卻未深入探究這些關係如何產生與維繫。因此，我主張以「酷異離散」的概念分析文本中的親屬關係。同時在這章中，我追溯酷兒政治理論與亞美研究的交會以說明「酷異離散」的概念。第二章探討〈千年修得共枕眠〉之中父女關係形成的過程中，族裔身分的作用。我指出，這個短篇描繪一種由「談話的行動」形成與維繫的「酷異」親屬關係。第三章探討〈內布拉斯加公主〉中的三角關係。本章著重於女主角未出生的胎兒對於女主角以及兩位主要男性角色的意義，分析文本如何呼應或挑戰以父系繼承概念為中心的親屬關係。第四章探討〈金童玉女〉中主要角色的婚約關係。我主張這段婚姻關係被注入新的意義，被挪用為性少數社群在政治及文化高壓環境（中國）之下的一種生存策略。第五章反思與論文完成時，同時發生於台灣의同性婚姻合法化一事例，思考其對親屬關係想像可能造成的影響。

關鍵字：酷異離散、親屬關係、李翊雲、〈千年修得共枕眠〉、〈內布拉斯加公主〉、〈金童玉女〉

Abstract

This thesis aims to study three short stories selected from Yiyun Li's first two short story collections, *Thousand Years of Good Prayers* and *Gold Boy, Emerald Girl*: "A Thousand Years of Good Prayers," "The Princess of Nebraska," and "Gold Boy, Emerald Girl." The thesis focuses on the diverse representations of kinship in these stories and look into how they resonate or challenge our common conception of kinship. To better understand how the kinship relations in Li's fiction is produced and sustained, I argue that we need to take not only sexual but also diasporic identity into consideration. By locating Li's works in the critical framework of "queer diaspora," I argue that Li's works offer us alternative and "queer" accounts of kinship, which have the potential to redefine and reimagine kinship structures.

The thesis consists of five chapters. Chapter One first offers a brief review of existing scholarship on Li's fiction. Among these studies, although some have touched upon the issue of kinship, they do little in probing into how such relations are produced and sustained. I argue that the idea of "queer diaspora" would be fruitful in our discussion of kinship in the texts. Then I move on to elaborate on the notion of "queer diaspora" by tracing the convergence between queer politics and Asian American studies. Chapter Two delves into the father-daughter relationship in "A Thousand Years of Good Prayers" and argues how one's ethnic identity comes into play in kinship formation. The story also demonstrates an alternative "queer" account of kinship built by contingent encounters and sustained by acts of talking. Chapter Three looks into the triangular relationship in "The Princess of Nebraska." This chapter focuses on the meanings of the female protagonist's pregnancy to the three main characters and analyze show it resonates with or challenges conventional conception of kinship based upon heteronormative patrilineage.

Chapter Four probes into the marriage arrangement in “Gold Boy, Emerald Girl” and examines its signification. I argue that this seemingly heterosexual marriage is invested with new meaning as a survival strategy for sexual minorities to survive in a politically and socially constraining environment (i.e., China). In the concluding chapter, I reflect on the recent legalization of same-sex marriage in Taiwan and its possible impacts on kinship formation.

Key words: Queer diaspora, kinship, Yiyun Li, “A Thousand Years of Good Prayers,” “The Princess of Nebraska,” “Gold Boy, Emerald Girl”



Acknowledgements

I would like to first thank my advisor, Professor Hsiu-Chuan Lee, for all of her guidance through the incredible and painstaking journey of thesis-writing. I have a tendency to write in a rush without thinking thoroughly. Professor Lee was always there to remind me of slowing down and really contemplating every word I put down on these pages. She led me to finish this thesis step by step, and her insights inspired my approach to the texts tremendously. If it were not for her, I would not have been able to complete this work. I would also like to thank the members of my committee, Professor Ioana Luca and Professor Chen Chung-jen, for taking their time to read my work and participate in the oral. Their advice introduced new perspectives into this work and made my analysis more complete. Last but not least, I would like to thank my friend Cole DeVoy, who helped proofread the draft at crucial points. I cannot thank him enough for his encouragement during the process, and I wish him all the best for his Master's studies at Yale.

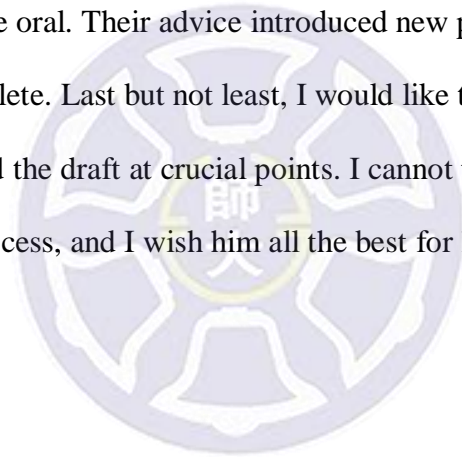


Table of Contents

Chapter One. Introduction	1
Chapter Two. “A Thousand Years of Good Prayers”	20
Chapter Three. “The Princess of Nebraska”	33
Chapter Four. “Gold Boy, Emerald Girl”	46
Chapter Five. Conclusion	59
Works Cited	63



Chapter One

Introduction

Kinship and Yiyun Li

Kinship has been an important issue in the works of Yiyun Li. In her debut short story collection, *A Thousand Years of Good Prayers* (2006), and the following collection, *Gold Boy, Emerald Girl* (2011), Li's topics of writing range from conflicting parent-children relationships and peculiar marriage arrangements to the struggles of gays and lesbians to cope with social pressures. In "A Thousand Years of Good Prayers," the confrontation between parents and children serves as Li's central concern. Li presents Mr. Shi, who flies across the Pacific Ocean to visit his newly-divorced daughter in the United States to "help her recover" (189). However, he soon finds himself struggling to communicate with her, as she refuses to talk to him as much as he would like. In "Gold Boy, Emerald Girl," the issue of kinship is complicated further when a mother requests that her son marry a woman who is secretly in love with the mother herself. Moving from the United States to settle down in China, Hanfeng agrees to marry one of his mother's students, Siyu, who has been secretly enamored with his mother. Despite the three principal characters' implied homosexuality, Siyu, Hanfeng and Hanfeng's mother all feel a sense of urgency about this marriage arrangement. The trio comes to look upon this nominal marriage not only as a source of companionship but as a means to secure themselves from social pressures – the mother's widowhood, Siyu's spinsterhood, and all three's homosexuality – through the formation of a "normal" family. Another story, "The Princess of Nebraska," also portrays characters who attempt to form a family despite their ambiguous relationships with one other. Boshen, having fled from China to the U.S. through a sham marriage, seeks to bring over

Yang, an 18-year-old Chinese “money boy” whom he has been in love with. Before that, however, he must accompany Sasha, a 21-year-old woman born and raised in Mongolia, through her abortion of Yang’s baby in Chicago. As these stories demonstrate, the complex relationships among Li’s characters are hard to define and name with conventional kinship terms. Focusing on the above three short stories, this thesis would like to explore Li’s representation of nontraditional kinship and its meaning.

Among the existing studies of Li’s fiction, some focus on the parent-child relationship in the texts and read it as a reflection of modern Chinese history. In this reading, the parents serve as symbols of China’s recent past while their children as symbols of Westernization. The conflict between parents and children is thus explained as a generational one between pre-modern China and its modern state under Western political and economic influence. As Fatema Ahmed claims in a review, “The parent-child relationships in this book [*A Thousand Years of Good Prayers*] provide a poignant commentary on the dislocation between modern China and its recent past.” As the statement suggests, Li’s depiction of parent-children relationships could be taken as a representation of modern China’s swift political and economic transformation during the twentieth century.

In addition to generational conflicts, some critics focus on how Li’s characters illustrate individuals’ struggles to cope with the transformation of the state. Taking Donna Seaman’s review as an example:

[*A Thousand Years of Good Prayers* is about] life in an increasingly capitalist yet all viciously repressive China with tales about Chinese immigrants and visitors to America. Her [Li’s] setting are vital and her characters richly complicated as they cope with the painful legacy of the cruelty and the madness of the Mao years and

as they struggle to maintain their dignity in volatile situations and their senses of self in unexpected alliances. (1964)

Seaman employs an accusatory tone toward the Mao regime and reads Li's characters as victims struggling in the aftermath of the Mao era. The characters are located in the historical intersection of China between the "repressive" Mao regime and its modern political situation amid "capitalist" Westernization. Though not specifically focusing on parent-child relationships, this reading again views Li's works as representations of China's historical position between its past and Western modernization. In my opinion, although looking at Li's works from this perspective might offer accounts of how Chinese individuals deal with political and economic transformation, it risks assuming a binary opposition between a "backward" China and a "forward" West. This binarism, moreover, generalizes Chinese people as victims who struggle to negotiate between a Chinese past and a Western present and future.

Besides the historical approach, some critics focus on Li's presentations of cultural differences between China and the West. In his article "Framing Risk in China" (2017) Graham J. Matthews studies the development of the Western conception of "risk" in the context of China. Matthews first draws on sociologists Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens's idea of "risk society" to explain that the Western notion of risk derives from modern industrialization. "Risk" indicates a state of concern toward the threats produced by modernization, such as "chemical pollution, atomic radiation, and genetically modified organisms" (Matthews 507). These threats differ from those in the pre-modern age, such as natural disasters, in that they are no longer attributable to fate; rather, they "originate in industrial and economic decisions and considerations of utility and function" (Matthews 507). Matthews suggests that such a conception of risk is fundamentally Western, since it does not consider varying historical and cultural contexts. Focusing on China

and its conception of risk, Matthews observes that “to date, there has been no significant study of risk society dynamics in China” (507). Li’s fiction, to Matthews, shows specific Chinese cultural situations in which the Western concept of risk society interacts with Chinese notions of risk and fate. This thesis would not delve into the difference between Western and Chinese ideas of risk. However, I emphasize the globalized nature of the idea of “risk society” in Matthews’s article: The idea of risk society “has its roots in post-feudal Europe but has become increasingly global over the course of the twentieth century” (Matthews 507).

Matthews’s attention to globalization, in which the concept of “risk” may vary in different contexts, leads up to another important perspective in reading Li’s fiction: the diasporic perspective. Indeed, as globalization enables cultural interactions to take place, it also enables people to move across national boundaries. And when people are able to move across national boundaries more freely, they bring cultures into interaction with each other. In Li’s fiction, many characters travel internationally, mostly between China and the United States. Li portrays the relationships and encounters between characters in diasporic situations, specifically between Chinese nationals and the Chinese living in the United States. Thus, it is important to take the diasporic experience of these characters into account when reading Li’s fiction.

Yi-Jou Lo, in his article “From What We Eat to How We Are” (1991), explores how Li’s characters in diasporic situations negotiate their national identities and identification through food and taste. Focusing on the father-daughter relationship in “A Thousand Years of Good Prayers,” Lo analyzes how food, including the presentation of color and the selection of ingredient, as presented in the story reveals the conflicting national and cultural identities of Mr. Shi and his daughter. Incorporated with the Chinese tradition, the dishes prepared by Mr. Shi become both symbolic of his Chinese ethnic origin and as a way to “help his daughter recall her

roots” (Lo 66). In this regard, food serves not only as a symbol of Mr. Shi’s own national and cultural identity but also as a way to solicit his daughter’s sense of being “Chinese.” Lo’s reading suggests that national and cultural identity plays a role in forming and maintaining kinship. However, in this reading, Mr. Shi seems to be a rather flat character: a father who sticks to his Chinese identity throughout the story and whose dishes “[tear] down the father-daughter relationship” (Lo 65). That is, the father-daughter relationship, in Lo’s reading, becomes a one-way relationship, in which the father tries to impose his national identity on his daughter. Lo’s reading does little in analyzing the changing dynamics of the father-daughter relationship, though it highlights the role of national and cultural identity in the process of relation-building. I believe that looking at Mr. Shi’s diasporic situation more closely would demonstrate how the idea of diaspora may further complicate Mr. Shi’s identity and a nationalist conception of kinship, which I will elaborate later in this thesis.

Alongside the diasporic perspective, other critics approach Li’s works from the angle of queerness. In her Master’s thesis “Queering Asian America” (2014), Yu-xuan You looks into how Wayne Wang’s cinematic adaptations of Li’s stories highlight the “queerness” of the Chinese-American identity and experience. You studies how Wang’s narratives deviate from patriarchal lineage, and as such offers a “queer” perspective which challenges the thinking that privileges heterosexual reproduction in the conception of future (the idea of “reproductive futurism,” as You borrows from Lee Edelman). Specifically, You focuses on how the motif of “the child” in Wang’s films not only “challenges the linear future of patriarchal reproduction but also implies the many possibilities of Asian-American futures” (10). Wang’s adaptations of Li’s stories, according to You, foreground the contingency and changeability of the Chinese-American

experience, which enables us to potentially “queer” the Chinese America structured by the ideas of patriarchal linearity and heterosexual reproduction.

Also attending to the “queerness” in Li’s fiction, King-Kok Cheung analyzes the characters’ negotiations between their non-normative gender identity and the social constraints of gender norms when they strive to form a family. According to Cheung in her article “Somewhat Queer Triangle” (2015), Li’s texts “reveal the pressure on Chinese gays and lesbians to lead compromised lives so as to create the semblance of heterosexual families and to avoid the homophobic gaze of their larger societies” (88). As Cheung points out, despite the characters’ queer sexualities and ambiguous relations, they are in fact not as queer as we think they are: “The characters themselves reiterate heteronormative mores and assess one another accordingly, notwithstanding their nonconformity” (99). For example, some characters, such as Sasha in “The Princess of Nebraska,” still considers homosexuality as a deviation, as she blames Yang’s profession as a *Nan Dan* (a male actor who plays a female character in the Peking Opera) for Yang’s homosexuality: “Why was there *Nan Dan* in the Peking Opera in the first place? *Men loved him because he was playing a woman; women loved him because he was a man playing. ... He didn’t have to be a man playing a woman—I thought I would make him understand*” (Li 89-90, italics original). Sasha’s sticking to heterosexual norms and considering Yang’s homosexuality as an “aberration,” to Cheung, attest to “the power of official discourse and social pressures” (100). The characters’ decisions and behaviors reflect the hostility of political and cultural context of China toward sexual minorities.

While Cheung’s argument focuses on the story’s representations of the Chinese gays’ and lesbians’ experience in a socially and politically constraining environment, I would like to study how they develop alternative kinship accounts within or outside such a context—in China or in a

relatively more tolerant society: the United States. I propose to take into consideration the diasporic experience of characters in the conception of kinship. I draw on David Eng's idea of "queer diaspora," which takes queerness as a "wide method of racial critique" to examine how diasporic experience works in producing and shaping kinship (Eng, *Racial Castration* 217). Bringing "queer" and "diaspora" together, I hope to see if "diaspora" could break away from its seemingly inextricable link to ethnic traceability, and as such offer a new means to imagine and "queer up" kinship. Before delving into how "queer diaspora" can better inform the complexity of kinship in Li's fiction, I will first briefly review the concept of kinship and then move on to offer an account of the idea of queer diaspora in the following sections.

Kinship

The meaning of the term "kinship" has remained debatable. Broadly speaking, kinship refers to how individuals are categorized and organized into groups in the society; that is, how individuals connect with each other socially. One of the most common and prevailing kinship relations is blood relationship, as *Oxford Dictionary* lays a (maybe too) concise definition on "kinship": "blood relationship." The study of kinship mostly focuses on various patterns and forms of blood relationships. As anthropologist Robin Fox points out, "the study of kinship is the study of what man does with these basic facts of life – mating, gestation, parenthood, socialization, siblingship etc." (30). Fox's list of kinship forms highlights blood relationships that individuals share with each other in forming kinships, such as the reproduction of blood (i.e. mating), the connection between the mother and her fetus (i.e. gestation), and the connection shared among biological brothers and sisters (i.e. siblingship). Clearly, blood is highly valued in the enterprise of kinship. Even today, the saying "blood is thicker than water" still prevails.

But kinship is not necessarily constrained to blood relation. According to *Cambridge Dictionary*, kinship can also refer to “a feeling of being close or similar to other people or things.” “Kinship,” in this case, can be used in a broader sense to signify the close feeling or bond shared among people, such as brotherhood, sisterhood or friendship, some of which are further explored in studies on homosociality.¹ In fact, in a broad sense, kinship may refer to an affinity between two individuals, which is possibly based upon “a shared ontological origin, a shared historical or cultural connection, or some other perceived features that connect the two entities” (“kinship,” *Wikipedia*). In the thesis, I draw on the term “kinship” to refer to both blood relations and intimate feelings because both can be found in the selected texts by Yiyun Li. For instance, in “A Thousand Years of Good Prayers,” “kinship” indicates the biological relation between Mr. Shi and his daughter as well as the intimate relation between Mr. Shi and his friend Madam.

Donna J. Haraway, in her book *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, explores the possibility of cross-species kinship. “Kinship” in her perspective should expand to refer to connections between humans and the other beings (other “critters,” in her words) in the natural world. Her “making kin” means to challenge the idea of Anthropocene, which designates an epoch when humankind has become the biggest influence on Earth’s ecosystems. The thinking of Anthropocene puts humankind at the center in the world and attributes environmental problems, such as climate change, to the dominance of human beings. To challenge such anthropocentric thinking, Haraway proposes “Make Kin, Not Babies” (102), which requires us to recognize and create new kinds of kin relations between humans and non-humans alike. As

¹ In sociology, “homosociality” refers to same-sex non-sexual relationships. Queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick popularized the term “homosocial” in her study on male homosocial desire and relations. For more on male homosociality, see Sedgwick’s *Between Men* (1985).

Haraway claims, “My purpose is to make ‘kin’ mean something other/more than entities tied by ancestry or genealogy” (102-103). Although Li’s fiction does not specifically touch on issues of cross-species kinship, it does echo Haraway’s claim that kinship should not be bound to genealogy. In a similar vein to Haraway’s “making kin,” this thesis explores the possibility of breaking kinship away from ancestry and genealogy by bringing diaspora into consideration to “queer up” kinship.

Queer Diaspora

David Eng’s notion of “queer diaspora” derives from his study of the Asian American diaspora. To better understand the concept of queer diaspora, in this section I would first define “queerness” within the context of queer politics and trace how it has been applied to complicate the conception of Asian American diaspora. Then I discuss how this conception of “queer diaspora” can be used beyond diasporic studies to probe into contemporary kinship and family formation, demonstrating how the idea can enrich our understanding of kinship in the globalized context.

Here one may wonder how and why we might approach Li’s texts through the lens of queer diaspora, since not all of Li’s characters are Asian Americans in a strict sense. Born and raised in China, most of the characters in the selected texts do not immigrate to the U.S., though some of them, such as Mr. Shi’s daughter and Hanfeng, have lived in America for a long time. Other characters, such as Mr. Shi and Boshen, have traveled between China and the United States. It should be noted here that, although Eng’s conception of queer diaspora derives from the convergence between Asian American studies and queer politics, it should not be limited to discussing the Asian American diaspora alone. Instead, it allows us to question the genealogical

implications embedded in the idea of diaspora itself and to further challenge our conception of kinship.

Originally meaning “strange” or “odd,” the term “queer” had been used to signify same-sex desires and relationships since the late nineteenth century. Queer theorists and activists recycled the pejorative implication of the word during the late twentieth century into a positive concept: to indicate those who reject conventional gender identities based on male-female binarism, including not only gay and lesbian identity but other non-normative genders and sexualities, such as bisexuality and transgendered identity. Today the term “queer,” according to *Oxford English Dictionary*, refers to “a sexual or gender identity that does not correspond to established ideas of sexuality and gender, especially heterosexual norms.” Drawing force from the term’s potential to question (hetero)normativity, queer theory emerged in the 1990s to advocate non-heteronormative perspectives in reading literary texts and to engage in the theorization of queerness itself. Judith Butler (1990) and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1990), for instance, lend queer studies theoretical bases by proposing the performativity and fluidity of gender identity. They emphasize the constructedness of gender identity within the social and cultural structures of power relations.

“Queerness” has gained increasing popularity in academia along with the development of the LGBT social movements in the past three decades; however, many queer theorists have been cautious about the possible reification of the concept of “queer” as a particular sexual orientation or gender identity. Many of them grew aware of the tendency that queer discourses were largely based on the assumption of a white subject; therefore, they urge that other dimensions of identity politics, such as race, ethnicity and class, be equitably considered. For example, Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, in “What Does Queer Theory Teach Us about X?” (1995), call for the

necessity of considering other aspects of identity politics, such as “exploitation, racial formation, the production of feminine subjectivity or of national culture” (347). Similarly, queer critic Cathy Cohen, in “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens” (1997), seeks a transformational queer politics in engagement with other layers of identity formation to challenge the dominant heterosexual-queer binary opposition. Cohen observes that “queer,” as an umbrella term, risks imagining non-heterosexual people as a whole without individual difference and heterosexual people as its opposite. In other words, queer politics could propose a simple and arbitrary dichotomy in which “all heterosexuals are represented as dominant and controlling and all queers are understood as marginalized and invisible” (Cohen 440). The way to look beyond the dichotomy and to maintain the dynamics of queerness is to take into consideration personal histories and multiple aspects of identities. Queer theorists have strived to keep up the critical momentum of queer theory by building connections between queer politics and other critical inquiries of the marginalized.

While “queer” in gender and cultural studies largely designates the problematic criteria to define various sexualities against heteropatriarchy, this term can refer to aspects broader than sexual desires and practices. In the context of Asian American studies, “queer” can be used, first and foremost, to understand Asian Americans’ juridical and social exclusion from the U.S. society. “Asian Americans,” according to Yu-xuan You in her master’s thesis “Queering Asian America,” can be “understood as ‘queer’ first because of their historical and cultural disavowed status as marginal figures and problematic subjects” (4). Indeed, under the influence of the Asian exclusion acts during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Asian immigrants struggled with racial discrimination and social marginalization in the U.S. society. They have

been rendered “queer” for their unassimilability and perpetual foreignness to the nation and the mainstream, predominantly white, society.

Asian American studies and queer politics resonate with each other on how they both contest a unifying identity category. The term “Asian American,” in imitation of the term “African American” introduced by the Civil Rights movements, was coined in the 1960s to promote political alliances of the ethnic community. However, critics have warned that the idea of such a unifying identity category like “Asian American” could diminish the cultural heterogeneity and multiplicity of the community. To be specific, during the time of Cultural Nationalism, Asian American studies tended to take for granted its subject to be “male, heterosexual, working class American-born, and English speaking” (Eng, *Q&A* 10). Therefore, critics attempted to challenge such normative idea of Asian American pan-ethnicity by taking into consideration alternative perspectives, such as gender, class, and exile experience (Lowe 1991; Lim 1997). Though not directly citing queer theory, Asian American critical texts share a similar focus with queer theory on how they problematize a unifying identity category and highlight the dynamics of identities constituted by multiple axes of social differences.

David Eng’s *Racial Castration* (2001) studies the impact of sexuality and gender on the racialization of Asian American men. In the concluding chapter, “Out Here and Over There,” Eng suggests that Asian American studies converge with queer studies at their claims of and resistances to a unifying identity from the position of marginalized subjects: “the now familiar critique of the subject of Asian American cultural nationalism traces much of its theoretical roots to work done in queer ... activism and cultural studies” (219). Eng argues for a conception of queerness not limited to the management and practice of sexuality; rather, he emphasizes “a politics of queerness ... as a wide method of racial critique” (217). Eng attempts to utilize the

political force of queerness to contest Asian American identity not only in terms of sexual orientation but also in terms of racial formation. Bringing queerness and diaspora together allows one to rethink the conventional conceptions of home in Asian American studies:

If earlier Asian American cultural nationalist projects were built on the political strategy of claiming home and nation-state through the domestic and the heterosexual, a new political project of thinking about this concept in Asian American studies today would seem to center around queerness and diaspora.
(219)

This statement suggests that the notion of queer diaspora is able to reconceptualize Asian American diaspora through challenging the normative notion of national and ethnic traceability, which for a long time has structured Asian American identity and culture. And such reconceptualization of Asian American diaspora relies on the political force of “queerness” to look into the conception of diaspora.

Eng’s notion of “queer diaspora” derives its force from the re-mobilization of queerness in queer politics. But queer studies, as David Eng, Judith Halberstam and José Esteban Muñoz, elaborates in the introductory essay to *Social Text*’s special issue on “What’s Queer about Queer Studies Now” (2005), has faced a critical impasse since the millennium: its concerns with identity politics and petitioning for gay-lesbian rights have diminished the political, transforming force of queerness. That is, when queer politics works hand-in-hand with individuals’ juridical entitlement and inclusion into the nation state, it tends to abandon its critical stance to challenge norms. Therefore, Eng, Halberstam, and Muñoz demand a renewal of queerness, proposing to mobilize queerness by utilizing its non-normative, dynamic power as an analytics of other critical inquires. “Queer diaspora” brings this non-normative dynamics to diaspora studies as a

means to question discourses of origin, which have been embedded in the concept of diaspora. In this way, queer diaspora is capable of “reconceptualizing diaspora not in conventional terms of ethnic dispersion, filiation, and biological traceability, but rather in terms of queerness, affiliation, and social contingency” (Eng, Halberstam, and Muñoz 7). Through the lens of queerness, diaspora is no longer in natural alignment with traceability and origin. Diasporic subjects might reject being imagined as dispersed from a certain ethnic, national or biological origin.

According to Eng, Halberstam and Muñoz, the challenge of queer diaspora to the conception of diaspora allows us to further contest conventional kinship structures, which are based upon genealogical thinking, such as filiation, affinity and patrilineal heritage. The lens of queer diaspora offers new ways of “contesting traditional family and kinship structures—of reorganizing national and transnational communities based not on origin, filiation, and genetics but on destination, affiliation, and the assumption of a common set of social practices or political commitments” (Eng, Halberstam and Muñoz 7). While the conventional thinking on kinship binds people across various lands together to a certain origin, queer diaspora foregrounds the present social relationships and the lived experience shared by the people in a specific context without the demand for recuperating a “lost” origin.

Eng, Halberstam and Muñoz’s comprehension of kinship as “social practices” through the lens of queer diaspora resonates with Judith Butler’s conception of kinship in her article “Is Kinship Always Already Heterosexual” (2004). Though not directly citing the notion of queer diaspora, Butler proposes to understand kinship as a kind of doing, which “does not reflect a prior structure, but ... can only be understood as an enacted practice” (123). Butler believes that taking kinship as “doing” directs our attention away from fixed structures of relations behind

human relationships to the socio-historical conditions through which kinship relations are formed and sustained. Both Butler's and Eng, et al.'s conceptions of kinship stress that kinship can be reimagined in performative terms without reflecting a certain essential origin or structure. In this thesis, I attempt to read Li's representations of kinship from the idea of kinship as social practices with performative features, which at the same time allows us to break away from any essential structure behind kinship formations.

Eng, in his book *The Feeling of Kinship* (2010), extends his queer diasporic methodology from a critique of diaspora to a more extensive study on contemporary forms of family and kinship. He takes queer diaspora as a critical response to what he calls "queer liberalism," which refers to the situation where the Euro-American idea of liberalism has covered up the fact that legacies of colonialism still exist as racial disparities today. Queer liberalism functions through the logic of "colorblindness," which perpetrates the forgetting of racial disparities through "a pervasive language of individualism, personal merit, responsibility, and choice" (5). Accordingly, regardless of one's skin color, everyone is assumed to occupy the same political and economic position in society in the first place. This language of liberalism, after the abolition of legalized racial segregation, has caused racialization and racism to move from public to private domains. As Eng claims, "If the law no longer formally discriminates as a matter of public policy ..., it certainly does little to redress private racism or discrimination" (7). The process of erasing racism in the public sphere and driving racial issues to private spheres results in what Eng describes as "the racialization of intimacy" (10), which is complicit in a purposeful oblivion of socio-economic disparities along with the production of the Euro-American idea of a "liberal" individual.

To tackle the racialization of intimacy and the forgetting of race in the context of queer liberalism, Eng turns to the idea of queer diaspora and studies its impact on kinship formation. Queer diaspora in *The Feeling of Kinship*, in addition to reiterating the non-normative force of “queerness” to free “diaspora” from ethnic/national centrality, also puts emphasis on how “diaspora” can enrich “queerness” by locating it in the context of globalization. As Gayatri Gopinath observes, “If ‘diaspora’ needs ‘queerness’ in order to rescue it from its genealogical implications, ‘queerness’ also needs ‘diaspora’ in order to make it more supple in relation to questions of race, colonialism, and globalization” (11). Since queer diaspora brings specific socio-historical contexts under globalization into discussion, sexuality is no longer a singular, universal identity category that refers to sexual desire or practices alone. Instead, through the lens of queer diaspora, sexuality works in the formation of nationalism and racialization discourses, especially Asian diaspora in Eng’s study. The political force of “queerness” allows queer diaspora to, as Eng claims, offer an important site for “the resistance to the universal translatability of (homo)sexuality as a stable category of knowledge traveling across time and spaces” (14). Queer diaspora attends to how sexuality comes to work in globalization studies. From this perspective, kinship formation is not only structured by sexuality but also by diasporic experiences with specific socio-historical conditions. In so doing, queer diaspora reorients our attention away from conventional forms of family and kinship to how and why other forms of families and kinships are rendered unimaginable in nationalist imageries.

Chapters

The thesis consists of four main chapters. In Chapter One, I first reviewed existing scholarship on Li’s fiction: on the modern Chinese history under the political and economic

influence of the West, on the cultural difference between China and the West, on the characters in diasporic situations, and on the characters' non-normative sexual orientation. Among these studies, although some have touched upon the issue of kinship by focusing on themes such as father-daughter relationship and marriages, they do little in probing into how such relations are produced and sustained. The focus of this thesis is thus how kinship is formed in the globalized context and how the characters' diasporic experience in such a context complicate our understanding of kinship. I draw on the idea of queer diaspora in an attempt to look into representations of kinship and its meaning in Li's fiction. In this part, I also elaborated on the notion of queer diaspora by tracing the convergence between queer politics and Asian American studies. Queer diaspora opens up possibilities to read kinship in Li's fiction in that it contests traditional forms of kinship and family, which are produced and structured by genealogical thinking such as origin, filiation, and lineage. Within the queer diasporic framework, the ambiguous social relationships in Li's fiction—the conflicting father-daughter relationship in “A Thousand Years of Good Prayers,” the bizarre love-triangle in “The Princess of Nebraska” and the painstaking marriage arrangement in “Gold Boy, Emerald Girl”—invites us to reimagine and redefine and thus “queer up” kinship in the context of globalization.

In Chapter two, I probe into the father-daughter relationship in “A Thousand Years of Good Prayers,” which revolves around Mr. Shi's visit to his newly-divorced daughter in the United States. I will begin by analyzing how the father-daughter conflict is resulted from the daughter's deviation from the role of a “good wife” in a heterosexual marriage. The conflict, as I will demonstrate with textual details, is also derived from Mr. Shi's assertion of ethnic distinction between Americanness and Chineseness. To be specific, the daughter' way of talking and the language she speaks, for Mr. Shi, mark her betrayal of her ethnic roots. Therefore, the

problem of the father-daughter relationship is how the father's conception of kinship is structured by heteronormativity and ethnic essentialism. In the second part of this chapter, I focus on how Mr. Shi explores alternative accounts of kinship through his interactions with Madam, an Iranian woman Mr. Shi encounters randomly in a park. Their interactions feature free talking without Mr. Shi trying to impose ethnic codes on Madam. It will give insight into Mr. Shi's past relationship, allowing him to see how an effective communication is not necessarily constituted by languages or meaning of words but by the practice itself. Last but not least, I propose to find in Mr. Shi's interaction with Madam an alternative kinship relation that does not center on any essentialized form of nationalism or culturalism. Rather, it is engendered from contingent encounters and live experiences of subjects in diasporic situations without aiming at recuperating a "lost" origin.

Chapter three explores the triangular relationship in Li's "The Princess of Nebraska." The story features Sasha and Boshen, who fall in love with the same boy, Yang, in China and plan to bring him over to the United States. Boshen, who has emigrated to the U.S. and worked as a chef's assistant, meets up with Sasha in Chicago for her abortion of Yang's baby. This chapter delves into the meaning of the baby for Boshen and Sasha respectively in light of Lee Edelman's critique of "reproductive futurism." I argue that Boshen's conception of a family that can accommodate Sasha, Yang, and himself through the marriage between Sasha and Yang, is not as queer as it appears to be, for it ultimately centers on preserving Yang's blood in the baby as a continuation of patriarchal lineage. I then move on to discuss Sasha's kinship with her mother and the baby, and argue that Sasha's memories about her mother, which is triggered by the baby's tap in her body, evoke an alternative kinship relation in which the child becomes the agent that actively opens up Sasha's future in a diasporic space. To Sasha and Boshen, America

is thus presented not only as a space more politically and culturally tolerant for sexual minorities but also as a space in which they as diasporic subjects are enable to establish alternative kinship relations in their own ways.

Chapter four looks into the marriage arrangement in “Gold Boy, Emerald Girl.” The story follows Hanfeng, who, after drifting around in the U.S. for years, returns to settle down in China to accomplish his mother’s wish of having a family after her retirement. Under his mother’s request, Hanfeng agrees to marry Siyu, one of his mother’s students so that the three of them can keep their queer sexualities away from social scrutiny. This chapter first looks into how and why the “queerness” of the characters—Siyu’s spinsterhood, Professor Dai’s widowhood and all three’s homosexuality—propels them to agree upon this marriage arrangement. Then I examine how the marriage paves way for an alternative form of kinship with queer potentiality. The marriage arrangement, I argue, is resignified from a heterosexual wedlock into a survival strategy sustained by the companionship among the sexually marginalized to keep themselves away from social pressures in China.



Chapter Two

“A Thousand Years of Good Prayers”

Yiyun Li’s “A Thousand Years of Good Prayers” is a short story revolving around the conflict between Mr. Shi and his newly-divorced daughter. While Mr. Shi pays a visit to his daughter from China to the United States, she refuses to talk to him as much as he expected and insists that she can be “quiet *and* happy” at the same time (Li 190, emphasis original). The confrontation between the father and the daughter is further dramatized when Mr. Shi feels the daughter act like “a total stranger, not the daughter he knows” when speaking English to her friend (Li 197). On the contrary, Mr. Shi has no difficulty bonding with an Iranian woman (“Madam” as he addresses her) he meets randomly at a park, though they both speak little English. As Mr. Shi narrates, “they have no problem understanding each other, and in no time they become friends” (Li 186). Contrary to his cold relationship with his daughter, Mr. Shi seems to be closer to this woman, “a stranger who does not even know his language [but] listens to him with more understanding” (Li 193). The story juxtaposes Mr. Shi’s interactions with his daughter and with Madam, portraying how Mr. Shi explores conceptions of kinship relations through his relationships with them.

This chapter focuses on the change of Mr. Shi’s views on kinship relations through examining his interactions with his daughter and with Madam in the text. First, I examine Mr. Shi’s kinship relation with his daughter and demonstrate how his conception of kinship is embedded in their Chinese ethnic identity. Mr. Shi’s interaction with his daughter shows how his major conception of kinship is structured by the inseparability of kinship and ethnic traceability, which constantly demands his daughter’s loyalty to her ethnic origin. This relationship, in my

view, can be seen as an extension of loyalism of the Chinese ethnicity and culture in diasporic situations. After discussing the father-daughter relationship, I move on to discuss the interactions of Mr. Shi and Madam and seek from these interactions a different account of kinship. Such an alternative account is queer in the sense that it is not based upon ethnic essentialism but through affective practice of talking. Characterized by its contingency and ambiguity, Mr. Shi's relation with Madam has the potential to "queer up" a conventional conception of kinship based on ethnic continuity.

Mr. Shi is troubled by his relationship with his daughter, first and foremost, because he has a hard time accepting her divorce after a seven-year marriage with a Chinese husband. The divorce signifies the daughter's deviation from his ideal conception of kinship formed by a marriage between a husband and a "good" wife. Mr. Shi has expected the daughter to live up to be a "good" wife like his wife: "She [the daughter] is made for a good wife, soft-voiced and kindhearted, dutiful and beautiful, a younger version of her mother" (Li 188-89). He constantly uses his wife as a role model to teach how his daughter should behave: "Your mother was an example of a good woman. ...Your mother wouldn't be so confrontational" (Li 194). Even the daughter herself is aware that she does not correspond to the ideal woman's role in his father's conception, as she tells him: "I'm divorced, so certainly I'm not a good woman according to your standard" (Li 194). The divorce of his daughter is thus taken as her disruption of his ideal kinship form. It upsets Mr. Shi even more when he learns that his daughter, rather than his previous son-in-law, turns out to be the "abandoner" of her marriage due to her extramarital affair, as he thinks bitterly to himself: "A disloyal woman is the last thing he raised his daughter to be" (Li 198). At this moment, Mr. Shi's overlapping image of the ideal wife and the daughter collapses.

In addition to the divorce, Mr. Shi is also troubled by how his daughter refuses to talk to him as much as he wants. When Mr. Shi comes to realize that his job at the Chinese government is not enough to excuse himself from maintaining intimate relationships among the family members, he confesses to his past mistake of not talking more and engaging his daughter into conversations: “I know now that it was not healthy for the daughter. I should’ve left my working self in the office. I was too young to understand that” (Li 195). As a result, during his stay in America, he strives to invite his daughter to talk to him as much as possible so as to “tackle her solitude” (Li 189). However, as much as Mr. Shi wants to talk more to her daughter, she seems less enthusiastic about having a conversation with her father. No matter how many topics Mr. Shi has come up with, ranging from her work, her colleagues, to the meals she has had, she “does not improve” and “becomes quieter each day” (Li 190). Having a hard time holding the interactions alive, Mr. Shi reached the conclusion that the daughter’s silence appears to be a sign of “not enjoying her life as she should,” since “A happy person will never be so quiet” (Li 190). Nonetheless, the daughter insists that people can be “quiet *and* happy” (Li 190, emphasis original).

As the story progresses, we soon find that the daughter’s silence to her father comes from her uneasy feeling about talking in Chinese. The conflict regarding languages takes place when Mr. Shi overhears the daughter speaking English passionately on the phone to someone he does not know. The way the daughter talks in English contrasts her cold attitude to her own father: her “voices shriller than he has ever known it to be. She speaks fast and laughs often” (Li 197). Both her language and her “manner” disturbs Mr. Shi: “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” (Li 197). After the daughter ends her conversation on the phone, Mr. Shi eventually loses his temper and scolds his daughter:

“You just talked on the phone with such immodesty! You talked, you laughed, like a prostitute!”

“It’s different, Baba. We [the daughter and her friend] talk in English, and it’s easier. I don’t talk well in Chinese.”

“That’s a ridiculous excuse!”

“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.” (Li 199)

This passage underlines two things: first, Mr. Shi feels upset about the daughter talking in an “immodest” manner like a “prostitute,” which again shows that the daughter fails to fit in the role of the good wife for a patriarchal family. Secondly, in Mr. Shi’s understanding, the daughter’s adoption of English over Chinese signifies her becoming Americanized and deviating from her ethnic root. The father-daughter conflict here derives from Mr. Shi’s conception of kinship based on a conventional family form embedded in ethnic essentialism.

Mr. Shi tries to remind her daughter of her ethnic root and restore her ethnic identification by preparing foods for her. In his article “From What We to How We Are” (1991), Yi-Jou Lo discusses the food prepared by Mr. Shi in “A Thousand Years of Good Prayers.” In the story, Mr. Shi serves “fried tofu cubes stuffed with chopped mushrooms, shrimps, and ginger, the collage of bamboo shoots, red peppers, and snow pea” (Li 195). According to Lo, Mr. Shi’s color arrangement and the ingredient selection of the meals are intentional: The color presentation of the dishes corresponds to the major five colors in traditional Chinese physics,

namely green, red, white, yellow and black (Lo 65). The tofu and the bamboo shoots are symbolic of Chinese tradition. As Lo concludes, “Mr. Shi purposefully prepares these dishes to help his daughter recall her roots” (66). When the daughter leaves the dishes “barely touched,” it frustrates Mr. Shi deeply: “she does not know the cooking has become his praying, and she leaves the praying unanswered” (Li 195). Symbolized by the uneaten food, Mr. Shi’s unanswered prayers signal his failure in restoring his daughter’s ethnic roots. What upset Mr. Shi is not only his daughter’s indifference to his cooking but also her silence to his solicitation of their ethnic origin symbolized by the food. For Mr. Shi, the daughter’s attitude toward the food suggests that she has turned her back to her ethnic origin, leaving her father’s solicitation “unanswered.”

Ling-Chi Wang studies the demand of loyalty to Chinese ethnic and cultural identity on Chinese living overseas. In his article “The Structure of Dual Domination,” Wang identifies two dominant paradigms in the study of Chinese diaspora: the assimilation paradigm and the loyalty paradigm. The assimilation paradigm focuses on how Chinese immigrants attempt to become Americanized and their conflicts with the predominant Euro-American white community. It draws attention to the ways how the U.S. society treats the Chinese minorities through laws and policies. The loyalty paradigm then refers to the sense of obligation of Chinese diasporic subjects to retain his/her Chinese ethnic and cultural roots, which are based on “the family or clan and strong social ethics rather than on individual liberty and an elaborate legal system” (Wang 173). As Wang argues, the two paradigms do not work independently and exclusively; rather, they together constitute the “structure of dual domination” upon Chinese Americans. While their unassimilability to the mainstream society is sustained by racial exclusion or oppression based upon the assimilation paradigm, the Chinese American community is also always under the loyalty demand of being

faithful to the homeland embodied through cultural values of blood traceability, familial bonds and social ethics. Since this loyalty imperative reaches out to Chinese overseas, it constitutes a form of “extraterritorial domination” (Wang 176).

Li does not put much emphasis on the oppression of the American society on Chinese immigrants at legal level in “A Thousand Years of Good Prayers”; however, we do see the daughter constantly caught under the demand of being faithful to her ethnic origin. Following Wang’s loyalty paradigm, Chinese culture lays much emphasis on family values, and marriage is usually considered as a way to continue ethnic and blood connection. For Mr. Shi, the divorce of the daughter indicates a break of such ethnic continuity. He has made it clear to his daughter that his visit is meant to help her “find the right person next time” (Li 194), since “the America he wants to see is the country where she is happily married” (Li 196). Mr. Shi’s attempts to maintain the ethnic continuation through building up kinship relations for her daughter signal his desire to continue the ethnic and blood connection of the family. By ending a marriage, what the daughter fails to sustain is not only a conjugal relationship but also the ethnic continuity on which Mr. Shi’s idea of kinship is based. In Mr. Shi’s understanding, she is not only the “abandoner” of her ex-husband but also the “abandoner” of her ethnic identity.

The father-daughter conflict in “A Thousand Years of Good Prayers” as such is the result of Mr. Shi’s narrow and conservative way of conceiving kinship. His insistence on a woman’s role as a “good” wife to maintain a family and his assertion on the ethnic distinction between Americanness and Chineseness casts into conflict his relationship with his daughter. For Mr. Shi, what matters is how the daughter acts and behaves in a certain way that corresponds to the kinship codes based upon heteronormativity and ethnic essentialism. In this regard, the problem

of the father-daughter relationship is how the father's conception of kinship is organized by his ethnic identity, which hinders him from seeing other accounts of kinship beyond that pattern.

But "A Thousand Years of Good Prayers" is not only about the "breakup" of kinship between Mr. Shi and his daughter. The story is "queer" in that it makes use of Mr. Shi's time in America—his time as a Chinese diasporic—to demonstrate his exploration of different conceptions of kinship through his interactions with other characters. When Mr. Shi learns about the existence of his daughter's new lover, who turns out to be the person his daughter talks passionately on the phone with, his first question to her is "Is he American?" (Li 197). When his daughter tells him that the man is from Romania, the first thought that comes into Mr. Shi's mind is: "At least the man grew up in a communist country" (Li 197). This response reveals Mr. Shi's initial attempt to imagine an affinity with the Romanian through finding their similar cultural backgrounds of being communists. He has started to imagine a different kind of kinship beyond ethnic continuity and blood connection. However, right after this reaction, he reiterates to his daughter about the importance of sustaining a marriage and a family: "Remember, you [the daughter] can't make the same mistake twice [divorce]. You have to be really careful" (Li 198). Although the imagined affinity shared by Mr. Shi and the Romanian boyfriend of the daughter may seem to be a starting point for Mr. Shi to imagine other accounts of kinship, at this point he ultimately returns to his conventional idea of kinship structured by marriage and ethnic continuity.

Mr. Shi's exploration of different forms of kinship becomes clearer in his interactions with Madam. The interaction between the two seems "queer" at first sight because they do not share a common language in their conversations. Two years senior than Mr. Shi, Madam is an Iranian woman whose native language is Persian. Throughout the story they communicate with

very simple English, with Mr. Shi speaking to Madam mostly in Chinese while she makes little verbal responses. In fact, Mr. Shi himself is aware that his relationship with Madam without a common language is unusual: “He is afraid that if he explains he and Madam talk in different languages, his daughter will think of him as a crazy old man” (Li 194). Nevertheless, despite not sharing a common language, Mr. Shi still feels intimate to Madam in their interactions: “Despite the fact that they both speak little English, they have no problem understanding each other, and in no times they become friends” (Li 186). Furthermore, during Mr. Shi’s conversation with Madam, he feels it is not necessary to explain everything to her: “he [Mr. Shi] 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” (Li 192). The interactions between Mr. Shi and Madam suggest that the key element to an effective communication may be something beyond language.

In “Is Kinship Always Already Heterosexual” (2004), Judith Butler proposes to understand kinship as a kind of doing. Kinship, to Butler, can be conceived to “not reflect a prior structure, but ... as an enacted practice” (123). In this way, kinship is no longer a form of being, which is grounded in a static idea of origin, such as biology or ethnicity. Rather, imagining kinship as practices allows us to put emphasis on the social acts that bring kinship relations into formation in everyday contexts. Echoing Butler’s argument, the interactions between Mr. Shi and Madam show how kinship can be reimagined as a matter of practices. For instance, when Mr. Shi notices the difference between his interaction with Madam and with his daughter, he thinks:

Imagine he’s traveled half of the world to his daughter, to make up for all the talks he denied her when she was younger, but only to find her uninterested in his

words. Imagine Madam, a stranger who does not even know his language, listens to him with more understanding. (Li 193)

This passage suggests that, despite the language barrier, Mr. Shi shares more intimacy with Madam than with his daughter through the act of talking and listening. More precisely, what connects Mr. Shi and Madam is not language itself or the cultural roots represented by the language, but a willingness to hear and understand the other's emotions and feelings. Here we see an alternative kind of kinship relation—kinship as “doing” —develops through the practice of talking and listening between two individuals.

One may wonder, however, since Mr. Shi talks to both Madam and his daughter, why he cannot achieve an effective communication and feels intimate when he talks to his daughter like he does to Madam? The difference, I assume, is that Mr. Shi's blood relation with his daughter constrains the ways with which he interacts with her. As my previous discussion demonstrates, during the conversations with his daughter, Mr. Shi constantly tries to impose the Chinese cultural codes on his daughter by reiterating her responsibility to sustain a marriage, dictating how she should talk, and insisting on what language she should use. Once the daughter fails to meet these demands, she is considered to deviate from Mr. Shi's account of kinship. To the contrary, the interaction between Mr. Shi and Madam is not organized by traceability to a static and fixed ethnic origin. When talking to Madam, Mr. Shi does not dwell on his normative conception of kinship. Therefore, when he escapes from ethnic norms and from the demands of the role of a father, he can develop a sense of intimacy through mutual understanding.

Without constantly imposing the Chinese cultural codes onto others, Mr. Shi can thus free himself and see people for who they are in their interactions. Moreover, taking kinship as evolving from performative act rather than being grounded in genealogy or ethnicity is affective

in that it directs Mr. Shi's attention to the materials in everyday contexts. For instance, in his interaction with Madam, Mr. Shi often describes in detail what he observes on Madam: "For the day Madam wears a bright orange blouse with prints of purple monkeys, all tumbling and grinning; on her head she wears a scarf with the same pattern" (Li 191). The emphasis on what Madam wears suggests that Mr. Shi starts to grow aware of things on others, which he is not able to sense when interacting with his daughter. As Mr. Shi describes one of his encounter with Madam, "Madam is walking toward him with basket of autumn leaves. She picks up one and hands it to Mr. Shi. ... Mr. Shi studies the leaf, its veins to the tiniest branches, the different shades of yellow and orange. Never before has he seen the world in such detail" (Li 201). The description highlights the material details that Mr. Shi's starts to sense in his surroundings through interactions with Madam. Moreover, the interaction between them, in Mr. Shi's eyes, are often characterized by descriptions of Madam's physical reactions, such as her "nodding" or "smiling" back to him without many verbal responses. It shows that meaning of words are not necessarily as important as bodily gestures in building up intimacy. Through his relationship with Madam, Mr. Shi's idea of kinship expands from the one grounded in ethnic traceability to an alternative, affective form that is constituted by the materiality and physical actions in daily life.

Through talking with Madam, Mr. Shi is also able to gain insight into his past relationship with an unmarried woman, Yilan, when he still worked as a "rocket scientist" for the Chinese government. According to Mr. Shi, his interaction with Yilan goes nowhere beyond talking: "The only thing we [Mr. Shi and Yilan] did was talk. Nothing wrong with talking, you would imagine, but no, talking between a married man and an unmarried girl was not accepted" (Li 201). It is easy to view this relationship between a married man and an unmarried woman as

an extramarital affair, which disrupts a family kinship. However, when revisiting this relationship in America, Mr. Shi no longer views it as an extramarital affair; rather, he detects the “queerness” of the “love” between him and Yilan:

“Talking is like riding with an unreined horse, you don’t know where you end up and you don’t have to think about it. That’s what our talking was like, but we weren’t having an affair as they said. We were never in love,” Mr. Shi says, and then, for a short moment, is confused by his own words. What kind of love is he talking about? Surely they were in love, not the love they were suspected of having—he always kept a respectful distance, their hands never touched. But a love in which they talked freely, a love in which their minds touched—wasn’t it love, too? Wasn’t it how his daughter ended her marriage, because of all the talking with another man? (Li 202, italics original)

The “love” between Mr. Shi and Yilan is not the kind of marital or extramarital “love” that aims for sexual conjugation or reproduction. It is rather a “love,” a relationship founded on “free talk” and “the touching of the minds.” Even Mr. Shi wonders if the relationship can be claimed “love” or not. This relationship appears “queer” in two aspects: first and foremost, it highlights the contingency of the practice of talking when building intimate relations. The practice takes place without regarding the individuals’ consideration of where the conversation will go and where it will end, just like *“riding with an unreined horse.”* In other words, the relation portrayed here is built through constant, contingent interactions rather than being grounded on a natural origin, such as ethnicity. Secondly, the relationship between Mr. Shi and Yilan is “queer” also because it is ambiguous and refuses to be named and defined by conventional kinship terms. Even Mr. Shi struggles to pin down the exact meaning of this relationship. The contingency and ambiguity of

the relationship bestows it the queer potentiality to challenge Mr. Shi's earlier conception of kinship based on family relations or ethnic continuity. Reviewing this relationship, Mr. Shi starts to relate his relationship with Yilan to his daughter's relationship with her Romanian lover. Through his memories, Mr. Shi gets to learn an alternative account of kinship formation, which may allow him to alter the way in which he perceives his conflict with his daughter and her relationship with her lover.

What makes Mr. Shi's self-reflection possible here is his intimate relationship with Madam; this relationship is organic and affective in that it is able to evoke Mr. Shi's memories, which allows him to reflect on his own conceptions of kinship. As I have mentioned, their conversations take place in the form of Mr. Shi speaking to Madam in Chinese while she listens. During their last conversation, Mr. Shi's narration, intertwined with his memories of the relationship with Yilan and his confession to Madam, takes up almost four pages until the very end of the story. This form of interaction, in my opinion, creates a space in which Mr. Shi is not only talking to others but also talking to himself, reflecting on his past relationship. In this way, their interaction is affective in the sense that it enables him to revisit his memories, which further allows him to self-question and rethink his ideas of kinship relations.

"A Thousand Years of Good Prayers" as such has explored a "queer" kinship formed through the talking between Mr. Shi and Madam. Before I conclude, I would like to draw attention to Mr. Shi's identity as a diasporic Chinese and Madame as a diasporic Iranian in the United States. Their relation, in my opinion, makes a new kind of "Asian American" affiliation that does not center on any essentialized form of nationalism or culturalism; rather, it is based upon and sustained by individuals' diasporic and lived experience in an everyday context. It should be noted that I am not reiterating a conventional conception of kinship based on essential

ethnic identities, be it the Chinese or Iranian identities; rather, I emphasize that Mr. Shi and Madam's relationship does not aim at recuperating any specific location or nation-state as the origin or home, either China, Iran or the America. Emerging from everyday contingencies, their relationship constitutes a kind of hybrid connection that contests the unified "Asian American" identity category. Constituted and maintained by interactions and affiliations among minoritarian individuals, such socio-cultural affiliations have the potential to challenge our conventional understanding of kinship based on nationality.

Throughout the story we see Mr. Shi explore different conceptions of kinship through his interactions with Madam, which may allow him to further understand the causes of his conflict with his daughter. The relationship between Mr. Shi and Madam engendered from contingent encounters and lived experiences offers a queer account of kinship of subjects in diasporic situations without aiming at recuperating a "lost" origin. In this sense, "A Thousand Years of Good Prayers" demonstrates the possibility that the idea of kinship can be dislodged from the static idea of origin and home. It engenders a new kind of "Asian American" affiliation that emphasizes lived experiences and social practices. Perhaps just as what Mr. Shi realizes at the very end of the story: "A good man should live in the present moment, with Madam, a dear friend sitting next to him, holding up a perfect golden ginkgo leaf to the sunshine for him see" (Li 203). It is through really feeling the surroundings and seeing people for who they really are can one build up intimate relations with others.

Chapter Three

“The Princess of Nebraska”

Yiyun Li’s “The Princess of Nebraska” juxtaposes the alternate third-person perspectives of two narrators—Sasha, a 21-year-old Mongolian woman, and Boshen, a 38-year-old Chinese homosexual physician. When in China, they fall in love with Yang, an 18-year-old boy who is studying to be a *Nan Dan* (a male actor who plays female characters in Peking opera) but gets expelled from school after being spotted with a male lover. The story features the triangular love relationship that haunts Sasha and Boshen while they arrive at Chicago for Sasha’s abortion surgery of Yang’s baby. Hesitant to get rid of the unborn baby, Boshen plans to bring Yang over to America so that the three of them can form a “family.” The representation of kinship in “The Princess of Nebraska” contains some noticeable queer elements at first sight. Boshen and Yang’s homosexual sexual orientation is perhaps the first “queer” element that jumps into readers’ eyes and distinguishes this story from “A Thousand Years of Good Prayers,” in which the main characters are clearly identified as heterosexual. In addition to queer sexualities, the unconventional “family” proposed by Boshen in the story directly challenges the heteronormative designation of family as formed by a marriage relation between a husband and a wife. In this sense, queer kinship emerges first in “The Princess of Nebraska” through non-normative familial relations formed by homosexual characters.

The queerness of the story is further dramatized by Yang’s ambiguous sexual identity. As the center of the triangle relationship, Yang is the link that connects the other two characters, Sasha and Boshen. However, he is lent with little voice throughout the story; instead, we mostly get to know him from Sasha’s and Boshen’s narrative perspectives. Yang’s appearance is

characterized with androgynous natures. When Boshen first meets Yang, he describes Yang as a boy “too beautiful for the grimy underground, a white lotus blossom untouched by the surrounding mud” (Li 72). Sasha further compares Yang’s appearance as “a statute of Kuanyin, the male Buddha in a female body” (Li 76). It is hard for readers to tell Yang’s sexual and gender identity at first sight judging solely from his appearance. In addition to his look, his profession as a *Nan Dan* suggests that he is able to play female characters on stage; however, even when he’s not on stage, he constantly switches between referring to himself as male and as female. When Boshen mentions to Yang about his plan to help him get back on stage to perform again, Yang replies skeptically, “*An empty promise of a man keeps a woman’s heart full*” (Li 73, italics original). When Sasha suggests a new life in America to him, telling him “We’ll be the prince and princess of Nebraska” (Li 86), Yang refuses by replying: “I was not trained to play a prince” (Li 86). This idea of moving to America bothers Yang, for he thinks “nothing humiliates a man more than living as a parasite on his woman” (Li 88). While he refers himself as the “woman” in his relationship with Boshen, it seems that Yang considers himself to be the “man” that should not live off a woman in his relationship with Sasha. Yang’s ambiguous and unstable sexual identification troubles Sasha and Boshen. If clearly Sasha is heterosexual and Boshen is gay, Yang’s sexual orientation remains undetermined. It is his flexible sexual identity that accounts for this ambiguous triangular relationship, which contests the conventional conception of kinship based upon heteronormativity.

Attending to the queer sexualities of characters like Boshen and Yang, my reading of the queer kinship in “The Princess of Nebraska” is nonetheless not limited to pointing out the homosexuality of Boshen or the undetermined sexual orientation of Yang. As King-Kok Cheung has pointed out in her article “Somewhat Queer Triangles: Yiyun Li’s ‘The Princess of

Nebraska' and 'Gold Boy, Emerald Girl',” the story demonstrates that homosexual relationship is under severe censorship in China, revealing “the pressure on Chinese gays and lesbians to lead compromised lives so as to create the semblance of heterosexual families and to avoid the homophobic gaze of their larger societies” (88). Within such a homophobic society, the characters seek other spaces to develop alternative kinship forms. Boshen successfully turns into an American citizen through a sham marriage with a lesbian friend, while Sasha arrives at America as a Chinese overseas student to pursue a new life. Despite moving away from China, they are both concerned with their relationships with Yang and with the unborn baby, and they have managed to come up with different ways to tackle the relationships: Boshen proposes to form a trio family so the three of them can get together in America, while Sasha initially is eager to break up with these past connections so as to start a new life in America. In this regard, America, I argue, is presented for Sasha and Boshen not as much a space of immigration that offers solution to identity or desire through a promising assimilation and naturalization to immigrants but as a diasporic space in which both characters struggle between their past connections with China and their future prospects in America.

As mentioned above, Cheung examines in her essay on Yiyun Li how the “The Princess of Nebraska” portrays the constraining social pressures Chinese gays and lesbians suffer from in the society. In Boshen’s case, due to establishing the first counseling hotline for homosexuals, he was disemployed from his position as a doctor in the hospital he worked in. Afterwards, he moves to Beijing, where he meets and falls in love with Yang, and takes on a part-time job at a clinic. In Beijing, Boshen’s continuing engagement with gay activism leads to a few “visits” of the secret police and causes him to be put under surveillance by the government, since “in the post-Tiananmen era, talk of any kind of human rights was dangerous” (Li 71). Even after he

turns to advocate AIDS awareness, he ends up being put under house arrest. The homophobic persecution in the story, to Cheung, “attests to the power of official discourse and social pressures” (100). Moreover, Cheung observes that the characters themselves reiterate heterosexual norms throughout the story. For example, in Boshen’s relationship with Yang, he thinks Yang fits into “the quiet like the most virtuous woman he had played on stage” (Li 72). Despite being gay, Boshen imagines Yang to fit into the role of a woman in a heterosexual relationship and feels the sense of obligation to assume as a masculine role to protect the boy: “he [Boshen] was not the one to have been touched by the boy’s beauty, but he was the one to guard and nurture it” (Li 74). The gay couple conceives their relationship as resembling a heterosexual relationship based upon conventional gender norms; as Cheung claims, “even a gay couple continues to gauge one another according to heterosexual norms” (90). Sasha, as Cheung further argues, is presented as “a straight woman who considers homosexuality to be a deviation” (90). For instance, she blames Yang’s profession as a *Nan Dan* for his homosexual orientation: “Why was there *Nan Dan* in the Peking Opera in the first place? *Men loved him because he was playing a woman; women loved him because he was a man playing. ... He didn’t have to be a man playing a woman—I thought I would make him understand*” (Li 89-90, italics original). Here Sasha sticks to heterosexual norms and considers Yang’s homosexuality as an “aberration” that she may help to “correct.” These characters as such underscore “heteronormative mores and assess one another accordingly” (Cheung 99).

Briefly speaking, Cheung’s reading of “The Princess of Nebraska” focuses on the representations of Chinese gays’ and lesbians’ experience in a socially and politically constraining environment. In what follows, I will shift the focus from China to a relatively more tolerant society—America. I intend to investigate how Boshen and Sasha manage their

relationships with their pasts and futures after they move out of China and eventually become able to imagine alternative forms of kinship.

Not being able to maintain his relationship with Yang and constantly under harassment for his gay activism, Boshen emigrates to America through a “false marriage” with his lesbian American friend (Li 69). The purpose of the immigration is not only for his own survival but also for hoping to “save” Yang in the near future by bringing him over to this more tolerant environment for sexual minorities. After learning that Sasha is impregnated by Yang, his plan turns “queer” (even “queerer” than a gay relationship between him and Yang), as he plans to have Yang and Sasha marry each other so that the three can form a “family” in which he can continue to love Yang. As Boshen envisions:

If only she [Sasha] could love the boy [Yang] one more time. Yang could choose to live with either of them; he could choose not to love them at all but their love would keep him safe and intact; they could – three of them –bring up the baby together. ... If only he knew how to make Sasha love Yang again. (90)

The passage reveals Boshen’s intention to maintain his relationship with Yang through forming a family of the *ménage à trois*. Trying to keep the baby as a way to bring Yang to America, Boshen attempts to dissuade Sasha from the abortion: “He [Yang] might want to come to the U.S. if he learned about the baby” (Li 87). However, Sasha has been aware of Boshen’s intention, as she points out when Boshen appears hesitant about the abortion: “Whatever interest he [Boshen] had in the baby was stupid and selfish” (Li 71). Sasha’s dislike of Boshen’s idea of an unconventional “family” is understandable, because she does not want to be forced into loving Yang for fulfilling Boshen’s selfish desire to reunite with Yang in America.

The “three-member family” in Boshen’s mind seems queer at first sight in that it challenges the conventional account of kinship based upon the union of a heterosexual couple. His plan is to hide the gay relationship between him and Yang under the guise of the legal heterosexual marriage between Sasha and Yang, so Yang can move out of China and away from its official persecution against homosexuality. However, as much as Boshen’s three-member family appears queer at first sight, I would note that the “queerness” in Boshen’s imagination is in fact limited if we look more closely into the reasons why Boshen wants to keep Sasha’s baby in the family. The more obvious reason, as I have shown, is that he plans to lure Yang to America through a convenient marriage. The subtler reason of keeping baby is that the baby has Yang’s blood. In fact, Boshen has thought about adopting the baby, for “half of her blood came from Yang, after all” (Li 71). In addition to wanting to use the baby as a medium to have Yang come over to America, Boshen has considered keeping the baby because he wants to preserve and pass on Yang’s blood. The baby, to Boshen, is not only an instrument to facilitate the making of the queer “family” in his imagination but also a symbol of the reproduction of Yang’s blood. The existence of the baby enables the passing on of a paternal lineage—a fantasy essential to heteronormative marriages and cannot be easily put to an end.

Queer theorists have explored the cultural and political implications of the “Child” in various ways. One of the most well-known studies of the Child image is Lee Edelman’s *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Edelman critiques political narratives’ and discourses’ holding onto the ideology of “reproductive futurism.” Reproductive futurism designates the idea that our participation in politics is motivated by a belief in creating a better future for the children to come. In this regard, the “Child” becomes “futurity’s unquestioned value” that political discourses aim to accomplish as a goal in the future (Edelman 4). In other

words, the social fantasy of the “Child” serves as the “perpetual horizon of every acknowledged politics” (Edelman 3). As Edelman further elaborates on reproductive futurism:

[The term entails] an ideological limit on political discourses as such, preserving in the process the absolute privilege of heteronormativity by rendering unthinkable, by casting outside the political domain, the possibility of a queer resistance to this organizing principle of communal relations. (Edelman 2-3, emphasis original)

In the framework of reproductive futurism, since heterosexual relations have procreation ability and can thus contribute to the production of children of the future, they are privileged to be the natural and normal way of being. Indeed, reproductive futurism, as the above passage suggests, is inextricable from heteronormativity, rendering any alternative (queer) forms of communal relations or kinships without procreation potential “unthinkable” or “outside of the political domain.” Queerness, according to reproductive futurism, “names the side of those not ‘fighting for the children’” (9). However, as Edelman argues, it is this unproductive nature of queerness that enables itself to disrupt politics based on reproductive futurism. He proposes to embrace this “queer negativity” that helps us think beyond the linkage of Child and future; that is, we have to acknowledge that queerness does not necessarily promise any good to the Child as the end goal in the imagined future. As the title of the first chapter in *No Future* is boldly entitled, “The future is kid stuff.”

At first sight, the queer family that Boshen proposes in “The Princess of Nebraska” seems to be potentially subversive, for it does not privilege the child as the ultimate goal in the future. The future Boshen envisions privileges Yang over the child: “Yang could choose to live with either of them; he could choose not to love them at all but their love would keep him safe

and intact” (Li 90). The baby, to Boshen, merely serves for his personal desire as a medium to facilitate his relationship with Yang. In this regard, the queer kinship shared by the three characters resonates with Edelman’s idea of queer futurity that does not aim at the Child as the telos. However, as I have mentioned, in addition to using the baby to bring Yang over, Boshen also cares about preserving Yang’s blood: he has thought about adopting the baby, for “half of her blood came from Yang, after all” (Li 71). He tries to talk Sasha out of the plan of abortion not for caring about Sasha or the new life but for continuing the blood of Yang, the father of the baby. Boshen’s motivation to keep Yang’s baby for the continuation of the father’s blood suggests that this family still aims for the reproduction the Child in the future. In this way, the queer family that Boshen envisions, in my perspective, may not be as queer as it appears to be, since the baby, to Boshen, ultimately becomes a symbol of patriarchal lineage treasured in the heteronormative thinking of kinship.

If the baby means patrilineal heritage to Boshen, what does it mean to the mother Sasha herself? Back in China, Sasha initially does not want kinship of any kind, since all she wants is to start a new chapter of her life as a graduate student in America. First and foremost, she strives to break away from her Mongolian identity. Throughout the story, she constantly reminisces about the small Mongolian town where she grows up with her mother, who is sent down from Beijing to Inner Mongolia for labor reeducation during the Cultural Revolution. After the Cultural Revolution, Sasha’s mother was forced to stay despite her divorce with her Mongolian husband, primarily because her two daughters, born in Mongolia, have no legal residency in Beijing. The name “Sasha,” which is of Russian origin, suggests that Sasha’s identity, like the Mongolian territory, is “sandwiched by China and Russia” (Li 85). Furthermore, Sasha admits that “She had forgotten almost all of the Mongolian words she had learned” (Li 84). When she

tries to sing a song about Genghis Khan to Yang, “The melody was in her mind, but no words came to her tongue” (Li 84). Genghis Khan and the Mongolian song symbolize Sasha’s ethnic origin, which she feels strongly connected to but eagers to escape from. As Sasha narrates, she always feels that she is born and trapped in the “wrong place”—Inner Mongolia—where her mother had to stay (Li 79). Sasha considers herself “used by the law to trap her mother in the grassland” (Li 78-79). Sasha feels herself used as an instrument by the law to keep her mother from moving out of Mongolia; in other words, she sees herself as a hateful cause of her mother’s immobile position in Mongolia. Therefore, she aspires to claim a new American identity so that she can break away from her kinship connection with her mother and her Mongolian identity.

Sasha does not expect that she would develop a relationship with Yang a month before her departure from China to the United States: “Sasha had not planned for love, or even affair. The friendship [with Yang] was out of whimsy, a convenience for the empty days immediately before graduating from college” (Li 81). After she gets pregnant with Yang’s baby, the baby becomes the obstacle in her way to her new American identity; therefore, after she arrives at America, she plans to have an abortion in the hope of breaking away from any kinship ties and “moving on” by herself:

“Moving on” was a phrase she just learned, an American concept that suited her well. It was such a wonderful phrase that Sasha could almost see herself stapling her Chinese life, one staple after another around the pages until they became one solid block that nobody would be able to open and read. She would have a fresh page then, for her American life. She was four months late already. (Li 69)

Sasha believes that there can be a clear cut between her past life in China, which she can “staple” up and put away, and her future life in America, which is a total blank page waiting for her to

assert her new identity. She intends to “move on” away from any kinship connection, including her relationship with the baby, to the “fresh page” in America. America, for Sasha, makes everything possible, like the movie *Pretty Woman* that she watches with Yang. She tells Yang that she wants to become Julia Roberts in the film, who is “pretty, and pretty, and so— American” (Li 81). The Hollywood film embodies Sasha’s fantasy of becoming from rags to riches in America, a place where, as she describes to Yang, “Everything could happen there. A prostitute becomes a princess; a crow turns into a swan overnight” (Li 81). Sasha’s desire for an American identity becomes even stronger when seeing the Christmas parade with Boshen on Michigan Avenue. Surrounded by the crowds celebrating Christmas, Sasha is drawn to the American youngsters enjoying the festival: in her eyes, “They were born to be themselves, naïve and contented with their naivety” (Li 78). Dazzled by the people, she tells Boshen “I would trade my place with any one of them” (Li 78). In this scene, Sasha as well as Boshen are contrasted to the Americans celebrating on the street as they are presented as outsiders who are unable to join the celebrating crowds. The contrast suggests that Sasha, as a Chinese diasporic, desires for an American identity so as to belong to the crowds, who are happier because they are born in the “right” place (America) while she herself has been trapped in the wrong one (Mongolia).

Watching the Americans enjoying Christmas on the street, Sasha considers the possibility of gaining the American identity she desires for through the birth of the baby: “If only there were a law in America binding her to where her baby belonged so that the baby would have a reason to live” (Li 78). Sasha is hoping that her kinship relation with the baby could secure her an American identity. However, it is clear that the birthright citizenship of the United States belongs only to the baby, not the parents. As much as Sasha imagines that “If only her baby were a visa that would admit her into this prosperity” (Li 79), her relation with the baby does not ensure her

the American identity she wants. While the baby may be an American, Sasha herself will be bound to her ethnic origin as a Mongolian. At this point, Sasha sees her kinship with the baby as nothing more than a possible way to secure her American citizenship, which explains why she seems so firm about the abortion. To her, the baby is “just a chunk of flesh and blood” if it is not going to help her gain an American identity (Li 87).

However, the end of the story implies that Sasha would decide to keep the baby because of its random tap she feels in her body. Some may argue that the story at this point seems to hark back to the patriarchal norm of passing on patrilineage through the Child, as Sasha “imagined a baby possessing the beauty of her father but happier, and luckier” (Li 91). However, I argue that here Sasha’s relationship with the baby shows potential to “queer” the conventional conception of kinship based upon patrilineage. The major moment when Sasha changes her mind is when the tap of the baby triggers her memories of her mother: “Her mother had been born into a wrong time, lived all her adult life in a wrong place, yet she had never regretted the births of her two daughters” (Li 90-91). The mother’s situation as a diasporic of moving from Beijing to Mongolia mirrors Sasha’s situation of moving from China to America; the difference is that the mother chose to embrace a kinship with her daughters and allows her children to open up a future for her, while Sasha initially intends to break away from any kinship ties. At the end Sasha’s memories about her mother, evoked by the bodily contact with the baby, propels her to follow her mother’s footsteps and to make the decision to keep the baby.

As the memories about her mother flood into Sasha’s mind through the tap of the baby from within her body, they awake Sasha’s desire for kinship connections: “A tap, and then another one, gentle and tentative, the first greeting Sasha had wished she would never have to answer, but it seemed impossible, once it happened, not to hope for more” (Li 90). Touched by

the tap and the memories, Sasha imagines a better future for the baby, and the story ends as she changes her mind:

Sasha held her breath and waited for more of the baby's messages. America was a good country, she thought, a right place to be born into, even though the baby had come at a wrong time. Everything was possible in America, she thought, and imagined a baby possessing the beauty of her father but happier, and luckier.

Sasha smiled, but then when the baby moved again, she burst into tears. Being a mother must be the saddest yet the most hopeful thing in the world, falling into a love that, once started, would never end. (Li 91)

The narrative voice of male figures, be it the potential adoptive father Boshen or the biological father Yang, is erased here. What leads Sasha to keep her baby is not the father figures but her memories of her mother's love triggered by the baby's tap in her body, which propels her to imagine an open and hopeful future. Sasha's relation with the baby does not fall under the heteronormative thinking of kinship, which relies on the reproduction of the patrilineal heritage in the body of a child. Rather, it demonstrates how diasporic subjects can make use of what they have in a diasporic space to develop alternative kinship relations: in the case of Sasha, the unborn baby becomes an agent that actively opens up a future.

The queerness of the kinship relation between Sasha and her baby, I argue, lies in its rejection to be defined by patrilineal norm as well as its emergence from diasporic experience. In this regard, the title "The Princess of Nebraska," does not refer simply to Yang. That is, although Boshen expects Yang to become the "princess" when he is brought to the America, given the fact that Yang has no intention of leaving China, the true "Princess of Nebraska" should actually be Sasha or Sasha's daughter. "The Princess of Nebraska" can refer to Sasha, for, despite the fact

that she cannot claim a national identity in America, she is able to develop kinship relations in her own ways as a Chinese diasporic in Nebraska. The phrase can also refer to Sasha's baby, who is going to be born on the land of Nebraska, enabling her mother to imagine a future. Either way, the child image here escapes from the hegemonic "Child" image of reproductive futurism, telling a different story about future: the future may be constituted by diasporic experiences shared by parents and children instead of relying on blood reproduction or genealogy.

For Sasha, though she fails to claim a definite American identity, she is able to create an alternative account of kinship as a Chinese diasporic figure. America, in "The Princess of Nebraska," is presented not only as a space more politically and culturally tolerant of sexual minorities like Boshen and Yang but also as a space in which diasporic subjects, such as Boshen and Sasha, are enabled to imagine and establish alternative kinship relations in their own ways. Like "A Thousand Years of Good Prayers," "The Princess of Nebraska" foregrounds the impact of diaspora on characters and their intimate relations among each other: If "A Thousand Years of Good Prayers" shows how kinship, through mutual understanding based on free talking, could develop between diasporic figures and break away from ethnic traceability, "The Princess of Nebraska" shows how kinship can be imagined in diasporic contexts to challenge the conventional conception of kinship grounded in patrilineal norms.

Chapter Four

“Gold Boy, Emerald Girl”

Yiyun Li’s “Gold Boy, Emerald Girl” follows Hanfeng, who returns to settle down in China after drifting around in the U.S. for years. Despite his homosexual orientation, Hanfeng agrees to return and marry Siyu, one of his mother’s students, under the mother’s request. However, we soon find that Siyu has been secretly enamored with Hanfeng’s mother, Professor Dai, who is implied to be homosexual in spite of her conjugal relation with Hanfeng’s father. The trio comes to look upon the marriage arrangement between Hanfeng and Siyu not only as a way for companionship but also as a way to secure themselves from social pressures on the mother’s widowhood, Siyu’s spinsterhood, and all three’s homosexuality in China.

Like “The Princess of Nebraska,” “Gold Boy, Emerald Girl” consists of characters who are identified as homosexual, which distinguishes the two stories from “A Thousand Years of Good Prayers.” Although both “The Princess of Nebraska” and “Gold Boy, Emerald Girl” feature queer sexualities, what further distinguishes the latter from the former is the context of the story: in “The Princess of Nebraska,” Sasha and Boshen struggle to form a queer family with Yang in America, a relatively more liberal country for gays and lesbians, while in “Gold Boy, Emerald Girl,” though Hanfeng has spent a long time as an “out” gay in the United States, the main characters end up making a compromise and settling for a nominal marriage in China, a socially and culturally more constraining county for homosexuals. “Gold Boy, Emerald Girl” presents a different trajectory of diasporic subjects from America to China and looks into how queer kinship relations are developed in a more politically and socially constraining Chinese context.

The marriage arrangement in “Gold Boy, Emerald Girl” seems conservative at first sight: the three homosexual characters make a compromise and resort to a “normal” family under the pressures in a socially and politically constraining environment for sexual minorities. The marriage between Hanfeng and Siyu assumes the appearance of a conventional wedlock based upon heteronormativity. However, this marriage, I argue, in effect makes possible an alternative, “queer” kinship among Professor Dai, Hanfeng and Siyu. It also resignifies marriage from a heterosexual conjugal relationship into a survival strategy of the (sexually) marginalized so as to shield themselves from social pressures. In this regard, if America presented in “A Thousand Years of Good Prayers” and “The Princess of Nebraska” allows queer kinships to unfold beyond the normative definition of kinship, “Gold Boy, Emerald Girl” shows how, when in a certain context, marriage can be appropriated by queer subjects for building up alternative forms of kinship within the structure. In what follows I first look at how and why the “queerness” of the characters propels them to agree upon a marriage arrangement and then moves on to explore how the marriage serves as an alternative form of kinship with queer potentiality.

What readers may find queer about Hanfeng, in addition to his homosexuality, is perhaps his decision to come back from the U.S. to China to settle down. This decision does not make sense to Hanfeng’s colleagues in America. When he tells them in San Francisco about his plan to move back to China, they “joked about moving with him and becoming the forty-niners of the new gold rush” (Li 207). Though their joking reaction reveals that there might be greater economic profitability in China today, it still appears absurd to the colleagues that a gay like Hanfeng would want to move back to a more socially constraining environment like China for good. Indeed, when in America, initially Hanfeng lives an open, free gay life without longing for

kinship connection. After being informed that his first lover is engaged, he throws himself into endless flings, trying to “have fun” in America without committing to any other relationship:

America, at first glance, seemed a happy enough place, and when his friend called with the news of his engagement, Hanfeng sought out companions. All he wanted was to have some fun ... ‘have fun’—wasn’t that the phrase that replaced words of farewell in many Americans’ lexicon? (Li 212)

Despite—or because of— all the flings, Hanfeng eventually comes to desire for kinship relations as he feels individual freedom in America starts to bore him: “Freedom is like restaurant food, he once told an old friend in the States, and one can lose one’s appetite for even the best restaurants” (Li 208). The feeling for kinship becomes stronger when he grows aware of the family life his friend has had at the moment: “his friend, who, unlike Hanfeng, had long ago settled down with a partner, a house, and two dogs, and talked of adopting a baby” (Li 208). This perfect picture of family life contrasts Hanfeng’s life as a single drifter moving from one place to another: from “New York to Montreal, then Vancouver, and later San Francisco” (Li 208). Hanfeng’s diasporic experience ultimately arouses his desire for kinship relation and propels him to reconnect with his mother.

One important reason for Hanfeng to return to China is his sense of obligation to take care of his mother after her retirement. As he thinks to himself: “His mother was getting old, ... the thought that he, too, was no longer a young man in need of adventures he kept to himself” (Li 207). Hanfeng’s disclaim of his own “adventures” in America suggests that he, feeling that he is no longer young anymore, starts to long for some kind of kinship relations, so taking care of his aged mother serves as a way to fulfill both his desire for kinship and also his filial obligation. While filiation has been essential in a Chinese family, what makes Hanfeng’s relationship with

his mother slightly “queer” is that, as far as Hanfeng can remember, he has been responsible for taking care of his mother since he was young: “He had been the one to cook for the two of them when he was a boy ... his mother, her preoccupation with her research a ready excuse, had eaten at odd hours then” (Li 208). Moreover, after becoming an adult, Hanfeng’s feeling to protect his mother becomes stronger when he sees her ridiculed by the audience when she is playing the piano on stage: “it occurred to Hanfeng that he was becoming a parent for his mother, that he would be the one to protect her from the hostility of the world” (Li 209). The passages suggest that there is a role reversal between the parent and the child in Hanfeng’s family; Hanfeng loves his mother through taking up the role of the parent who is responsible for accompanying and protecting his mother, who is constantly under the “hostility of the world” for her widowhood (which I will discuss later). Through returning to China and sustaining a marriage with Siyu, Hanfeng can continue to love his mother in the role of a parent by protecting her from social pressures.

If Hanfeng’s return to China for good appears eccentric in others’ eyes, Siyu is considered odd for being single at the age of thirty-eight. In fact, she “had developed a reputation as unmatchable” over the years when matchmakers’ attempts all turn out in vain (Li 206). Siyu herself also feels the social pressures on her unmarried state: “The world had made up its mind about her oddity in her spinsterhood” (Li 215). Growing up in a patriarchal society, a spinster like Siyu appears odd not only because she has not fulfilled her responsibility of forming her own family by marrying a man but also because she remains distant to her own family. When her father remarries, Siyu tries to stay away from his new family, as she thinks to herself: “He did not need her to complicate his new life” (Li 217). Although she proposes to have a monthly lunch with her father, she is aware that her cold attitude to him comes across as being “ungrateful

and coldhearted ... in the eyes of old neighbors and family friends” (Li 217). Siyu’s spinsterhood and her cold attitude to her father speaks for her being unfilial in others’ eyes.

As the story progresses, we soon find that Siyu’s unmarried status and her distant attitude to her father are resulted from her homosexual affection toward Professor Dai: “how could she stay in his [her father’s] sight when she was going through her life with a reckless speed known only to herself, all because of a love she could not explain and did not have the right to claim in the first place?” (Li 217-18). Her love is so strong that she got up at six every morning as a student to wait for Professor Dai in front of her building, only to get the professor to talk to her after two years (Li 206). Even after she graduated, Siyu “tried to keep herself uncommitted” for almost two decades just to wait for Professor Dai to invite her to spend every holiday together (Li 204). As much as she is obsessive with Professor Dai, Siyu feels that this love cannot be known not only because it is of same sex but also because it is between a younger woman and a much older woman. As King-Kok Cheung points out in her article “Somewhat Queer Triangle,” in the Chinese society, “attraction between an older woman and a much younger woman is ... unspeakable and, therefore, unspoken” (97). In this regard, Siyu is “queer” to others for her unmarried status and her failure of sustaining filiation with her father, resulted from her homosexual affection toward an elder woman, which she can only keep to herself.

Professor Dai is the person who arranges Hanfeng and Siyu’s marriage and facilitates the making of this family. Known mostly through Hanfeng’s and Siyu’s narrative perspectives, she apparently is no less “queer” than the other two in the heteronormative society. As Siyu describes, Professor Dai appears peculiar in others’ eyes for her widowhood. For instance, when the death of Hanfeng’s father is brought up, even though it is resulted from a bike accident “that no one could be blamed for” (Li 216), Siyu still feels Professor Dai blamed by others: “Siyu had

sensed the others' disapproval of Professor Dai, as if she were partially responsible for the unfair fate that befell the man" (Li 216). After Hanfeng returns to China, he also comes to realize that her mother's behavior may come across as weird or even ridiculous to others:

His mother had always been a headstrong woman, and with her grayish-white mane and unsmiling face, she appeared as regal and intimidating as she had ever been. Still, seeing her through other people's eyes, Hanfeng realized that all that made her who she was—the decades of solitude in her widowhood, her coolness to the prying eyes of people who tried to mask their nosiness with friendliness, and her faith in the notion of living one's own life without having to go out of one's way for other people—could be deemed pointless and laughable. (209-10)

The passage reveals Hanfeng's ambivalent feeling about his mother: on the one hand, as a son, he sees his mother as a "headstrong woman" (with a "regal" and "intimidating" appearance) whose faith of simply minding her own business enables herself to deal with the hostility of the society on her own; on the other hand, Hanfeng is also aware that her mother's "solitude" and "coolness" appears "pointless" and "laughable" in other people's eyes, and this awareness fosters Hanfeng's sense of obligation to protect his mother. Although Hanfeng admires his mother's strong characteristics and individuality, he also realizes and cannot deny that she is deemed "queer" under the constant scrutiny of the society. Struggling to negotiate between his own and others' perspectives in seeing his mother, Hanfeng ends up deciding to take up the role of the parent and protect his mother.

While Professor Dai's widowhood has already made her "queer" in the society, she has another secret that she keeps only to herself—her homosexual identification. When she marries Hanfeng's father, they were compared to the "gold boy" and "emerald girl" for "their matching

good looks” (Li 216). However, their marriage turns out not to be what Professor Dai genuinely wants, as she advised Siyu:

She [Siyu] shouldn't get married if it was not what she wanted. ... You could feel trapped by the wrong man. ... You would have to wish for his death every day of your marriage, ... but once the wish was granted by a miracle, you would never be free of your own cruelty. Siyu listened, knowing that the older woman was talking about herself. (Li 220)

Professor Dai is trying to persuade Siyu to marry for who she really wants, since Professor Dai feels trapped in her own wrong marriage because of her homosexual identification. Her queer sexual orientation is also revealed in Hanfeng's reminiscence about a visit of her close “friend” when he was ten: “The woman, who had told Hanfeng that she was a very old friend of his mother's and was planning to stay with them for a week, left the next morning. ... He could not pinpoint when he understood that there had been betrayals between the two friends” (Li 219). Like Siyu, Professor Dai's affection cannot be open to the public because it is of same sex; but what makes this relation even more socially unacceptable is the fact that it is an extramarital affair. Therefore, Professor Dai has “long ago decided to live alone with the secret until her death” (Li 219). In this way, the marriage arrangement between Hanfeng and Siyu can serve as a pretense to divert others' attention away from Professor Dai's homosexual identification.

Judith Butler in her article “Is Kinship Always Already Heterosexual?” points out that marriage is usually inextricable from the state, since the state gets to determine what kind of desire and sexuality qualifies to enter the sphere of marriage. Emphasizing the power of the state, Butler asks the questions at the heart of marriage relation: “whose desire might qualify as a desire for state legitimation? ... whose desire might qualify as the desire of the state?” (22).

Since the state is able to regulate forms of sexuality and desire through its legitimation, certain forms of desire (usually heterosexuality) are constructed and normalized for the formation of kinship. The powerful role the state plays makes marriage never a private business about personal desire. Rather, it “compels ... universal recognition” (Butler 23), for coming along with a marriage are certain official rights and public acknowledgement to the married couple, such as that “everyone must let you into the door of the hospital; everyone must honor your claim to grief; everyone will assume your natural rights to a child; everyone will regard your relationship as elevated into eternity” (Butler 23). In other words, a “married” relationship is legitimated by the state and universally recognized as a “normal” relationship. Read this way, the arranged marriage between Hanfeng and Siyu in “Gold Boy, Emerald Girl” is established for the purpose of gaining such recognition from the state, so that Hanfeng’s and Siyu’s homosexual identities can be spared from the surveillance of the society. Siyu can break away from her identity as a spinster. And since she has her own family to take care of after the marriage, she can also be excused from being distant to her father. Hanfeng can also be acknowledged by fulfilling his filial obligation through forming a “normal” family while being able to can take care of his mother at the same time. In this regard, the marriage becomes the three main characters’ strategy to survive in a socially constraining environment to sexual minorities.

However, at this point one may argue that: despite the fact that it seems the marriage serves as a survival strategy to deal with social pressures, does Li reiterate or even perpetrate normalization of kinship and desire by portraying how these “queer” people resort to a “normal” family through a heterosexual marriage in “Gold Boy, Emerald Girl”? If not, what is queer about this representation of marriage? How does it enable us to imagine an alternative form of kinship relation? Indeed, through appearing to be a “normal” marriage between a man and a woman,

Hanfeng's and Siyu's marriage is "queer" in that it challenges the common conception of marriage by transforming marriage into a survival strategy, an idea indebted to José Esteban Muñoz's idea of disidentification.

In his book *Disidentification: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, Muñoz studies how minority subjects negotiate with predominant political discourses through practicing "disidentification" as survival strategies. He proposes the idea of "disidentification" as a possible way for minorities to negotiate with dominant ideologies and finds illustrations of this idea in the examples of how queer people of color deal with heteronormativity. According to Muñoz, when a subject is confronted by dominant ideologies, he/she may choose neither to assimilate (identify with) nor to reject (counter-identify with) them; instead, they may employ a third, alternative way of identification—the practice of disidentification. As Muñoz defines, disidentification is about "recycling and rethinking encoded meaning" of the dominant ideology (31). It indicates a process in which minorities rework the codes of the dominant ideology in their own ways and invest them with new meanings so as to survive in a hostile environment:

Disidentification is meant to be descriptive of the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship. (Muñoz 4)

The passage suggests that minority subjects may employ disidentification so as to survive despite their non-conformity to the mainstream community. By appropriating and rewriting the codes of a predominant cultural system through disidentification, the minorities are able to resist the cultural system from within instead of totally assimilating with or rejecting the system.

As my previous discussion shows, the main characters in “Gold Boy, Emerald Girl” are under constant scrutiny of a heteronormative society: Siyu’s spinsterhood, Professor Dai’s widowhood and the three’s homosexuality make them minorities in the society. The arranged marriage between Hanfeng and Siyu, I argue, serves as a way to “disidentify” the conception of marriage based on heteronormativity for the three main characters to survive in the society. Precisely, Hanfeng and Siyu’s marriage is not entirely to identify with the mainstream, conventional wedlock between a male and a female, for Hanfeng and Siyu do not love each other in an amatory way. Nor do the characters counter-identify with the legitimized marriage system by trying to form a queer family beyond the legitimation of the state, which would be what Boshen attempts to do in “The Princess of Nebraska.” Their union rather invests different meaning into the conception of marriage to secure themselves from social pressures.

More clearly, the marriage arrangement in the story is achieved because of the couple’s love toward the same person. Marriage is resignified from being based on the romantic love between the husband and the wife to being based on the husband and the wife’s love toward a third person. As Siyu thinks to herself, “the marriage, arranged as it was, would still be a love marriage” (Li 220). Here the “love” does not refer to the romantic love between Hanfeng and herself but the love that the couple share toward Professor Dai. Indeed, the story title “Gold Boy, Emerald Girl” also implies that the marriage is built upon Hanfeng and Siyu’s love toward Professor Dai. The origin of the phrase can be traced to Daoism and Buddhism. In Daoism, the “gold boy” and “emerald girl” are a pair of servers to serve and accompany the passing souls to heaven; therefore, there are usually icons of these servers at traditional Daoist funerals (“金童、玉女,” 2009). In Buddhism, the “gold boy” and “emerald girl” are the pair of servers who accompany Guanyin. Classic Chinese literature borrows these images of “gold boy” and “emerald

girl” as an expression to praise the matching good looks of an enamored couple², which has been in use today in occasions like weddings (“金童玉女,” 2019.). In Li’s story, the phrase is originally used to describe Professor Dai and her husband for their handsome looks in the wedding. However, the arranged marriage between Hanfeng and Siyu foregrounds the original meaning of the phrase in Buddhism: they are the “gold boy” and “emerald girl” for their companionship with Professor Dai, who, in this case, can be compared to the Guanyin. They may be the “gold boy” and “emerald girl” to others for their matching looks in the wedlock, but what really makes them a “gold boy” and a “emerald girl” is their communal love toward Professor Dai.

While the image of Guanyin symbolizes the central figure of the triangular relationship—Professor Dai—in “Gold Boy, Emerald Girl,” it is not the first time that Li employs this image. In fact, in “The Princess of Nebraska,” Li has employed the same image to describe Yang. When describing Yang’s androgynous appearance, Sasha compares it to “a statute of Kuanyin, the male Buddha in a female body” (Li 76). If, in “Gold Boy, Emerald Girl,” the image of Guanyin refers to Professor Dai whom the “gold boy” (Hanfeng) and the “emerald girl” (Siyu) love and serve, then Boshen and Sasha can also be compared to the “gold boy” and “emerald girl” for their communal love toward Yang. Originated from *Avalokiteśvara* in Sanskrit, the name Guanyin, short for *Guanshiyin* (觀世音) in Chinese, means “He/She Who Looks Down Upon the Sounds (Cries) of the World” (Pine 45). In other words, Guanyin is perceived as the god looking after those in need in the world. In this case, Professor Dai’s act of arranging the marriage to secure

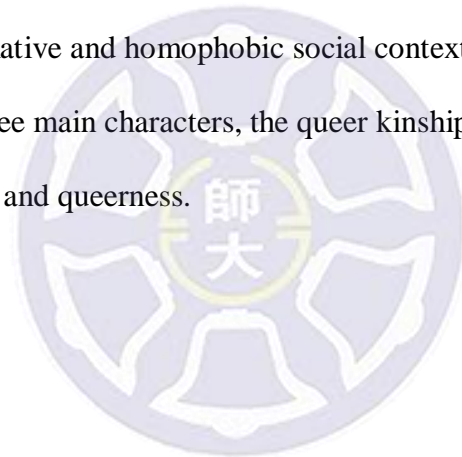
² For example, in Li Hau-gu’s *Jang Sheng Ju Hai* (李好古《張生煮海》), “gold boy” and “emerald girl” are used to describe a matching couple: “gold boy’s and emerald girl’s feeling are mutual, talented man’s and beautiful woman’s match are rare” (“金童玉女意投機，才子佳人世罕稀”; my translation). For more on Li, see “金童玉女” (2019).

Hanfeng and Siyu from hostility of the society foregrounds her image as Guanyin who reaches his/her hands out to people in need. However, although Yang can also be compared to Guanyin for being loved by both Boshen and Sasha, he is not as compassionate as Professor Dai. In fact, he remains quite individualistic throughout the story without managing to help his lovers solve their problems, as he tells Boshen, his way of living a life is “You do things when you feel like it, no?” (Li 75). In “Gold Boy, Emerald Girl” and “The Princess of Nebraska,” Li employs the same image of Guanyin to describe two different characters in two sets of triangular relationships: although both Professor Dai and Yang can be compared to the Guanyin who occupies the centers of the relationships, only Professor Dai embodies the compassion and love of the god.

Evolving from the married couple’s love toward Professor Dai, Hanfeng and Siyu’s marriage foregrounds the practice of companionship in kinship formation. As Professor Dai tells the couple: “When you are young, you marry for passion ... When you’re older, you marry for companionship” (Li 219). For Hanfeng, Professor Dai does not want him to “repeat her fate” as she was trapped in a loveless marriage with her husband; this time she wants his marriage to be based upon, if not his love toward his wife, the companionship among the three family members, as Professor Dai tells him: “There were many ways to maintain a marriage, and she expected theirs to be far from the worst” (Li 219). Also focusing on the relationship brought about by companionship, Siyu envisions her married life as “standing by the window and listening to Hanfeng and Professor Dai play four-hand, and she could see the day when she would replace Professor Dai on the piano bench, her husband patient with her inexperienced fingers” (Li 221). In fact, here Siyu sees the marriage as a lasting companionship even after Professor’s Dai’s passing. Clearly, what is aimed by and sustains this marriage is not only Hanfeng and Siyu’s love

toward Professor Dai but also the communal companionship among the three main characters: “They were lonely and sad people, all three of them, and they would not make one another less sad, but they could, with great care, make a world that would accommodate their loneliness” (Li 221). Originally based upon the couple’s love toward Professor Dai, the marriage ends up serving as a space, the “world” they make, for the three solitary individuals in this family to accompany each other for the rest of their lives in under constraining social pressures.

To conclude, in “Gold Boy, Emerald Girl,” Li explores an alternative way to reimagine kinship and a “queer” strategy to negotiate with heterosexual norms. Under the guise of a heterosexual marriage arrangement, Hanfeng, Siyu and Professor Dai are able to build up a queer family despite the heteronormative and homophobic social context they live in. Sustained by the companionship among the three main characters, the queer kinship is established to accommodate their loneliness and queerness.



Conclusion

In this thesis I have demonstrated how the “queer” kinship in Li’s fiction challenges the common conception of kinship. In Chapter Two, the analysis of “A Thousand Years of Good Prayers” demonstrates how the conflict between Mr. Shi and his daughter is resulted from Mr. Shi’s conception of kinship based upon heteronormativity and ethnic essentialism. The story also allows us to see an alternative form of kinship built by contingent encounters between Mr. Shi and Madam. Sustained by the acts of talking, their relationship may constitute an “Asian American” affiliation that foregrounds lived experiences in a diasporic context. In Chapter Three, I probe into the meaning of the baby to Sasha and Boshen as diasporic subjects in “The Princess of Nebraska.” While the baby serves as a symbol of patrilineage in Boshen’s three-member-family imagination, Sasha’s kinship with the baby has the potential to “queer” kinship by evoking a mother-baby bodily contact. In this regard, America is presented not only as a more tolerant space for Chinese gays and lesbians but also as a space in which diasporic subjects, such as Boshen and Sasha, are enabled to establish alternative kinship relations in their own ways. Last but not least, in Chapter Four, I explore the marriage arrangement in “Gold Boy, Emerald Girl.” Foregrounding companionship, the arranged marriage between Hanfeng and Siyu is utilized as a survival strategy to keep the three main characters away from social pressures on their queer sexualities in a heteronormative society. The story shows us how sexual minorities manage to invest in marital relations new meanings for their own good in a constraining society.

While I was in the process of completing this thesis, on 18 May 2019 lawmakers in Taiwan passed the Enforcement Act of Juridical Yuan Constitutional Interpretation No. 748 (「司法院釋字第 748 號解釋施行法」, 2019), making Taiwan the first Asian nation to legalize

same-sex marriage. Beginning in the 1990s, the movement for human rights for the LGBTQ community in Taiwan has gained the nation a reputation for being one of the most LGBTQ-friendly countries in Asia (Spencer, 2018). On 25 May 2017, the Supreme Court issued a ruling that declared the laws banning same-sex marriage unconstitutional (釋字第 748 號「同性二人婚姻自由案」, 2017), thereby compelling the Legislative Yuan to amend those laws within two years. Despite heated debates, on 18 May 2019, a bang of the gavel finally marked the passing of the legislation after its third reading with a crowd cheering on Qingdao E. Road outside the Legislative Yuan. Same-sex marriage is now legitimate in Taiwan.

As a researcher on the subject of kinship, I have felt ambivalent about marriage. While agreeing that the legalization of same-sex marriage represents a crucial moment of progress in the history of the LGBTQ rights movement in Taiwan, I also realize that more should be done in terms of kinship imagination and practices. I believe that the legalization of same-sex marriage will bring gay and lesbian communities numerous social benefits, such as inheritance rights and medical rights, though some limits remain. For instance, the law as currently formulated in Taiwan only grants same-sex couples adoption rights for children genetically related to one of the parents. Furthermore, the bill does not grant legal recognition to transnational same-sex marriages in Taiwan. In addition to these limits at a legal level, as marriage is singled out as the only legitimate and “normal” form of kinship, our imagination with regard to kinship relations is still constrained. Queer theorist Jack Halberstam has discussed the reasons why, even as a member of the LGBTQ community, she does not necessarily support the legalization of same-sex marriage. In her article “Gaga Relations: The End of Marriage,” queer people like her may oppose same-sex marriage for a number of reasons. For one thing, rights, such as healthcare rights, should be universal instead of marriage-dependent; for another, privileging the marriage

model prevents us from recognizing the variety of intimate relations (Halberstam 102-14). Moreover, when same-sex marriage is expected to model on that of heterosexual couples, the society may neglect other possible various forms of intimate relationships, such as open relationships.³ This being said, I do recognize the value of the legalization of same-sex marriage today, if primarily as a step further toward officially recognizing the lived realities of people holding diverse sexual and gender identities and toward creating a world better accommodating people of various desires.

By working on this thesis, I not only hope to arouse interest in the studies on Yiyun Li's fiction but also wish to cultivate alternative "queer" accounts of kinship via analyses of Li's rich texts. As I have pointed out in this thesis, queer kinship could be built upon the acts of talking between two individuals like Mr. Shi and Madam, could develop in a diasporic context such as in the case of Sasha and Boshen, or could be contrived under the guise of a hetero-marital contract as a survival strategy in a sexually constraining society. Due to the limited space of this thesis, however, there are still issues that I am not able to deal with but hope to address in future studies. One thing is that I use "kinship" in this thesis mostly as a broad and general term to refer to blood relation and intimate feelings; I did not have the chance to probe into the subtler categorizations of kinship in a Chinese context. For instance, while "cousin" in English generally refers to a child of one's uncle or aunt, in Chinese it refers to various relationships depending on gender and age difference, such as "tang ge" ("堂哥," male elder cousins from the father's side)

³ An open relationship is a kind of intimate relationship that is sexually non-exclusive or non-monogamous. It refers to an intimate relationship between two partners who reach a consensus that they can have intimate relations with others besides each other, including sexual relations. Tristan Taormino, in *Opening Up: A Guide to Creating and Sustaining Open Relationships*, further categorizes open relationships into different types, such as "swinging," "open marriage" and "polyamory."

and “biau mei” (“表妹,” female younger cousins from the mother’s side). In future studies, I would be more attentive to the cultural specificities of kinship categorizations.

Finally, in addition to Yiyun Li’s works discussed here, many other works could offer further insights into the issue of kinship and deserve further attention of those who are interested in this subject. To name a few: British author Kazuo Ishiguro’s Man-Booker-Prize-shortlisted novel *Never Let Me Go* (2005) complicates the issue of kinship by bringing biotechnology into consideration, raising ethical problems about intimate relationships among clones and human beings. Also a Man-Booker-Prize-shortlisted novel, Hanya Yanagihara’s *A Little Life* (2015) traces the lives of four male friends at New York City from college to middle-ages and delves into the complexities of male bonds. In an Asian context, Taiwanese author Ku Yu-ling’s *Our Stories: Migration and Labour in Taiwan*⁴ portrays the experience of Southeast Asian workers in Taiwan and touches upon the issues of diaspora and kinship in the context of Taiwan. I hope that my thesis has offered a useful starting point to explore more texts on kinship and probe into kinship studies. I also hope that my thesis can serve as a timeless reminder that, when we are toasting for the progress on marriage equality in Taiwan, we should always remain open-minded for still other “queer” kinships.

⁴ *Our Stories* is an English translated version from its original version in Mandarin. For the bibliographical information of the Mandarin version, see 顧玉玲.

Works Cited

- Ahmed, Fatema. "'A Thousand Years of Good Prayer': Double Agent." *New York Times*. Oct. 23 2005. Web.
- Berlant, Lauren and Michael Warner. "What Does Queer Theory Teach Us about X?" *PMLA* 110. 3 (1995): 343-49. Web.
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990. Print.
- . "Is Kinship Always Already Heterosexual?" *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 13.1 (2002): 14-44. Web.
- Cheung, King-Kok. "Somewhat Queer Triangles: Yiyun Li's 'The Princess of Nebraska' and 'Gold Boy, Emerald Girl.'" *Critical Insights: Contemporary Immigrant Short Fiction*. Ed. Robert C. Evans. New York: Grey House Publishing, 2015. 88-103. Print.
- Cohen, Cathy. "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*. 3.4 (1997): 437-65. Web.
- Edelman, Lee. *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Durham and London: Duke UP, 2004. Print.
- Eng, David L. *The Feeling of Kinship: Queer Liberalism and the Racialization of Intimacy*. London: Duke UP, 2010. Print.
- . *Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity in Asia America*. Durham: Duke UP, 2001. Print.
- , José Esteban Muñoz and Judith Halberstam. "Introduction: What's Queer about Queer Studies Now?" *Social Text* 23.3-4 (2005): 1-17. Web.
- and Alice Y. Hom, eds. *Q&A: Queer in Asia America*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1998. Print.

- Fox, Robin. *Kinship and Marriage: An Anthropological Perspective*. Harmondsworth: Pelican Books, 1967. Print.
- Gopinath, Gayatri. *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures*. Durham and London: Duke UP, 2005. Print.
- Halberstam, Judith Jack. "Gaga Relations: The End of Marriage." *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender, and the End of the Normal*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2012. 95-129. Print.
- Haraway, Donna J. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham and London: Duke UP, 2016. Print.
- Ishiguro, Kazuo. *Never Let Me Go*. London: Faber and Faber, 2005. Print.
- "Kinship." *Cambridge Dictionary*. shorturl.at/nFHP7. Web.
- "Kinship." *Oxford English Dictionary*. <https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/kinship>. Web.
- Ku, Yu-ling. *Our Stories: Migration and Labour in Taiwan*. Trans. Agnes Khoo. Petaling Jaya: SIRD, 2011. Print.
- Li, Yiyun. "A Thousand Years of Good Prayers." *A Thousand Years of Good Prayer*. London: Harper Perennial, 2005. 186-203. Print.
- . "Gold Boy, Emerald Girl." *Gold Boy, Emerald Girl*. London: Fourth Estate, 2011. 204-21. Print.
- . "The Princess of Nebraska." *A Thousand Years of Good Prayer*. London: Harper Perennial, 2005. 68-91. Print.
- Lim, Shirley Geok-lin. "Immigrant and Diaspora." *An Interethnic Companion to Asian American Literature*. Ed. King-Kok Cheung. NY: Cambridge UP, 1997. 289-311. Print.
- Lo, Yi-Jou. "From What We Eat to How We Are: Food and the Father-Daughter Relationship in Yiyun Li's *A Thousand Years of Good Prayers*." *The Explicator* 73.1 (2015): 65-68. Print.

Lowe, Lisa. "Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity: Marking Asian American Differences."

Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies 1.1 (1991): 24-44. Web.

Matthews, Graham J. "Framing Risk in China: Precarity and Instability in the Stories of Li

Yiyun." *Textual Practice* 31.3 (2017): 505-21. Web.

Muñoz, José Esteban. *Disidentification: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*.

Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999. Print.

Pine, Red. *The Heart Sutra: The Womb of the Buddhas*. Berkley: Counterpoints, 2004. Print.

"Queer." *Oxford English Dictionary*. <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/queer>. Web.

Seaman, Donna. "A Thousand Years of Good Prayers." *Booklist* 101. 22 (2005): 1964. Web.

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*. New

York: Columbia UP, 1985. Print.

---. *Epistemology of the Closet*. Berkley: University of California Press, 1990. Print.

Spencer, David. "7 Reasons why Taiwan is the best LGBT destination in Asia." *Taiwan News*.

Taiwan News. 29 July. 2018. Web. www.taiwannews.com.tw/en/news/3492498

Taormino, Tristan. *Opening Up: A Guide To Creating and Sustaining Open Relationships*. San

Francisco: Cleis Press, 2008. Print.

Wang, Ling-Chi. "The Structure of Dual Domination: Toward a Paradigm for the Study of the

Chinese Diaspora in the United States." *Sinophone Studies: A Critical Reader*. Ed. Shu-mei

Shih et al. 170-82. Print.

Yanagihara, Hanya. *A Little Life*. New York: Anchor Books, 2015. Print.

You, Yu-xuan. *Queering Asian America: Selected Chinese American Films by Wayne Wang*.

Master Thesis. National Taiwan Normal University. 2014. Web.

「司法院釋字第 748 號解釋施行法」，18 May. 2019

吳碧惠，「金童、玉女」。 *Encyclopedia of Taiwan*. Ministry of Culture, R.O.C., 9 Sep. 2009.

Web. <http://nrch.culture.tw/twpedia.aspx?id=11597>

「金童玉女。」 *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*. Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia, 13 Oct.

2018. Web. shorturl.at/stUWZ.

「金童玉女。」 *教育部重編國語辭典修訂本*. Ministry of Education, R.O.C., 7 June. 2019. Web.

dict.revised.moe.edu.tw/cgi-bin/cbdic/gswweb.cgi?o=dcbdic&searchid=Z00000094042

「釋字第 748 號『同性二人婚姻自由案』」， 24 May. 2017.

顧玉玲。《我們：移動與勞動的生命紀事》。新北市：印刻出版社，2008。

