

A Thousand Years of Good Prayers



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF YIYUN LI

Yiyun Li was born and raised in Beijing, China during the height of the country's Cultural Revolution. She earned a bachelor's degree at Peking University, and soon after graduating from college, she moved to the United States where she received a degree in immunology from the University of Iowa. Five years later, in 2005, she earned a Master of Fine Arts in creative nonfiction and fiction writing from the Iowa Writers' Workshop. She has published multiple books, including five novels, two collections of short stories, and one memoir. She has also published reporting and nonfiction writing in magazines. Li has received numerous awards for her writing, including a MacArthur Foundation Fellowship and a Guggenheim Fellowship. She is currently a professor of creative writing at Princeton University.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Much of Yiyun Li's writing addresses the impacts of the political revolution and turmoil in China during the twentieth century. After a long civil war, China became a communist country in 1949 and allied itself with the Soviet Union. Newly named the People's Republic of China and often known as "Red China," the country saw significant upheaval under communist leadership, particularly Chairman Mao Zedong. Most notably, the Great Leap Forward, a social and economic campaign conducted between 1958 and 1962, attempted to completely transform the country's agricultural economy by outlawing private farming. The Great Leap Forward resulted in a destructive famine that killed millions of people. From 1966 to Mao's death in 1976, the Chinese Communist Party led a social movement called the Cultural Revolution that attempted to eradicate all traces of capitalist culture and belief in Chinese society. After Mao's death, there was a contest of power, and subsequent leaders loosened some of the country's strict communist policies and introduced some aspects of capitalist economics. Because of the continuous turmoil, repression, and poverty, many Chinese people immigrated, particularly to the United States, to seek new opportunities. However, many people who left China struggled to reconcile the communist ideas they had learned during their upbringing with America's capitalist values.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

"A Thousand Years of Good Prayers" is the titular story in Yiyun Li's first book, a collection of stories called *A Thousand Years of Good Prayers* (2005). Other stories in the book deal with similar themes, particularly parent-child relationships and the impacts

of China's twentieth-century political upheaval on the lives of ordinary people in both China and the United States. Li's second book and first novel, *The Vagrants*, specifically deals with the impacts of the Cultural Revolution: it tells the story of a devoted Communist's renunciation of her beliefs and the impacts of her execution on her parents. Another related work is [The Joy Luck Club](#) (1989), Amy Tan's classic novel about four Chinese immigrant families in San Francisco. Told from the perspectives of four mothers and their four daughters, the novel similarly considers themes of immigration, cultural memory, and parent-child relationships. Jhumpa Lahiri's [Interpreter of Maladies](#) (1999), also a collection of short stories by an Asian-American author, includes tales about characters caught between old and new worlds, in this case India and the United States. The book's titular story, "Interpreter of Maladies," also involves themes of language, communication, and adultery.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** A Thousand Years of Good Prayers
- **When Published:** September 20, 2005
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Short Story, Asian American Fiction
- **Setting:** A Midwest college town
- **Climax:** Mr. Shi's daughter reveals to her father that she knew he was not a rocket scientist.
- **Antagonist:** Silence, failures of communication
- **Point of View:** Third Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Military Experience. Before attending college, Li completed a year of mandatory military service in the People's Liberation Army, China's primary military force.

Difficult Times. In 2012, Li experienced a significant mental health crisis during which she attempted suicide. After recovering, she stopped writing for a full year and focused on reading biographies, memoirs, and other accounts of people's lives.



PLOT SUMMARY

Mr. Shi, supposedly a retired rocket scientist, comes to the United States to visit his recently-divorced daughter in a small town in the Midwest. She is hesitant to let him visit, but he convinces her that he wants to see the U.S. for his 75th

birthday. Mr. Shi is enjoying his visit despite the fact that his daughter does not seem to want to spend time with him. He spends time alone while she is at work, and makes a friend: an Iranian woman whom he calls “Madam.” Despite the fact that they both only speak minimal English, he feels that they can understand each other and they meet regularly in the mornings on a park bench.

However, Mr. Shi struggles to communicate with his daughter. They have dinner together after work, and he always **cooks** for her, but she usually eats little and does not want to have conversations with him. Mr. Shi worries that his daughter’s divorce, from another Chinese man, was her fault. Mr. Shi worries that his daughter is getting too old to find another husband. He worries that she is unhappy because of her quietness, and she reminds him that he had been quiet for much of his life despite seeming happy.

Mr. Shi tells Madam of his daughter’s unhappiness and her divorce, and explains that every good relationship is the result of hundreds or thousands of years of good prayers. Mr. Shi believes that Madam’s vibrancy could help his daughter improve her situation, but his daughter still denies that she is unhappy. Mr. Shi believes that his daughter asks him too many direct questions and says that good women, like his wife had been, are more deferential. He believes that his wife would have been better at helping their daughter heal.

The next night at dinner, Mr. Shi’s daughter informs him that she wants him to go on a tour of the U.S. with a Chinese-speaking travel agency. The daughter answers a phone call, and Mr. Shi hears her speaking loudly and enthusiastically in English and laughing often, which makes him uncomfortable. His daughter admits that she was speaking to a lover, who was the reason her marriage ended. She explains that she feels good speaking to him in English, and that she never felt comfortable speaking to her ex-husband about her feelings in Chinese. As their argument escalates, Mr. Shi’s daughter tells him that she and her mother knew that he was lying about being a rocket scientist. She tells him she will book a tour for him.

The next morning, Mr. Shi goes to say goodbye to Madam. He admits to Madam that he had not been a rocket scientist for a long time: early in his career, he had developed an emotionally intimate relationship with a woman who was his card puncher, Yilan. His superiors believed that they were having a romantic affair, and they forced him either to admit the relationship or lose his job. He refused to admit it and was demoted. He never told his wife out of loyalty to her, but she found out through gossip. He realizes through recounting the story to Madam that even though nothing physical happened in his relationship with Yilan, he was in love with her. He tells Madam that sacrifice is what makes life meaningful.



CHARACTERS

Mr. Shi – Mr. Shi is, according to himself, a retired rocket scientist. He lives in China, but is visiting his daughter in the United States to help console her after her divorce. When he arrives in the U.S., he discovers that she does not want to spend much time with him and is very quiet when they are together. He tries to take care of her by **cooking** for her, but she is reluctant to eat. Over the course of the story, Mr. Shi becomes increasingly aware that he made mistakes in the way he raised his daughter, and did not spend enough time talking to her or to his wife, which he feels guilty about. He blames his work, which he says was required to be kept secret from his family. At the end of the story, it is revealed that Mr. Shi has been lying about being a rocket scientist, which his daughter and wife knew, and which explains his emotional distance from them. He had had an emotional affair with his colleague, Yilan, and was demoted when he refused to admit it. At the end of the story, he is left wondering whether he made the right choice to give up his relationship with Yilan. Mr. Shi knows that his daughter, who also had an affair, is like him in many ways, which he finds complicated because he holds her to different standards as a woman. Mr. Shi also has a close friendship with Madam, even though they do not share a common language. Over the course of the story, Mr. Shi comes to realize the importance of communication, as represented by the juxtaposition of his relationships with his daughter, Madam, Yilan, and his wife.

Mr. Shi’s Daughter – Mr. Shi’s daughter moved from China to the United States, where she works as a librarian in the East Asian department of a college. After seven years of marriage to a Chinese man, she is newly divorced. She reveals to her father that she was divorced because of an affair with a Romanian-American man with whom she feels she can communicate better than with her husband, because she was not raised to express her feelings comfortably in Chinese. Mr. Shi’s daughter is reluctant to talk to her father both because of her discomfort speaking in Chinese and her knowledge of the lie he had told her and her mother for many years about his work. She does not like answering his questions about her work, her friends, and her life, and often refuses his company when she leaves the house. She feels there is a chasm of miscommunication between them and that they do not know how to speak to each other. At the end of the story, it does not seem that her relationship with her father has been repaired, because she sends him away to do a tour of the United States instead of letting him stay with her.

Madam – Madam is an Iranian immigrant to the United States who lives in a retirement home in the same town where Mr. Shi’s daughter lives. She is 77 years old, two years older than Mr. Shi. She speaks little English, but develops a friendship with Mr. Shi based on their mutual connection. She wears bright colors and patterns that bring joy to Mr. Shi. They sit together

on a park bench most mornings and tell each other stories, she in Persian and Mr. Shi in Chinese. They exchange some words in English, and she tells him that she believes America is a good country. Mr. Shi imagines her background and her life in Iran and believes that she must have been protected from misfortune by the men in her life. Mr. Shi, however, may be unaware of the turmoil in recent Iranian history that imposed strict rules regarding women's behavior and may have prompted her to leave. At the end of the story, Mr. Shi sits on the park bench with Madam and feels grateful for their friendship. He appreciates the joy and vibrancy she has brought to his life, and the story concludes with him feeling like he can see the world in detail for the first time in his life thanks to her.

Mr. Shi's Wife – Mr. Shi's wife is never present in the story—she has died— but both Mr. Shi and his daughter speak about her regularly. They reveal no details about her, but it becomes clear that even though Mr. Shi believed her to be a good woman and a good wife, they had a strained relationship because he was always so quiet about his work. He maintained the lie that this was because his job as a rocket scientist required confidentiality, but in actuality it was because he had been demoted to a menial position after his alleged affair with Yilan. He had refused to tell his wife, believing it was out of loyalty to her, but she found out anyway through the rumors that other people spread about him. Mr. Shi's wife was closer with their daughter than he had been, and he believes that his wife would have been better at helping their daughter recover after her divorce.

Yilan – Yilan was the card puncher with whom Mr. Shi had an emotional affair when he was still a rocket scientist. They never had romantic or physical contact, but they communicated freely and developed intimacy through their long conversations at their workplace. Mr. Shi realizes through telling the story of their relationship to Madam that he was in love with Yilan. Mr. Shi felt like he could connect with Yilan, unlike his wife, because he had to keep the details of his work as a rocket scientist secret from his family. His intimacy with Yilan was related to their shared passion for the mission of their work and their excitement about communism. After he refused to admit their affair to his superiors, she was sent away to a provincial town and Mr. Shi never saw her or heard from her again.



LANGUAGE, COMMUNICATION, AND UNDERSTANDING

The characters in “A Thousand Years of Good Prayers” spend much of the story finding ways to communicate with each other across various barriers—linguistic, emotional, and cultural. The story suggests that while such barriers can prevent people from communicating with one another, true understanding ultimately transcends language. Mr. Shi's relationships demonstrate that speaking a common language, especially when emotional and cultural barriers interfere, does not mean that people always understand each other. With his daughter in particular, Mr. Shi struggles to make himself understood and to understand her because she grew up accustomed to his silence as a way of concealing the truth about his work, which makes her distrust his words. Words spoken in a shared language are not enough to make oneself understood; trust and willingness to listen are also necessary.

Lack of a shared language can also prevent understanding. For example, Mr. Shi's daughter does not know how to speak to him about her feelings in Chinese, which prevents them from feeling close to each other. Additionally, Mr. Shi makes numerous assumptions about Madam because he cannot understand many of the words she speaks to him. At the same time, lack of a shared language does not necessarily hinder understanding: Mr. Shi feels he has an intimate friendship with Madam despite the fact that they both speak only limited English. Even if they cannot understand what the other person is saying, they become close companions because of their shared joy in spending time with each other. Understanding through communication—even nonverbal communication—is therefore crucial for intimacy. This ability to understand without a common language suggests that, sometimes, nonverbal communication can say more than words.



LOVE, MARRIAGE, AND INTIMACY

For both Mr. Shi and his daughter, intimacy with and love for a person who is not their spouse come into conflict with their marriages. Intimacy is inherently tied to communication: only characters who can talk to each other freely and feel that they understand each other in the story achieve true intimacy. Mr. Shi's daughter, for example, feels intimate with her lover because they can speak English together, while she never wanted to talk to her ex-husband. Likewise, Mr. Shi felt intimacy with coworker Yilan because they could speak freely with each other, while the government prevented him from speaking about his work, which took up most of his life, with his wife. Communication itself therefore becomes a form of love and intimacy that transcends physical bonds.

Despite this overlap in their respective experiences of intimacy,



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

Mr. Shi and his daughter have different values about marriage, his more traditional and hers more modern: Mr. Shi considers marriage to be a bond one must maintain because of duty, even when he felt more intimate with—and loved—a woman who was not his wife. Even as he upholds this view of marriage, Mr. Shi lives with regret, missing Yilan and wondering whether his sacrifice was worth it. At the same time, Mr. Shi is angry at his daughter for ending her marriage and assumes that it must have been her fault. Mr. Shi's daughter, who is of a later generation and has been influenced by American cultural norms, prioritizes intimacy over the structure of marriage, and leaves her husband for her lover with whom she feels she can communicate. Li therefore suggests that it is perhaps more important to find meaningful love and intimacy with someone than to adhere to the bonds of marriage out of duty.



FATHERS AND DAUGHTERS

Mr. Shi has complicated feelings about the ways in which his daughter has grown up to be like him: they both had similar extramarital affairs, both feel very dedicated to their work, and both accuse each other of being too quiet when they are trying to conceal their feelings. Mr. Shi is particularly upset with her not only because she is his child and because he is angry at himself for the same behavior, but also because she is a woman and therefore he holds her to different standards. Li demonstrates that while fathers can become angry at any child for the ways they replicate their mistakes, in the case of a daughter, a father's disappointment can be inflected with the rigid expectations applied to women's conduct. For example, Mr. Shi sees marriage as the ultimate goal for his daughter, describing her as a lychee that is past its prime. He believes that her divorce must be her fault because she was a bad wife, and believes that when she asks him questions she is too direct and ought to be more deferential. Mr. Shi therefore struggles to come to terms with his influence on his daughter because his judgment is clouded by his traditional ideas of how a daughter, wife, and woman is supposed to behave. He is not able to see the contradictions in how he understands his own behavior because of these double standards.

Mr. Shi tells Madam that good relationships between fathers and daughters are especially difficult to achieve, believing that they require a thousand years of good prayers. But he explains his strained relationship with his daughter by blaming her, suggesting that she considers him a “nuisance” and prefers that he remain silent. This inability to understand his daughter's feelings indicates Mr. Shi's double standards: he cannot clearly investigate how his own conduct has harmed their relationship. At the end of the story, when Mr. Shi leaves to go on a tour, while he and his daughter have finally been honest with each other, they have not resolved their conflict. This conclusion suggests that fathers will always struggle to understand their

daughters and their own impacts on them as long as gendered double standards are in place.



HISTORY, CULTURE, AND MIGRATION

The three main characters in “A Thousand Years of Good Prayers”—Mr. Shi, his daughter, and Madam—are all either visitors or immigrants to America: Mr. Shi is only there to see his daughter, while his daughter and Madam have moved there permanently. As the story demonstrates, America is a place where immigrants and visitors are subjected to conflicting pressures and desires: both to assimilate and to maintain their native languages, customs, and traditions. Mr. Shi describes the importance for him and his daughter of living and growing up in a communist country, in particular his excitement and hope as a young rocket scientist in helping his country advance. Yet as an older man visiting America, he describes loving America, a capitalist country, and the opportunities it brings, especially regarding money: he explains that his daughter earns more in a year than he earned in twenty. This shift suggests a profound change of values inspired by traveling across borders.

Many of Mr. Shi's traditions from his life in China are tested when he comes to America, particularly his ideas about marriage and a woman's role in society. He clings to the belief that his daughter must feel shame about her divorce and insists that she must be miserable, unable to see the freedom and happiness that her divorce has given her. However, he finds solace in knowing that while his daughter's lover is not Chinese, he also comes from a communist country and so he can understand aspects of her culture and history. More generally, Mr. Shi struggles with his relationship to the past and to history: he both wants to hold onto traditional values and at the same time he wants to forget his wrongdoings in China and to refuse to dwell on old stories. At the end of the story, he remembers how he was told in his training in China that “It is what we sacrifice that makes life meaningful,” but now he doubts the statement's value. However, he dismisses this instinct as a “foreign thought,” demonstrating how he feels stuck between living in the moment and valuing the past.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



FOOD AND COOKING

In “A Thousand Years of Good Prayers,” cooking and food are forms of communication, symbolizing the way messages can be conveyed without a shared language or understanding. Mr. Shi tries to show his care for his daughter using cooking and food. She is reluctant to accept or eat his

food when he cooks for her, however, symbolizing the tension and alienation in their relationship. Near the beginning of the story, Mr. Shi tells his daughter that he took a cooking class after his wife died and studied the material rigorously, suggesting that he wanted to communicate with and understand others better. Every day Mr. Shi cooks dinner for his daughter to try to give her sustenance, both literally and metaphorically, after her divorce, but she does not want what he gives her, because Mr. Shi fundamentally misunderstands what his daughter wants and needs.

Mr. Shi explains to Madam that he believes a good relationship between father and daughter requires a thousand years of good prayers. He knows that his relationship with his daughter is bad, and concludes that he must be “*praying halfheartedly.*” Later, he says that his cooking has become his praying, but his daughter is leaving his prayers “unanswered.” Mr. Shi therefore recognizes that their misunderstandings are mutual: his prayers lack fervor and his daughter rejects them in the form of food because she can sense their lack of enthusiasm. In a story in which characters find many ways to communicate—Madam and Mr. Shi find intimacy despite not speaking the same language and Mr. Shi’s wife asks questions with her eyes, for example—food is another way of showing that communicating beyond language can *both* convey truths that cannot be expressed in words *and* obscure the meaning of things that can only be conveyed in a shared language.


Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes early in the story, when Mr. Shi is establishing his friendship with Madam, and introduces the theme of culture, history, and migration that appears throughout the story. While he is a visitor to the United States from China, she is an immigrant, originally hailing from Iran. Both of the countries they come from are very different from the United States—and in particular, countries that have had antagonistic relationships with the United States—but this quote shows how they have both come to love the United States despite the values with which they were raised. However, despite appreciating the United States, they still honor the values of history and tradition, suggested by Madam’s statement that China is a good country because it is old.

Readers are also introduced to Mr. Shi’s unreliability as a character. He insists that he is a rocket scientist, finding a way to describe the profession to Madam through a combination of limited English and nonverbal communication. However, it’s revealed later that Mr. Shi is lying when he says that he was a rocket scientist. Readers also get the sense that Mr. Shi is perhaps even lying to himself, trying to convince himself that he is still a rocket scientist. This self-deception is indicated by his last line in the conversation: he speaks without thinking, and immediately realizes that the words he says do not actually represent what he knows to be true.

●● America is worth taking a look at; more than that, America makes him a new person, a rocket scientist, a good conversationalist, a loving father, a happy man.

Related Characters: Mr. Shi, Mr. Shi’s Daughter

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 189

Explanation and Analysis

This quote illuminates how migration impacts Mr. Shi’s self-deception. In China, the lies that he has told about his work for decades haunt him and inescapably influence his life and relationships with his family. In the United States, where no one except his daughter knows of his history (though he is still unaware that his daughter knows about his lies), he feels like he can have a fresh start. Mr. Shi feels like traveling to America allows him to escape, or erase, his personal history: he thinks that everyone in this new country will



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Random House edition of *A Thousand Years of Good Prayers: Stories* published in 2006.

A Thousand Years of Good Prayers Quotes

●● “I love America. Good country for everybody.”

“Yes, yes. A rocket scientist I am in China. But very poor. Rocket scientist, you know?” Mr. Shi says, his hands making a peak.



“I love China. China a good country, very old,” the woman says.

“America is young country, like young people.”

“America a happy country.”

“Young people are more happy than old people,” Mr. Shi says, and then realizes that it is too abrupt a conclusion.

Related Characters: Mr. Shi, Madam (speaker)

Related Themes:  


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believe what he says about his work, that he will finally be able to communicate with his daughter despite years of silence and misunderstanding between them, and that he will escape the guilt he feels about his past. However, Mr. Shi proves to be wrong—he is haunted by the same history he thought he could leave behind in China, demonstrating that memory cannot be suppressed or erased no matter how far one travels.

●● Women in their marriageable twenties and early thirties are like lychees that have been picked from the tree; each passing day makes them less fresh and less desirable, and only too soon will they lose their value, and have to be gotten rid of at a sale price. Mr. Shi knows enough not to mention the sale price. Still, he cannot help but lecture on the fruitfulness of life. The more he talks, the more he is moved by his own patience.

Related Characters: Mr. Shi, Mr. Shi's Daughter

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 189-190

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Mr. Shi's perspective on marriage and gender roles is introduced explicitly. His ideas are shaped by antiquated and sexist ideas about a woman's worth that do not reflect the reality of evolving cultural norms in the contemporary United States. This passage also explores the symbol of food as it relates to migration and cultural evolution: Mr. Shi considers femininity in terms of a lychee, which is a traditional Chinese fruit not commonly found in America. This invocation of the lychee indicates the chasm between Mr. Shi's traditional Chinese paradigms and his daughter's American values and lifestyle, suggesting the ways in which fathers can misunderstand their daughters and try to control their lives because of their double standards towards women, and their daughters in particular.

Finally, this passage illuminates some of the reasons why Mr. Shi and his daughter struggle to communicate with each other—in particular, Mr. Shi's failure to realize when his talking is drowning out his daughter's voice. In the last lines of the passage specifically, Mr. Shi cannot stop himself from "lectur[ing]" at his daughter, and he becomes pleased with himself the more he talks. But it is clear that he is talking *at* her, not *with* her: it is a "lecture" and not a discussion. This obliviousness perhaps explains why Mr. Shi's daughter does

not want to talk with him: she may feel that he is more interested in *speaking* than in *listening*.

●● Her eyes behind her glasses, wide open and unrelenting, remind him of her in her younger years. When she was four or five, she went after him every possible moment, asking questions and demanding answers. The eyes remind him of her mother too; at one time in their marriage, she gazed at him with this questioning look, waiting for an answer he did not have for her.

Related Characters: Mr. Shi, Mr. Shi's Daughter, Mr. Shi's Wife

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 190



Explanation and Analysis

This passage explores the theme of language and communication that is central to the story. Here, Mr. Shi's daughter's eyes reveal the possibilities of communication that transcends words. While she communicated with words to her father as a child, his silence in response taught her that she would not find answers to her questions through language. Now, as an adult, her silence echoes what she received from her father when she was growing up. Her eyes are described as "wide open and unrelenting," suggesting that they are communicating to Mr. Shi both her observation of him (perhaps more than he knows) and her ferocity and lack of forgiveness, perhaps even anger. Her expression is conveying these feelings to her father, which he perceives, but he cannot understand why she cannot explain these feelings in words.

Her nonverbal communication also reminds Mr. Shi of his wife's questions that she asked without words, which, as readers learn later in the story, he would not answer because of the lies he had told her previously. This similarity between mother and daughter also suggests some of the complicated dimensions of relationships between father and daughter: Mr. Shi sees in his daughter many of the qualities he saw in his wife, and holds his daughter to the same standard of good womanhood. This comparison indicates that Mr. Shi's relationship with his daughter has inherited many of the flaws in his relationship with his wife.

“In China we say, *Xiu bai shi ke tong zhou*,” Mr. Shi says when Madam stops. It takes three hundred years of prayers to have the chance to cross a river with someone in the same boat, he 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.

Related Characters: Mr. Shi (speaker), Madam

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 192

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Mr. Shi introduces the Chinese saying that gives the story its title. He is explaining that every relationship comes about for a reason, and that every good or intimate relationship is the result of hundreds or thousands of years of “good prayers.” This passage primarily explores the theme of language and communication, suggesting the intimacy and understanding that Mr. Shi feels with Madam despite their lack of a shared language.

However, as readers have already seen, Mr. Shi is an unreliable character, who lies to himself and others and often does not understand how others relate to his style of communication. This unreliability therefore casts some doubt on the mutual understanding he feels with Madam. Mr. Shi’s belief that Madam will understand what he is saying to her even if he says it in a language she does not understand suggests the limit of their mutual understanding and the limits of Mr. Shi’s notion that intimacy transcends common language. Though Madam listens to his explanation of the story, he does not receive any confirmation that Madam knows what he is saying. This perhaps indicates Mr. Shi’s tendency to prioritize *his talking* over *true conversation*.

He feels disappointed in his daughter, someone he shares a language with but with whom he can no longer share a dear moment. After a long pause, he says, “You know, a woman shouldn’t ask such direct questions. A good woman is deferential and knows how to make people talk.”

Related Characters: Mr. Shi (speaker), Mr. Shi’s Daughter

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 194

Explanation and Analysis

This passage explores further the themes of language and communication, and the relationships between fathers and daughters. Mr. Shi’s feeling that, despite the common language he shares with his daughter, he cannot share a moment of intimacy with her, suggests the limitations of spoken language to achieve understanding. This inability to communicate contrasts, for example, with Mr. Shi’s relationship with Madam, in which he feels like they share an intimate connection and understanding despite the fact that they both only speak limited English (even if their mutual understanding may be less profound than he assumes).

This passage suggests that a significant reason why Mr. Shi cannot understand his daughter is because of his antiquated beliefs about how women ought to behave. Mr. Shi believes that women ought to communicate differently than men, and that a woman’s role in a conversation is to get the other person to talk, rather than speak directly herself. This conviction implies that Mr. Shi’s expectations for the women in his life are to listen while *he* talks, not to communicate equally—thus revealing an unbalanced dynamic in his conversations with both Madam and his daughter.

Truly it was his mistake, never establishing a habit of talking to his daughter. But then, he argues for himself—in his time, a man like him, among the few chosen to work for a grand cause, he had to bear more duties toward his work than his family. Honorable and sad, but honorable more than sad.

Related Characters: Mr. Shi, Mr. Shi’s Daughter

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 195-196

Explanation and Analysis

This passage further underscores Mr. Shi’s self-deception about his work as a rocket scientist. When thinking to himself here, Mr. Shi does not outright say that his work was building a rocket, but it is implied, given how he speaks about the importance of his work and its significance to the “grand cause” of communism. Mr. Shi is evidently trying to come to terms with his (both present and former) belief in his country’s political destiny with the fact that his family suffered because of his secrecy about his work for his country, both as a young rocket scientist and as a disgraced demoted employee. Knowing about Mr. Shi’s lies about his profession, it does not seem convincing—either to himself

or to the reader—that his neglect of his family was truly “honorable more than sad.” In fact, it seems the opposite, though Mr. Shi cannot admit that to himself in order to justify his behavior.

In some ways this clash between family and country also illuminates a political issue as well as a personal one: communists in China were expected to prioritize their country over their families, while American capitalist ideology celebrates the nuclear family as the most important relationship and community. Therefore, Mr. Shi’s internal struggle reflects a clash of political values, between his own Chinese communist tradition and his daughter’s newer, more American ideas of family.

●● He listens to her speak English on the phone, her voice shriller than he has ever known it to be. She speaks fast and laughs often. He does not understand her words, but even more, he does not understand her manner. 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.

Related Characters: Mr. Shi, Mr. Shi’s Daughter

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 197

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Mr. Shi is hearing his daughter speak to her lover on the phone. Mr. Shi’s reaction indicates the discomfort a father often feels when he witnesses how his daughter behaves around someone with whom she is intimate. This form of communication is something not meant for him, and makes him realize how much he does not know or understand her—and even that there are things that he ought not to know or understand about her, represented here by the parallel between her speech and her naked body.

This passage particularly suggests that it is the aspects of communication that transcend language that make Mr. Shi’s daughter’s speech to her lover unpleasant to Mr. Shi: Mr. Shi says her he understands his daughter’s “manner” even less than he understands her “words.” Again, in contrast to his communication with Madam, in which he understands her manner but not her words, this scene with Mr. Shi’s daughter suggests how communication beyond language can both succeed and fail.

●● “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.”

Related Characters: Mr. Shi’s Daughter (speaker), Mr. Shi

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 199

Explanation and Analysis

Mr. Shi’s daughter explains here why she has found a lover with whom she can speak English, and, conversely, why she struggled to find intimacy with her ex-husband, with whom she spoke Chinese. Her claim that a new language “makes you a new person” is relevant to the themes of both language and communication and migration and history that emerge throughout the story: her statement suggests that when she moved to the United States, the linguistic and cultural differences she encountered transformed her. This quote also, once again, suggests the limits of linguistic communication. Mr. Shi’s daughter associates Chinese with the silence in her family as a child—a silence that spoke significantly louder than words. However, it is not simply that Mr. Shi’s daughter has a lack of Chinese words to express how she feels, it is also that by finding a new language, she has discovered an entirely new form of communication, unburdened by the emotional baggage that Chinese carries for her.

●● “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?

Related Characters: Mr. Shi (speaker), Mr. Shi’s Daughter, Madam, Yilan

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 202

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Mr. Shi is coming clean to Madam, explaining

that he had given up his job as a rocket scientist for Yilan, his card puncher. In his explanation of their alleged affair, he realizes the lies he has been telling himself for decades: while he maintained that they had not had an affair or been in love because they had never touched, in telling Madam the story he realizes that they were, in fact, in love. This passage ties together many of the ideas about language, communication, and intimacy that have emerged throughout the story. When Mr. Shi realizes that he “is confused by his own words,” he realizes that he has been failing to understand not only his daughter but *himself*—that the *words* he told himself about being a rocket scientist and being loyal to his wife were concealing the *truth*, which he previously could not speak, that he had loved another woman.

This realization also reveals contradictions in what Mr. Shi says about women and communication and what he feels. Despite what he said previously to his daughter about good women being deferential and getting others to talk, he loved Yilan *because* she talked with him openly. Mr. Shi’s unreliability here makes him a more sympathetic character, revealing that his antiquated ideas about gender roles that he has absorbed from cultural values are in conflict with his desire to communicate equally with women.

☝ “It is what we sacrifice that makes life meaningful”—Mr. Shi says the line that was often repeated in their training. He shakes his head hard. A foreign country gives one foreign thoughts, he thinks. For an old man like him, it is not healthy to ponder too much over memory.

Related Characters: Mr. Shi (speaker), Madam, Yilan

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 203

Explanation and Analysis

This passage comes just before the last lines of the story, giving readers a bittersweet and complex ending. Readers see Mr. Shi in a moment of profound internal struggle, both reconsidering how to relate to the past and struggling to escape it and move forward. Mr. Shi seems inclined but unable to reject the values of communist China: at first, he seems to reject the message of sacrifice, but then immediately dismisses his doubt as “foreign thoughts,” influenced by his trip to the United States. Mr. Shi regrets giving up his relationship with Yilan to keep his family intact, yet he also would have felt guilty and ashamed had he left his wife and daughter to be with Yilan. At his elderly age, looking back on his life, he evidently doubts that his life is more meaningful because he sacrificed Yilan.

However, it remains unclear whether it is truly “healthy” for Mr. Shi *not* to reconsider his past. On the one hand, he cannot change the past, and he is happy to seek comfort and meaning in the present. On the other hand, now that he has admitted to himself in words what really happened, by refusing to “ponder too much over memory” he is also preventing himself from reflecting emotionally on how he *feels*, which cannot necessarily be put into words.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

A THOUSAND YEARS OF GOOD PRAYERS

Mr. Shi, now retired, says he had been a rocket scientist in China. With his limited English, he learned this phrase by drawing pictures for a woman in an American airport while he was on the way to visit his daughter in a Midwest town, where she works as a librarian in the East Asian studies department of a college. He likes telling people in America that he was a rocket scientist because he feels that it garners respect. Only five days into his visit, he feels that he has made many acquaintances because many people greet him in the town.

Mr. Shi's most significant acquaintance is a woman who lives in a retirement home, whom he calls "Madam." Madam is 77, which is two years older than Mr. Shi. She speaks little English and often speaks to him in Persian. He sits in the park in the mornings and waits for her. They speak about how they both believe America to be a good country because their children can make good money. Mr. Shi tells Madam he was a rocket scientist in China, and she tells him that she thinks China is a good country.

Mr. Shi believes that Madam is very happy and loves everything she sees. He enjoys listening to her speak in Persian to him though he does not understand her. He believes she enjoys speaking to him, and he too feels happy. Madam wears bright colors and barrettes in her hair that remind Mr. Shi of his daughter. Mr. Shi wants to tell Madam about how he misses the past and how his relationship with his daughter used to be, but he does not want to speak about the past and believes his English to be insufficient.

Mr. Shi makes dinner for his daughter every day when she comes home from work. He studied **cooking** after his wife died with the same intensity that he studied mathematics and physics. Mr. Shi is proud of his cooking and tells his daughter to look for happiness in life. Despite her praise for his cooking, she eats very little and seems dispirited. Mr. Shi attributes this to her recent divorce after seven years of marriage and her ex-husband's return to Beijing. Mr. Shi does not understand how their marriage could have ended, as he believes his daughter to be a good wife—beautiful, dutiful, and quiet—like her mother had been. When he learned of his daughter's divorce, Mr. Shi begged her to let him visit her to console her. He was only able to convince her by telling her that he wanted to see America for his 75th birthday.

Readers get a sense from the beginning of the story that Mr. Shi is very proud of his work, and that being a rocket scientist is central to his identity. They also learn that he is an outgoing person who feels connected to people in the world, even when he cannot speak their language. The rapidity with which Mr. Shi calls new people his friends or acquaintances suggests that he may be lacking intimacy in other relationships in his life.



Mr. Shi's relationship with Madam demonstrates his firm belief that true understanding and intimacy transcend language. Though they barely share a common language, they are united by their belief that the United States is a good country. This discussion hints at the theme of preserving cultural heritage, which Mr. Shi struggles with later in the story.



Mr. Shi's belief in Madam's happiness is based on her demeanor, but it seems like Mr. Shi may be making assumptions about her. Readers know that they share an intimacy, but because Madam does not speak in the story, readers do not know whether what Mr. Shi believes about her is correct. The fact that Mr. Shi does not try to communicate with Madam in English also hints at the limitations of their understanding.



The symbol of food and cooking is introduced here. The fact that Mr. Shi's daughter does not want to eat the food he cooks symbolizes their mutual misunderstanding: like her struggle to accept or respond to many of her father's words, her hesitance to eat his food suggests that what he is giving her is not satisfying her needs. Mr. Shi's assumptions about the cause of his daughter's divorce also indicate this mutual misunderstanding: as far as readers know, he has never asked her directly why she got divorced, he has only assumed that it must have been her fault.



Mr. Shi's daughter keeps much of her life secret from Mr. Shi. When he asks her to accompany him outside, she refuses. He asks her questions about her life, work, friends, and plans for the future because he is concerned that she is lonely and overcome by the shame of her divorce. He compares women of her age to lychees, getting less desirable by the day. He fears that she is nearing her expiration date for another marriage. Mr. Shi worries that his daughter is wasting her life and not enjoying herself, which she denies. When he accuses her of being too quiet to be happy, she reminds him that he was very quiet once and never wanted to tell his family about his work or his life. He is angry that she has asked him such a direct question and insists that he talks more now.

Mr. Shi's assumptions about his daughter's unhappiness and (in his opinion) increasingly grim marriage prospects are the result of his antiquated understandings of gender and marital norms: he does not understand that divorce and remarriage are common and socially acceptable in modern America, and his opinions about women's behavior reflect the double standards that he applies to men and women. For example, he believes he can ask his daughter questions directly, but that she should not ask him direct questions and should be more deferential.



The next morning, Mr. Shi tells Madam that his daughter is divorced and unhappy. When she responds in Persian, he wonders if she knows what divorce means, and guesses that her happiness indicates that she must not have dealt with much hardship in her life. He wonders what her life must have been like in Iran and concludes that she is happy to have been displaced. He compares her vibrancy and happiness to his daughter's lack thereof. Mr. Shi is amazed that despite their differences they are able to converse.

Once again, Mr. Shi makes assumptions about Madam's life because he does not understand the words she is saying to him. In this case, his assumption that Madam is likely a very happy person who has not suffered much seems likely to be untrue, given the political turmoil in Iran, her home country, in the 20th century. Though Madam and Mr. Shi may have a meaningful friendship, this passage suggests the limits of communication beyond a shared language.



Mr. Shi wants to explain to Madam a Chinese phrase that means that it takes 300 years of prayers to find a true connection with someone. Believing that she will understand him regardless of the language he speaks, he tells her in Chinese that it must have taken many years of good prayers for them to meet each other. He continues in Chinese, explaining that there is a reason for every relationship, and that it takes 1,000 years of good prayers for a good relationship between father and daughter. However, he believes his daughter doesn't appreciate this and doesn't want him to talk to her. He tells Madam that his daughter wants it to be like her childhood, when he could not say anything because he was a rocket scientist and his work was confidential.

While Mr. Shi often blames his tense relationship with his daughter on her and her refusal to talk to him, here he gives a hint that maybe there are other causes: namely, a failure to offer enough good prayers, which have resulted in the situation he is now in and which neither he nor his daughter can control. However, Mr. Shi is still unable to accept his own role in the strain in their relationship, again insisting that his job as a rocket scientist dictated his life and that his daughter preferred it that way.



Mr. Shi realizes that he has not been so close to a woman of his own age since his wife died. He feels unhappy that he has come to America to speak with his daughter to make up for the talks she missed out on when she was a child, but that now she seems uninterested in what he has to say. He believes that Madam, who cannot comprehend his language, understands him better than his own daughter. Mr. Shi believes he should not dwell on such old stories but Madam tells him she loves stories and begins to talk happily. She says America is a good country because they can talk freely.

Mr. Shi laments the failures of communication in his relationship with his daughter, and feels sad that despite their common language, he recognizes that they do not understand each other. In contrast, even though he and Madam usually do not understand each other literally, they are both willing to spend time together and listen to each other, a form of communication that can engender a sense of intimacy beyond language.



Later that evening, Mr. Shi tells his daughter that Madam could help her with her unhappiness because Madam is so optimistic. When his daughter asks how Madam could do that, Mr. Shi is afraid that he will sound crazy if he tells his daughter that he and Madam speak to each other in different languages. He feels disconnected from his daughter even though they speak the same language. He tells her that women ought not to ask such direct questions.

Mr. Shi's daughter responds that Mr. Shi would not consider her a good woman because she is divorced. He ignores her, saying that her mother was a good woman. His daughter asks if her mother had succeeded in making him talk, to which Mr. Shi responds that her mother would not have been so confrontational. Mr. Shi's daughter counters that at first he accused her of not talking enough, and now that she talks he wants her to talk in a different way. He tells her that talking is more than asking questions, it is sharing feelings. Mr. Shi tells her that he only wants to help her after her divorce. His daughter suggests that she would like him to leave America and then leaves the dinner table, having not eaten any of her **food**. Mr. Shi laments that his daughter does not realize his food is his prayer for her.

The next morning, Mr. Shi tells Madam that his wife would have been better at cheering his daughter up. He speaks Chinese to her more comfortably now, telling her in his native language that his wife had been closer with his daughter when she was a child because he was always working or thinking about his work. His wife had been understanding and had known not to disturb him, but he realizes now that he neglected his daughter and did not spend enough time talking to her.

At dinner that night, Mr. Shi's daughter tells Mr. Shi that she has found a Chinese-speaking travel agency in America and she wants him to do tours with them so he can see the rest of the country. Mr. Shi is grateful that she is trying to honor his wishes, but all he wants to see in America is his daughter happily married. He tells her he would rather stay with her because he has friends here. The phone rings and his daughter answers it, taking the phone into her bedroom, though she leaves the door open.

Mr. Shi again reveals the double standards which he applies to women, believing that Madam must be a virtuous woman who could provide a good example for his daughter, despite not knowing anything about Madam's life and marital history. At the same time, he rebuffs his daughter for directly asking him a good question.



Even though Mr. Shi and his daughter are speaking back and forth in conversation in this scene, they are evidently speaking past each other, not truly understanding what the other has to say. Mr. Shi's daughter cannot forget her memories of her childhood, and still feels anger at her father for only now trying to speak to her. But Mr. Shi does not like the way that his daughter speaks to him and believes it to be insufficiently emotional. This conflict suggests that Mr. Shi's daughter may be uncomfortable not only because of her history with her father, but also because of the specific language they are speaking, Chinese. Mr. Shi indicates that his cooking for his daughter is a form of prayer, referencing the thousand years of good prayers required to have a good relationship between father and daughter, but he does not realize that it may be his bad prayers that are the cause of their tense relationship.



This passage marks a turning point for Mr. Shi: he admits for the first time that he made mistakes by neglecting his family while his daughter was growing up. But Mr. Shi cannot yet admit this to someone who can understand, and he cannot apologize to his daughter; he is only able to say it to Madam in Chinese.



Mr. Shi is unable to see that he is overstaying his welcome at his daughter's house and refuses to read the signals that she is sending him: he sees her pushing him to leave as an attempt to accommodate his wishes, and he does not understand that his insistence that she remarry may not be what she wants.



Mr. Shi hears his daughter speaking English loudly and rapidly on the phone, laughing often. He has never heard her speak like this and it disturbs him, seeming immodest. When she returns, he asks her to whom she was speaking. She reveals that it was a lover, hoping that this will make her father understand that she is not unhappy. She tells Mr. Shi that her lover is Romanian American, and Mr. Shi is glad that he came from a communist country. Mr. Shi warns not to rush into any mistakes because of her loneliness after her abandonment.

Mr. Shi is uncomfortable hearing his daughter speak in a manner, and a language, that he does not recognize. Her clear and unreserved communication shocks him. But even when she reveals that she is happy with her lover, Mr. Shi still sees her behavior as a reaction to her divorce, not understanding that she sees her divorce differently. Even though Mr. Shi does not recognize his daughter when she talks to this man, he sees the nationality of her partner as an indication that his daughter has not completely abandoned or forgotten the communist values with which she grew up.



Mr. Shi's daughter reveals that, contrary to Mr. Shi's belief, she was not abandoned by her husband, but rather they got divorced because of her connection with this other man. Mr. Shi is confused and angry that he has raised his daughter to be disloyal and insists that she must explain herself to him because he is her father. Mr. Shi's daughter explains that her husband thought she didn't talk enough and started to think she was hiding something from him. Mr. Shi says that she was hiding this man from her husband, and his daughter responds that she communicates better with her lover because they speak in English, and she never learned to express her feelings in Chinese.

This scene marks a turning point for Mr. Shi's daughter: for the first time in the story, she is opening up to him and being honest about her life. In doing so, she is challenging his expectations of women's behavior. She also speaks to him openly about her father's childrearing and his relationship with her mother, revealing to her father that she was aware of the problems in their marriage, even when he could not admit them to anyone—even himself. She specifically characterizes these problems as a lack of communication, thus explaining why she never learned to express her feelings in Chinese.



Mr. Shi accuses his daughter of blaming him and her mother for her reasons for cheating on her husband, which his daughter denies. She explains that he and her mother did not talk when they had problems, and so she learned to stay quiet. Mr. Shi insists that there were no problems and that they were just quiet people. His daughter reveals that she knows Mr. Shi is lying about being a rocket scientist, and that her mother had known it too. Mr. Shi is shocked and unable to speak. His daughter apologizes for hurting him, and he remains calm, acknowledging that she is telling the truth. Mr. Shi's daughter tells him that she will book the tours for him tomorrow.

Mr. Shi does not react well to his daughter's confrontation and becomes angry and defensive, refusing to admit that his relationship with his wife was not perfect. It seems like he is trying to convince himself as well as his daughter. Mr. Shi's daughter's revelation of her awareness of his lies marks the climax of the story, and sheds light on everything up to this point about Mr. Shi being a rocket scientist. It becomes clear that Mr. Shi has been lying not only to his family, but to himself for many years, trying to cling to his former profession as a central part of his identity. When he does not get angry at his daughter and admits that she is telling the "truth," he is admitting to his lies for the first time.



Mr. Shi goes to see Madam a final time to come clean about the lies he has told her about himself. He practices what he will say to her, remembering his time as a young rocket scientist and how excited he was to talk about it. He had begun talking to his card puncher, a young woman named Yilan. Card punchers have been made obsolete by advanced technology but Mr. Shi misses his relationship with Yilan. Mr. Shi sees Madam approaching him with a basket of colorful autumn leaves. Madam hands one leaf to him, and he sees the brightness and the detail clearly for the first time in his life.

It seems like his daughter's revelation has inspired Mr. Shi to be honest with the people in his life whom he cares about. The fact that he goes to Madam suggests the true intimacy of their connection. When Madam hands him a leaf and he can see clearly for the first time, it seems evident that Madam has had a profound effect on Mr. Shi, and has helped him open his eyes to the meaning life can have in the present without dwelling on the past.



Mr. Shi reveals in English to Madam that he was not a rocket scientist because of Yilan, his card puncher. They became very close by talking all the time, in the office and on their lunch breaks. They talked about their excitement about their opportunities and the hope of building the first rocket for their communist country. They became very close because Mr. Shi felt like he could talk openly to her, which he could not with his wife because his work was confidential. Mr. Shi and Yilan were accused of having an affair, even though they never touched each other. By telling this story, he realizes that they were in love, but a kind of love that resulted from a connection of minds and not bodies.

When Yilan was sent away because of their affair, Mr. Shi was told that he could keep his job as a rocket scientist if he admitted to their affair and apologized, which he refused to do out of loyalty to his wife and to Yilan. Had he admitted the affair, he would have selfishly kept his job and hurt his wife. But it would have been more selfish to abandon his family for a life with Yilan, Mr. Shi believes. As a result, he took the lowest position someone with his training could have: decorating offices, filing papers, and organizing his colleagues' work. He ignored his wife's questioning looks until she stopped giving them. In the present, Mr. Shi tells Madam something he was taught in his training: that sacrifice makes life meaningful. He tries to focus on being in the present with Madam, admiring the beauty of the leaves.

It is notable the Mr. Shi speaks the most important part, his confession about his job, in English in order to make sure that Madam understands literally what he is saying, not just emotionally. Mr. Shi does not just want Madam to listen and smile, at least to the parts he can convey in English. Mr. Shi is thus acknowledging the limits of understanding that result from communicating with each other in different languages. Once he starts speaking to Madam in Chinese, it is as if he is admitting this story to himself, as much as or even more than he is admitting it to her. By telling the story, he realizes that the honest communication he had with Yilan, and has tried to achieve with other people in his life, is a form of love that he has never acknowledged to himself.



In the final scene of the story, Mr. Shi looks back on the choice he made to give up both his job and his relationship with Yilan for what he considered to be loyalty to his wife. More than 40 years later, he seems to doubt whether he made the right choice. When he brings up the idea from his training that sacrifice makes life meaningful, he seems unsure of whether he believes it: his sacrifice not only caused him (and Yilan) enormous pain, but it did not prevent his wife and daughter from suffering either. At this point in his life, when his wife has died and his relationship with his daughter is strained—as they have not resolved their conflicts by the end of the story, and she still seems to be angry about events from her childhood—Mr. Shi seems to be wondering what meaning has emerged from his sacrifice. But in the last moments of the story, Mr. Shi tries to stop dwelling in the past, and instead focus on the meaning that his life has in the present, like the beauty of the colors and the natural world.





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