Immortality Study Guide

Immortality by Yiyun Li

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

□Immortality,□ a short story by Chinese writer Yiyun Li, was first published in the *Paris Review* in 2003. It was reprinted in Li's collection of short stories, *A Thousand Years of Good Prayers* in 2005. □Immortality□ is set in China and is told from the point of view of an entire town as it goes through the turbulent events that affected China in the twentieth century. These events include the overthrow of the Qing dynasty (1644-1911/12); the establishment of a communist dictatorship and the personality cult of Mao Zedong; the horrors of the Cultural Revolution, in which millions died; and the massacre of pro-democracy demonstrators at Tiananmen Square, Beijing, in 1989. All these details form the backdrop to Li's highly unusual story of a boy who was born in 1949, the year that the communists came to power, and who as he grew up bore such a strong resemblance to the dictator that he was summoned to Beijing and trained to impersonate the dictator in official films and national events. With its vivid picture of life in China during the communist era, Li opens a window on a world that to Western readers may seem exotic and strange, and the tragic story she tells, of a young man who eventually falls from grace as rapidly as he first rises to fame, is a quietly compelling one.

Author Biography

Nationality 1: Chinese

Birthdate: 1972

Yiyun Li was born in Beijing, China, in 1972. Her father was a physicist and her mother a teacher. As a young child, Li learned how harsh the judicial system could be in the communist country. In 1978, when she was five and a half, the police drove through her neighborhood informing all the residents by loudspeaker that they were to assemble in an open field in ten minutes. In the field, four heavily bound men were placed on a temporary stage, and a police officer announced that they were counterrevolutionaries who had been sentenced to death. The sentence was to be carried out after the men had been paraded through all the local districts. At a signal from her daycare teacher, the five-year-old Li raised her fist, and along with everyone else, shouted a slogan calling for the men to be put to death.

As Li grew up, her mother would close the windows of their house when Li's grandfather, who had fought in the nationalist army against the communists, denounced Mao Zedong, the communist leader. Li's mother warned her to be careful what she said when she was out of the house and could be overheard by others.

Li was a high school student in Beijing when in June 1989, the Chinese Army crushed the pro-democracy protesters in Beijing's Tiananmen Square, killing thousands. She later said, according to Bob Thompson writing in the *Washington Post* on December 21, 2005, that everyone in Beijing knew someone who had been at the square that night, and she compared it to the terrorist attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001.

After the Tiananmen Square incident, the Chinese government ordered that every student at Beijing University was to attend a military camp for one year for purposes of political reeducation. In 1991, Li, a freshman student at the university, found herself at a military camp in central China. Though she already loathed the communist system, her enforced military service made her feel as if she were a victim of the regime, and her anger against the system continued to grow.

After she left the army, Li studied biology, with the goal of pursuing graduate study in the United States. In 1996, Li came to the United States, even though at the time she had only limited command of English. She enrolled in a Ph.D. program in immunology at the University of Iowa. She also took an adult education class in writing.

In 2000, Li realized that her ambition was to become not an immunologist but a writer. She accepted a master's degree in immunology and, in 2001, enrolled in a creative writing course at the University of Iowa. Her teacher was James Alan McPherson, a Pulitzer Prize winner. McPherson was deeply impressed by Li's story, □Immortality.□ Encouraged to continue writing, Li was admitted to the prestigious Iowa Writers'

Workshop, where she completed two more master's degrees, an MFA in fiction and an MFA in creative nonfiction writing. By this time, □Immortality□ had been published in the *Paris Review* (2003) and a memoir by Li had been published in the *New Yorker* (2004). Soon, Random House had offered her a contract for a collection of short stories, which was published in 2005 as *A Thousand Years of Good Prayers*. The collection, which includes the story, □Immortality,□ received unanimous praise from reviewers and won the Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award, the largest short story prize in the world.

As of 2006, Li lived in Oakland, California, with her husband and their two sons.

Plot Summary

□Immortality□ is told in the first person plural by a narrator who represents an entire Chinese town over the course of the twentieth century. The narrator begins by going back to the time of the Chinese imperial dynasties, when members of the imperial family were served by eunuchs who attended to their every need. Eunuchs are men who have had their testicles surgically removed.

This particular town has a history of sending boys to be castrated and serve the emperor and his family. Serving in this way was considered an honorable calling, and the town is proud of the role it has played in producing what were called □Great Papas.□ The tradition died out, however, when the last imperial dynasty was overthrown and replaced by republics. By the 1930s, most of the Great Papas lived in poverty in temples around the Forbidden City, which was the imperial palace located at the center of the capital city, Beijing.

In the late 1940s, the communists were victorious in the civil war, and the new rulers promised everyone a prosperous life. In the narrator's town, a carpenter's wife becomes pregnant. As the baby grows inside her, she keeps looking at newspaper pictures of the communist dictator. (Historically, the dictator was Mao Zedong, although in the story he is not named.) The narrator reports that there is a saying in China that the more a pregnant woman studies a face, the greater the possibility that the child will resemble that face. So it turns out. The baby boy soon begins to resemble the dictator rather than his father, who was executed by the communists after making some indiscreet remarks about the dictator in a pub. The dictator's rule is a brutal one, but the townspeople are unaware of this, merely going along with whatever the authorities want them to believe.

The boy's mother, widowed at the age of eighteen, is given a job as a street sweeper. No one wants to marry her, and she ages rapidly. By the time the boy is ten, she looks sixty. At that time, a famine comes and lasts for three years. (Historically, this is the famine in China that occurred from 1959 to 1961.) It is partly the fault of the communists, for mismanaging the economy. But when the authorities tell the townspeople that the famine is caused by sparrows and rats that ate all their food, the citizens believe them and attempt to kill all the sparrows. (This incident is based on Mao Zedong's declaration during the famine that sparrows were pests and should be hunted down by the people.) The boy who resembles the dictator tries to sneak a sparrow into his sleeve and take it to his mother to eat, but a bigger boy grabs him and accuses him of stealing the property of the People. The boy is set upon by a mob and beaten until his mother comes to rescue him, telling the mob to look at the boy's face. The mob freezes when it realizes that the boy looks exactly like the dictator whom they are taught to revere.

After this event, no one in the town ever utters a disrespectful word about the boy's face, and the older the boy gets, the more he resembles the dictator. After he graduates from high school, the Revolutionary Committee discusses what would be an appropriate job for him. They eventually appoint him as the director of the advisory board to the

Revolutionary Committee, which involves no responsibilities at all. The young man prospers, but no young woman will date him, because the word is that marrying this man will either bring the greatest fortune or the greatest misfortune.

When the dictator dies, the people in the town ostentatiously mourn. All entertainment is banned for six months. A year later, the young man, now twenty-eight, is whisked off in an official car to the capital city, where he is to audition as the dictator's impersonator. His mother is proud of him. The young man spends days in training for his new role, along with other candidates for the position. He succeeds in getting to the final round of competition, with three other men, and wins because he is the one who is adjudged to have best captured the essence of the dictator.

After this, he becomes the sole face that represents the dictator to the nation. He stars in movies about the dictator, and flies across the country appearing in televised celebrations of national holidays. The town hopes that he will marry a local young woman, but it becomes increasingly clear that this will not happen.

Time passes, and the country undergoes social changes as a result of Western influences. People can now buy Western consumer items and watch imported movies. The people in the town begin to realize that their own lives are not as happy as they had been taught to believe, and the capitalist countries are not simply waiting for the Chinese communists to liberate them through the worldwide spread of communism. Biographies and memoirs of the former dictator begin to appear that present the dictator in a bad light. Rumors spread that under his rule, fifty million people died through famine or political persecution. Doubt runs rampant through the people in the town. They are no longer interested in the stories told to them about the dictator's impersonator by his mother.

The present leader of the nation tries to reignite enthusiasm for communism, but a protest breaks out in the capital city. Thousands of people rally for democracy, but the army fires on the protesters. (Historically, this was the massacre in Tiananmen Square, in Beijing, in June 1989, in which between five hundred and seven thousand people were killed.) Shortly after that, the □big-brother country,□ which is their neighbor, ceases to exist. (This is a reference to the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991.) The townspeople are confused by all these rapid changes.

The dictator's impersonator, now in his forties, begins to encounter problems. He has never made love to a woman, and he starts to fantasize about his missed opportunities. He also thinks that no woman is good enough for him, since he is such a great man. He has time free now, and he takes to wandering the streets in disguise. At a stall in an alley, he buys a pornographic book and a biography of the dictator written by his physician of thirty years. The book was banned on publication abroad but has been smuggled into the country from Hong Kong and the United States. (This is a reference to the memoirs of Mao Zedong's physician, Dr. Li Zhisui, published in the United States in 1994.)

The man returns to his room and studies both books. He feels an emptiness he has never known before. He sees in the biography pictures of the dictator with attractive young nurses, and he realizes that being a great man means one can have whatever one wants in the world. He goes out in the night and finds a prostitute in a karaoke-and-dance bar. They go together to a hotel. The woman's pimp rushes into their room, impersonating a police officer. He handcuffs the man and photographs him. When the couple realizes who he is, they ask for ten times what they usually request in blackmail money. The man refuses to pay, thinking that his indiscretion will pass unnoticed. But rumors start to spread through the capital about his visit to the brothel. The incriminating pictures circulate until everyone claims to have seen them, and he is fired from his job as the dictator's impersonator. He is in any case no longer needed, since a new leader has come to power and is seeking someone who resembles him rather than the former dictator to become his impersonator.

On a winter's day, the man returns to his hometown. His mother has died, and he goes to her tomb, where he castrates himself. None of the townspeople knows why he does this, although they all remember the stories of the eunuchs of old, the Great Papas. The man lives on in the town, facing a long barren life. He sits around in the sun and walks to the cemetery at dusk, where he talks to his mother until it is dark. The townspeople pray for him to live forever, as they had prayed for the dictator.

Characters

Dictator

The dictator is not named and does not appear directly in the story, but his presence is felt everywhere. His photograph appears all the time in the newspapers during the 1950s; at that time, he is □the only superstar in the media,□ and the townspeople refer to him as □Our Father, Our Savior, the North Star of Our Lives, the Never Falling Sun of Our Era.□ Since they regard him as a surrogate father, they weep like orphans at his death. Underneath their adulation of this pseudo-divine figure, however, lies a □hidden hatred□ that they dare not acknowledge.

Impersonator

The impersonator is a young man whose face resembles the face of the dictator. The resemblance is so uncanny that even as a boy he leads quite a privileged life. At school, the teachers never rebuke him, and in the team games the children play, the side without him is always willing to lose. After he leaves school, he is given a title as director of the advisory board to the Revolution Committee, but this is a fake job that involves no work at all. A year after the dictator dies, the young man is taken to the capital city where he auditions as the dictator's impersonator. He is successful and travels the country, impersonating the dictator at national celebrations. He also appears in movies as the dictator. In this role, he is adored by the masses. People want to shake his hand and get his autograph, pretty young women rush up to him with bouquets of flowers, and enthusiastic children swarm around him. When he is in his forties, however, he becomes tormented by the fact that he has never married and never even made love to a woman. He has rejected many women who would have married him because he did not think they were worthy of him, since he has come to consider himself a great man. Eventually, he falls prey to lust, buying pornographic magazines and soliciting a prostitute in a bar, only to be blackmailed by the woman's pimp. He is fired from his job as impersonator, and even though he begs for another chance, his career is over. He returns to his hometown and castrates himself by his mother's tomb. At the end of the story, he cuts a pathetic figure: □He sits in the sun and watches the dogs chasing one another, his face hidden behind dark glasses and the high collar of his coat.□ In the evenings, he goes to the cemetery and talks to his mother.

Impersonator's Father

The impersonator's father is a young carpenter. He marries at the time when the dictator first comes to power. This would be in 1949, when the communists triumphed in the civil war. The carpenter is described as □a hardworking man, nice to his neighbors, good to his wife.□ However, he meets a tragic fate. One evening he is a little drunk and makes a joke about the dictator's policy of describing women who have given birth to a certain

number of babies as mother heroes. This is considered an attack on the dictator's population policy, and the carpenter is tried and executed. His son is born on the day of his death.

Impersonator's Mother

The impersonator's mother is an illiterate eighteen-year-old girl. When she is pregnant, she frequently gazes at the face of the dictator in newspaper photographs; as a result, so she believes, her son's face resembles that of the dictator. After the execution of her husband, she is given a job as a street sweeper. Although she is beautiful, none of the young men in the town offers to marry her, since she is stigmatized as the widow of a counterrevolutionary. She ages rapidly in her appearance. By the time her son is ten years old, she looks like a woman of sixty. But she is fiercely protective of her son and rescues him from the mob that attacks him. She is proud of him when he is taken away to the capital city to become an impersonator and takes credit for the fact that he looks like the dictator. She enjoys telling the townspeople stories of his new life; she also does her best to persuade him to marry one of the local girls, telling him that he needs a son. When word of the scandal about her son's visit to a prostitute reaches her, she is stricken by shame, falls ill, and dies.

Narrator

The narrator is the collective voice of the town, persisting over many generations, and referred to in the first person plural as □we.□ The townspeople are simple folk who cling to their old traditions at the same time as they embrace the new ideology of communism. They regard the Great Papas of the past as heroes and think of the dictator's impersonator as a hero, too, even after he disgraces himself. In their eyes, he is the greatest man in their history. The townspeople are not educated, and they have little power to think for themselves. They are obedient to authority, and they respond not as individuals but as a group. For the most part, they are tools in the hands of the dictator and the Communist Party. They are naive and appear to know little about the world beyond the borders of their town.

Themes

Mind Control

The story shows some of the negative consequences of a totalitarian system, in which the government controls every aspect of people's lives, including how they behave and what they think. The minds of the townspeople are controlled by the Communist Party, which is their only authority for what is happening both in their own town and in the wider world. They show no ability to make independent judgments for themselves or to exercise common sense. They will believe almost anything. They are convinced, for example, that the famine is caused by sparrows and rats eating the food, simply because this is what the Communist Party tells them, its propaganda transmitted to them through loudspeakers in the town.

The system under which the townspeople live wipes out individuality. They always think and behave as a group, and the group mentality can make them dangerous, as when they set upon the boy who during the famine merely wants to take a sparrow home for his mother to eat. They lose their reason, thinking that the boy is committing some offense against them all, and they become like animals: □Some of us bare our teeth, ready to eat him alive.□

The townspeople are also quite ready to condemn their own people simply because the Party tells them to, as when they celebrate the execution of the young carpenter□the father of the future impersonator□for some small indiscretion which resulted in his being branded as a counterrevolutionary. The townspeople thrust their fists into the air and hail a great victory for the People and chant revolutionary songs.

Since they are easily controlled by the Party and believe fervently in the personality cult of the dictator, the townspeople are ready to make any sacrifice that is demanded of them, even their lives. When the dictator defies the Americans to drop atomic bombs on China, the ordinary people in the town work themselves into a state of great indignation about the aggression of the Americans. They are ready for the bombs to fall, so they can □prove to the dictator [their] courage, and [their] loyalty.□

The tyrannous nature of the rule to which the townspeople have submitted is everywhere apparent. The Party rigidly enforces the personality cult of the dictator, even sending parents of first-graders who make the mistake of misspelling the dictator's name to labor camps. The people are terrified of doing or saying something that will get them into trouble with the government. They must make sure they express the sentiments that are officially approved. If for a moment they think anything that might call official doctrine or government practices into question, they instantly repress the thought. For example, when some of them go to see the memorial of the dictator erected after his death, they pay a □substantial fee□ (the hint of exploitation is unavoidable) to buy a white paper flower to be placed at the foot of the coffin. Some of them wonder whether the flowers are collected at night and resold the next day, but

□instantly we will feel ashamed of ourselves for thinking such impure thoughts in the most sacred place in the world.□ Another example occurs when they watch national celebrations on television and see people dancing and singing with hearty smiles on their faces □like well-trained kindergarteners.□ For a moment, the brainwashing is not quite perfect: □At such moments, those of us who think a little more than others start to feel uneasy, haunted by a strange fear that our people are growing down, instead of growing up.□ But that intuition quickly vanishes when the dictator's impersonator appears on the screen.

It is only when Western influences start to appear in China that the people start to think for themselves a little more, and doubts begin to appear. They realize the falsity of much of what they were taught in the early days of communist rule. But the communist system soon manages to reassert its hold over the people's minds. In the aftermath of the killing of pro-democracy demonstrators (this is a reference to the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989), the people mindlessly echo the words of the new dictator, who has said that he is willing to kill two hundred thousand people in exchange for twenty years of communist stability: □Numbed by such numbers, we will echo his words and applaud his wisdom when we are required to publicly condemn those killed in the incident.□ This suggests that in terms of how the people's minds are controlled by the authorities, nothing much has changed since the 1950s.

Emasculation

When they first come to power, the communist leaders proclaim that communism is great, and they persuade the people that there will now be prosperity for everyone. But the story shows that in one respect at least, China continues as before. In the old days, the town used to castrate seven- and eight-year-old boys and send them to the capital city to serve the imperial family. The town is proud of its history of supplying the emperor with Great Papas, but the reader will find it hard to accept the notion that there is any honor in the practice of sacrificing boys' masculinity so that they may better serve the ambitions and whims of the country's leaders. The mutilation of the Great Papas serves as a powerful symbol of how individuals are emasculated in service of their rulers, and so it is with the young impersonator, who is a eunuch in everything but name even before he castrates himself at the end of the story. His status as a celebrity derives solely from his imitation of the dictator; in himself, he is nothing, his achievements nothing. All his power is derived from the dictator, on whom he is utterly dependent. The slightest sign of any individual expression would mean that he was no longer fit to impersonate the dictator. In this sense, he is as emasculated as the eunuchs of old, and like the eunuchs also, when he can no longer be of any use to his rulers, he is discarded. It comes as no surprise that eventually, because of sexual frustrations that derive in part from his life as an impersonator (he is too puffed up with ideas of his own greatness to accept a local young woman as a bride), he castrates himself and becomes literally a eunuch.

Style

The point of view from which the story is told is an unusual one, since the narrator is not an individual voice but a collective one: the members of the town stretching over a period spanning many generations. This point of view effectively conveys a sense of community; the town is proud of its history of sending Great Papas to serve the imperial family, and it is through the money that the eunuchs send home that their brothers are enabled to marry and raise families. The townspeople believe that this is their great distinction in history. Were it not for the Great Papas, they would have nothing of value; after all, they are □small people born into this no-name town.□ The fact that not a single person in the story is given a name contributes to another effect conveyed by the collective point of view, the sense that the town is a single group and acts as a group; it does not value individuality. The people in the community all think in the same way. This is in part because the town is relatively isolated, not yet affected by modernity. In the 1950s, although the town does have at least one newspaper, it gets a lot of its information from loudspeakers placed on the roofs of the houses, which are used by the Party to disseminate news and propaganda. Even in the 1970s, when a car comes to take the young man away for his training, most of the townspeople have never seen a car before. During that period also, there is just one television set in the entire town.

Historical Context

Chinese History in the Twentieth Century

China's two thousand years of imperial rule by various dynasties, the last of which was the Qing dynasty, ended in 1912 when the army overthrew the dynasty and established a short-lived republic. This change in power was followed by a ten-year period of fragmentation in which various warlords, provincial military leaders, competed with one another for power. This period lasted from 1916 to 1927. During the 1920s, the great struggle between the nationalist movement and the communists to gain control of China began. In the 1930s, the nationalists, led by Chiang Kai-shek (1887-1975), gained the upper hand and expelled the communists from southern and eastern China. In what became known as the Long March, the communists trekked across China and established a base in the northwest. It was during this period that Mao Zedong (1893-1976) emerged as the communist leader.

In the 1930s, the impoverished and divided nation also had to deal with the Japanese invasion, which was not finally repelled until the end of World War II in 1945. After World War II, the civil war between nationalists and communists, which had been put on hold during the previous decade because of the need to unite against the foreign invader, resumed. By 1949, the Communist Party emerged victorious and inaugurated the People's Republic of China under the leadership of Mao Zedong. Chang Kai-shek and the remaining nationalists fled to the island of Taiwan.

The communists soon formed a strong central government with a planned economy based on the five-year plans typical of the Soviet Union. In rural areas, the old feudal system was broken up, and land was taken from landowners and given to the peasants. This was a violent upheaval, and from 1950 to 1952, some 700,000 landlords and others designated as counterrevolutionaries were killed.

Despite the violence, during the 1950s, China made enormous strides in modernizing the backward economy, particularly by investing in heavy industry (iron, steel, machinery). During the first five-year plan, the annual industrial growth rate was 11 percent. But Mao was dissatisfied with the results, and from 1958 to 1960, he oversaw what was called the Great Leap Forward, a drastic reorganization of the economy aimed at raising production. The results were disastrous and contributed to the famine that afflicted China especially in 1960 and 1961, during which twenty million people died of starvation.

The Cultural Revolution

In 1966, the ten-year period known as the Cultural Revolution began, during which the country descended into chaos and near anarchy. The Cultural Revolution was put into motion by Mao as a way of outmaneuvering other communist leaders whom he had

come to distrust. Mao also wanted to shake up the bureaucracy, which he thought was too slow in implementing reform. For this he enlisted the aid of millions of young people, mostly students, reasoning that they were not attached to the ways of the past and would generate the necessary revolutionary fervor. Mao invited these students, who were known as Red Guards, to tear down all the old structures of society. Mobs of Red Guards dressed in paramilitary uniforms traveled the countryside by train creating turmoil wherever they went. Educational and religious institutions were targeted. Teachers were beaten up by their students; factories and high schools were closed. People who were arbitrarily accused of being counterrevolutionaries were either imprisoned or executed. Millions died during the Cultural Revolution; some estimates put the deaths at between twenty-three and thirty-five million.

The Cultural Revolution was also the time when the personality cult surrounding Mao, which had been present since the 1940s, reached its most extreme form. Jonathan Spence explains in his book *Mao Zedong* the form the personality cult took during this time:

Every street was to have a quotation from Chairman Mao prominently displayed, and loudspeakers at every intersection and in all parks were to broadcast his thought. Every household as well as all trains and buses, bicycles and pedicabs, had to have a picture of Mao on its walls. Ticket takers on trains and buses should all declaim Mao's thought.

Mao Zedong was regarded as the embodiment of the Chinese nation, the great leader whose wisdom unerringly steered the ship of state.

Economic Liberalization

Mao died in 1976. In the 1980s, his successor, Deng Xiaoping (1904-1997), pursued what were known as open-door economic policies, which encouraged the introduction of Western capitalistic practices to the Chinese economy. These policies were continued by Deng's successor, Zhao Ziyang (1919-2005), who became general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party in 1987. As a result, the Chinese economy began to prosper as never before. Annual growth rate during the 1980s was about 9.5 percent (compared to an average 3 percent annual growth in the United States), and Chinese consumers found that luxury items such as American clothes, stereos, automobiles, and washing machines were now within their reach.

Economic liberalization also produced demands for political liberalization. During 1989, there were massive pro-democracy demonstrations in Beijing's Tiananmen Square. In early June, one such demonstration was violently suppressed. Chinese leaders sent in troops and tanks, killing hundreds, possibly thousands, of demonstrators. Many students and others were executed or imprisoned following the shootings.

Critical Overview

Li's collection of stories, *A Thousand Years of Good Prayers*, in which □Immortality□ appeared, was greeted with universal acclaim. Reviewers admired Li's treatment of the different ways in which Chinese people came to terms with the dramatic changes in their society during the 1990s and also her many portraits of Chinese immigrants adapting to life in the United States. *Publishers Weekly* calls the book □A beautifully executed debut collection. . . . These are powerful stories that encapsulate tidily epic grief and longing.□

Many reviewers also singled out □Immortality□ for comment. Fatema Ahmed in the *New York Times Book Review* describes it as the most ambitious story in the collection, in which Li takes the reader □on a virtuoso tour□ through the turbulence of China's twentieth century history. Ahmed comments that □The collective first-person narrators, reminiscent of the bereaved neighborhood boys in Jeffrey Eugenides' novel *The Virgin Suicides*, are a striking symbol of endurance; like Eugenides' narrators they, too, outlive the subjects of their story.□

For Rodney Welch in the *Washington Post*, □Immortality□ is the best story in the collection. Welch writes:

The story captures 20th-century China in all of its false hopes, terrors and (speaking of violent metaphors) emasculation, and the narrative voice is perfect: It's told by an anonymous voice in the crowd□a crowd that believes what everyone believes, which is also what it is ordered to believe from on high.

In England's *Guardian*, Michel Faber comments on the story's □disquieting blend of realism and fable.□ Calling it □the most overtly artful piece□ in the collection, Faber writes: □The doppelganger's career in propaganda movies is handled with deadpan humour, but we are kept off-balance by a piteous parallel narrative about imperial eunuchs and by the sheer horror of quotes from the tyrant's speeches.□ In the *Village Voice*, Rebecca Tuhus-Dubrow describes □Immortality□ as □eerie□ and draws attention to the unusual point of view from which it is told: □[T]he first person plural, convey[s], better than any description could, a sense of community that subsumes its constituent selves.□

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Aubrey holds a Ph.D. in English and has published many articles on contemporary literature. In this essay, Aubrey discusses, first, China's traditional practice, now discarded, of employing eunuchs as imperial servants; and second, the cult of personality associated with Mao Zedong.

In its short twenty-four pages, Li's story □Immortality□ manages to provide a condensed yet illuminating tour of some of the most bizarre and disturbing aspects of Chinese political culture as it hurtled from one violent change to another through the twentieth century. Much of what Li describes may strike the Western reader as strange, repellant, and sinister, and it will be no surprise that the author chose to leave her homeland and live in a society where freedom and individuality are prized more highly than passive obedience to collective authority. This essay discusses two aspects of the story that are most foreign to the American mind: first, China's practice, discarded only in the early twentieth century, of employing eunuchs as imperial servants; second, the cult of personality associated with Mao Zedong and the associated limitations of thought that are demanded in a totalitarian society.

Li's account of the role of eunuchs in China's imperial dynasties, which takes up the first four pages of □Immortality□ is fact not fiction. As Mary M. Anderson explains in her book, *Hidden Power: The Palace Eunuchs of Imperial China*, eunuchs were an irreplaceable part of the Chinese imperial system. Since eunuchs were unable to father children and, therefore, had no sons to whom they might seek to hand down political power, it was considered that they would be completely passive and loyal to the emperor. Only eunuchs were allowed to attend the emperor and the ladies of the imperial family as well as the emperor's large harem. One of the eunuch's duties was to ensure that no male took advantage of the concubines, since it was considered essential that all the children the concubines bore were fathered by the emperor. As Li makes clear in the story, and as Anderson confirms, some eunuchs, since they were so close to the emperor, did attain positions of power and influence, as well as accumulating considerable wealth. Eunuchs were often put in charge of young princes and would make sure that they exerted as much influence as they could on the future emperor to further their own ambitions.

Eunuchs, who could easily be spotted by their high falsetto voices and characteristic walk□leaning slightly forward, taking short steps, toes turned outward□were resented by the mandarins, the elite members of the Chinese civil service, who could not attain such personal closeness to the emperor. Anderson points out that since it was the mandarins who wrote the histories of China, it is not surprising that eunuchs were presented in such histories as having exerted a bad influence on the country. Despite the bias of the mandarins, however, Anderson regards it as undeniable that the disloyalty of powerful eunuchs, particularly those who served weak emperors who mistrusted their own political advisors and, therefore, became dependent on their eunuchs for advice, did cause great harm to China in various periods of history. This, of course, is a conclusion that the humble inhabitants of the anonymous town in

□Immortality,□ who are proud of the eunuchs they sent to the palace, would reject as malicious fabrications. They persist in referring to castration as being □cleaned,□ a tidy euphemism that disguises the horrific and repellant nature of the practice.

When China's last imperial dynasty was overthrown, in the early years of the twentieth century, the practice of castrating boys for the purposes of serving the nation's leaders ended. By mid-century, the most populous nation on earth had adopted communism and was determined to modernize its society and become a great power in the world. It was during these years, from the 1950s to the 1970s, that the so-called cult of personality emerged in China, associated with the towering figure of Mao Zedong. This is the period described in □Immortality□ □when the dictator becomes larger than the universe in our nation.□

The personality cult was a feature of twentieth century totalitarian regimes. A single leader was elevated to quasi-divine status and was presented as the great liberator of his people. His image appeared everywhere in statues and on billboards, posters, and murals in public places, for the people to contemplate. The leader was often represented in different guises, in military uniform as revolutionary hero and in civilian clothing as gentle father of the nation. His slogans and teachings were also ever-present, either accompanying the images or quoted by Party officials as well as ordinary people. Bookstores, schools, and libraries were filled with volumes of the leader's speeches and other writings. For those living in the midst of such a cult, it became almost impossible to think of their country except in terms of the indispensable leader who was the very soul of the nation. Thus in China, as Jonathan Spence explains in his book, *The Gate of Heavenly Peace: The Chinese and their Revolutions, 1895-1980*, Mao was hailed by the masses as the □great helmsman,□ and little books of his sayings were distributed everywhere. When the Red Guards burned the British legation in Beijing during the Cultural Revolution, they chanted that Mao was □the red, red sun in their hearts.□ Spence quotes a poem written by a young female textile factory worker that refers to the time when Mao saluted the marching Red Guards from the terrace of the Gate of Heavenly Peace in 1966. The poem conveys the feeling that the great man had the keys to the future in his hands: □Chairman Mao waves his hand at the Gate of Heavenly Peace; / In an instant, history has rolled away so many centuries.□

China under Mao Zedong is only one example of the cult of personality. Before Mao, Joseph Stalin (1879-1953), who wielded absolute power in the Soviet Union from the 1930s until his death, established a similar cult. Stalin was regarded as virtually a demigod; numerous places in the Soviet Union were renamed after him; writers and artists were compelled to depict him in a heroic light; and schoolchildren were taught that everything valuable and good came from their great leader. As the historian Roy A. Medvedev explains, □The deification of Stalin justified in advance everything he did, everything connected with his name, including new crimes and abuses of power. All the achievements and virtues of socialism were embodied in him.□

The cult of personality was designed to convince the people that the leader was kind and just and wise and did everything for the benefit of the people. Stalin was often known as □Uncle Joe,□ for example, which gave him a benevolent image. The truth

was markedly different, though, since both Stalin and Mao were responsible for the deaths of millions of their fellow countrymen and women. But for the most part, the brainwashed masses were unable to entertain the notion that their kind and noble leader might also be a man who ordered or condoned mass murder and was indifferent to the value of human life. This was in part because in a totalitarian state the Party controls all the sources of information, so the masses know only what they are permitted to know. But in addition to this limitation, they are trained to think in certain limited grooves. If they are presented with evidence that their leaders are not quite what they seem to be, or they suspect as much, they immediately repress the thought or reinterpret the information they have received. The classic analysis of the kind of thinking that goes on in totalitarian societies was made by the English novelist and essayist George Orwell in his novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, published in 1949 and set in Oceania, a future totalitarian society in which the cult of personality centers on the infallible, all-knowing leader known as Big Brother. In Oceania, the people are trained from an early age in what is called □crimestop,□ a kind of unconscious self-censorship in which a person automatically stops short of any thought that might lead in a heretical direction. Should that process break down, the result is □thoughtcrime,□ which is not an actual crime or any act at all, but simply a thought that does goes against the interests of the Party. Should it be discovered, a person can be arrested for thoughtcrime. In □Immortality,□ there is a clear example of what Orwell meant by both these terms. When the people from the town visit the memorial to the dead dictator, they see a mass of white paper flowers around the coffin, and some of them, just for a moment, wonder if the flowers are collected each night and resold the following day. But they instantly repress the thought and feel ashamed of themselves for thinking it. In other words, just as a □thoughtcrime□ pops up, □crimestop□ comes into play. The people have been conditioned and are now incapable of thinking a negative thought about the Party.

Other elements in □Immortality□ show how the masses have had their ability to think in a rational manner blunted by the propaganda of the Party. When they discover that their beloved leader is willing to sacrifice half the population of China to American bombs, they direct their anger not at the dictator, to whom they make ostentatious displays of loyalty, but at the United States. Perhaps even more disturbingly, later, when cracks start to appear in the monolithic cult, the people seem indifferent to the dictator's crimes. Rumors circulate that fifty million may have died from famine and persecution during his reign, but when the people realize that this is less than the number of people the dictator was willing to sacrifice in a nuclear war, they say, in a matter-of-fact way, □So what is all the fuss about?□ Still without the strength to call their leaders to account, they soon acquiesce and even applaud the statements of a later leader who says he is willing to sacrifice many thousands of lives in exchange for social stability. It seems that the long habit of subservience to authoritarian leaders is not an easy one to shake off.

Source: Bryan Aubrey, Critical Essay on □Immortality,□ in *Short Stories for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2007.

Topics for Further Study

Make a class presentation with a classmate on the life and achievements of Mao Zedong. What were Mao's contributions to twentieth-century China? Does he deserve credit as a modernizer of China? Was he a tyrant on the scale of Hitler and Stalin? One person should present the positive aspects of Mao's rule and the other the negative side. Then the class should vote on whether Mao deserves to be called a great man.

Re-read □Immortality,□ and write an essay in which you describe some of the ways in which traditional folk beliefs continue to exist alongside communist doctrine in the minds of the townspeople. What effect do those beliefs have on the people's behavior?

Team up with one other student. Imagine you are both pro-democracy students in Beijing in 1989, just prior to the Tiananmen Square massacre. Write a five-point manifesto listing the kind of changes you are advocating in Chinese politics and society. Then research the history of China since 1989, and against each point in your manifesto, describe any progress or lack of progress that has been made in attaining the desired goal. Has China gone backwards or forwards in terms of democracy since 1989? Make a joint class presentation of your findings.

In the story, the United States is perceived as an enemy of China and a potential adversary in a nuclear war. Write an essay describing how President Richard M. Nixon's visit to China in 1972 changed the relationship between the United States, China, and the Soviet Union. What was Nixon's purpose in visiting China?

Compare and Contrast

1950s: According to China's census in 1953, the population of China is 583,000,000. The population rises fast as death rates fall, and birth rates are not curbed.

1980s: In 1982, China's census reports the population to be 1,008,175,288, an increase of about 73 percent on the 1953 figure. At this time, China's population is about one-fourth of the global population.

Today: The population of the Chinese mainland is estimated in July 2005 to be 1,306,313,812.

1950s: Although population is rising rapidly, the communist government does not implement a population policy.

1980s: China continues the population policy it instituted in the 1970s, when family planning was incorporated into the constitution. The fertility rate drops from 5.29 (children born/woman) in the 1950s to 2.63 in the 1980s. However, enforcement of the one-child policy is harsh. There are forced abortions, infanticide, and strict penalties.

Today: The population policy remains but is less strictly enforced. Rights of women are more respected as China tries to strike a balance between population growth, human rights, and long-term social development. The fertility rate is estimated to be 1.72 in 2005.

1950s: China's economy is centrally planned and for the most part is not open to international trade. China makes great strides in modernization.

1980s: China focuses on market-oriented economic development, develops stock markets, and opens up to foreign trade and investment.

Today: Economic reform has produced a more than ten-fold increase in China's gross domestic product since 1978. Living standards have improved dramatically. Although China remains a communist, one-party state, the private sector of the economy is growing, and China is a major participant in the global economy.

What Do I Read Next?

Li's article, "The Man Who Eats," in the *New Yorker* (September 6, 2004), is a memoir of her grandfather, a former member of the Chinese nationalist army and a formidable man who lived through three regimes, two world wars, two civil wars, famine, and revolution. The piece also contains much information about conditions of life in Beijing when Li was growing up in the 1970s.

China's Son: Growing Up in the Cultural Revolution (2001), by Da Chen, is a story of how one man's life was devastated by the Cultural Revolution. Da Chen came from a landowning family and found himself an outcast in communist China. Told that he could never become more than a poor farmer, he dropped out of school. After the death of Mao in 1976, however, he realized that a college education might still be possible for him. Working long hours, he made his dream come true, earning a place at the prestigious Beijing University.

The Rice Room: Growing Up Chinese-American, From Number Two Son to Rock 'n' Roll (1994) is an autobiography by Ben Fong-Torres, who was a writer and editor for *Rolling Stone* magazine during the 1960s. As a first-generation Chinese immigrant, Fong-Torres found himself immersed in a culture that was vastly different from the cultural heritage which his immigrant parents urged him to preserve. Fong-Torres describes his feelings of having a dual identity and how his attempt to forge a compromise between the old and the new affected all areas of his life.

The Chinese Century: A Photographic History of the Last Hundred Years (1996), by Jonathan Spence and Annping Chin, is a collection of rare historic photographs documenting Chinese history through the century, from the lives of the famous to the millions of anonymous ordinary citizens. There is also a supplementary text that gives some historical background for the photographs.

Further Study

Casserly, Jack, *The Triumph at Tiananmen Square*, ASJA Press, 2005.

This is a vivid, eyewitness account by a veteran American news reporter of the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989. Casserly also provides an account of the transformation of China in the 1980s and 1990s into a nation that manages to combine communism with free-market economics.

Li Zhisui, *The Private Life of Chairman Mao: The Memoirs of Mao's Personal Physician*, translated by Professor Tai Hung-chao, with the editorial assistance of Anne F. Thurston, Random House, 1994.

This book is referred to in □Immortality.□ Li was Mao's physician for thirty years, and in this book he describes Mao's private life, including his medical conditions, such as his dependence on barbiturates, his sexual contacts with young women even when he was an old man, and many other revelations. The memoir makes an intimate but entirely unflattering portrait of a man whom Li regards as a tyrant with a callous disregard for human life.

Terrill, Ross, *Mao: A Biography*, Harper & Row, 1980.

This very readable biography does justice to Mao's status as one of the most powerful leaders of the twentieth century. Terrill also discusses Mao's personal and political failings but does not demonize him in the way Li Zhisui does.

Yiyun Li, □What Has That to Do with Me?□ in *Gettysburg Review*, Vol. 16, No. 2, Summer 2003, http://www.gettysburg.edu/academics/gettysburg_review/yli.htm (accessed May 3, 2006).

Using the point of view of a five-year-old girl in day care, Li tells the story of a nineteen-year-old girl who expressed doubts about Mao Zedong during the Cultural Revolution. The girl was arrested and imprisoned for ten years before being executed in 1978. Li links the story to her own experience growing up in Beijing.

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Tuhus-Dubrow, Rebecca, □How Soon Is Mao? Li's Fiction Debut Is China by Way of Iowa,□ in *Village Voice*, October 31, 2005.

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Yiyun Li, □Immortality,□ in *A Thousand Years of Good Prayers*, Random House, 2005, pp. 44-67.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's"For Students" Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on "classic" novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of "classic" novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members—educational professionals— helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed—for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man–the character is listed as "The Narrator" and alphabetized as "Narrator." If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. • Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name "Jean Louise Finch" would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname "Scout Finch."
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an “at-a-glance” comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author’s time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes “The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,” a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children’s Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

“Night.” Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234–35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the “Criticism” subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on “Winesburg, Ohio.” Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335–39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. “Margaret Atwood’s “The Handmaid’s Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,” Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9–16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133–36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. “Richard Wright: “Wearing the Mask,” in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69–83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59–61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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