Li Yongping 李永平 (1947—)

Li Yongping is a Taiwan author who rose to literary fame for a collection of inter-related short stories called *Retribution: The Jiling Chronicles* (吉陵春秋, 1986), considered among the works exemplifying the best of Taiwan modernism. Now a citizen of the Republic of China (Taiwan), Li was born in Kuching, a city in the East Malaysian state of Sarawak, in northwest Borneo. Sarawak became a British crown colony in 1946, and then joined the independent Federation of Malaysia in 1963. Li left Kuching in 1967 to pursue university education in Taiwan, following a route that was and has remained popular with many Chinese Malaysians who, like Li himself, had received some Chinese-language education in Malaysia. Li graduated from National Taiwan University in 1971 and later received postgraduate degrees in the United States. Li relinquished his Malaysian citizenship in 1987. Over the course of his career, Li has published several long novels and collections of short stories and essays; he has also worked as an editor, translator and professor.

The *Retribution* stories revolve around crime and retribution in the fictional town of Jiling. In the first story, “In Great Blessings Lane” (萬福巷里), the lovely young wife of a coffin-maker is raped by a local thug and then hangs herself; her husband kills the wife and mistress of the rapist in revenge. The following stories revisit these events by focusing on other town residents as they recall and gossip about them in subsequent years. The stories offer unflinching depictions of the coexistence of generative and destructive impulses in the human spirit while weaving a complex history of morality and transgression among Jiling’s residents. The collection has earned a ranking of 40th on *Asia Weekly*’s (亞洲週刊) “100 Best-loved Chinese Novels of the 20th century.”

Critics of the *Retribution* stories have concentrated on narratorial style, distinctive literary language, and setting. Particularly the first two stories feature a narration that resembles a video camera in that it emphasizes occurrences that can be discerned visually or aurally. This deprives readers access to the characters’ inner states and compels them to experience violence in a way that tests the limits of their compassion. The stories’ literary language is remarkable for how it has been carefully adapted from that primarily used in traditional Chinese novels. In terms of setting, for some critics, the stories’ language and cultural references evoke an atmosphere of traditional China. Others draw upon the author’s background and the stories’ climate references to place Jiling in Southeast Asia or link it to Kuching.

For many, situating Jiling geographically is unimportant; Li’s affinity for the Chinese language and literary tradition is more noteworthy. In other works, Li fascinatingly combines mapping and narration. In a collection of autobiographical short stories called *The Snow Falls in Clouds: Recollections of a Borneo Childhood* (雨雪霏霏：婆羅洲童年記事, 2002), Li presents memories of growing up in Borneo and moving to and living in Taipei. The stories emerge in the form of a conversation with a young girl named Zhu Ling, who also appears in two earlier novels by Li, *The Giant Eagle* (海東青, 1992) and *Zhu Ling’s Wanderings through Wonderland* (朱鴒漫遊仙境, 1998). In *The Snow Falls in Clouds*, Zhu Ling becomes both confidante and muse to Li’s first-person narrator, “Li Yongping,” as they wander through Taipei at night. The confessional tone suggests that the collection represents the narrator’s pursuit of absolution for youthful misdeeds, as if only this could render him fit to return, though no physical homecoming occurs. In his more recent, award-winning long novel, *The End of the River* (大河盡頭, 2008-2010), Li Yongping has achieved another remarkable literary homecoming.

**Works**

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**Further Reading**

http://web.mit.edu/ccw/li-yongping/index.shtml

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Chiu, Kuei-Fen. 2008. “Empire of the Chinese Sign: The Question of Chinese Diasporic Imagination in Transnational Literary Production.” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 67, no. 2: 593-620. (Discusses *Retribution: the Jiling Chronicles*)

Groppe, Alison M. 2013. *Sinophone Malaysian Literature: Not Made in China*. Amherst, NY: Cambria Press. (Discusses *The Snow Falls in Clouds: Recollections of a Borneo Childhood*)

Rojas, Carlos. 2008. “Li Yung-p’ing and Spectral Cartography.” In *The Naked Gaze: Reflections on Chinese Modernity*, 187-212. Cambridge: published by the Harvard University Asia Center: distributed by Harvard University Press. (Discusses *The Giant Eagle* and *Zhu Ling’s Adventures in Wonderland*)

Tsu, Jing. 2010. *Sound and Script in Chinese Diaspora*, 176-212. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. (Discusses Li Yongping’s relationship to the Chinese language in the context of Malaysian Chinese Sinophone literature)