THE LOST AND FORGOTTEN LANGUAGES OF SHANGHAI

by Ruiyan Xu

About the Author
• A Conversation with Ruiyan Xu

Behind the Novel
• “Language Lost and Found”
  An Original Essay by the Author

Keep on Reading
• Recommended Reading
• Reading Group Questions

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ST. MARTIN'S GRIFFIN
A Conversation with Ruiyan Xu

In *The Lost and Forgotten Languages of Shanghai*, all three protagonists at times feel estranged and isolated from their surroundings. Why do outsiders fascinate you?

We can start with the obvious—I moved to the United States when I was ten, and I was the outsider. I didn’t understand the language, I didn’t know the culture, and in my elementary school class, I was totally lost. I still feel lost sometimes—albeit to a lesser extent. Because I didn’t grow up here, there are references I miss, a kind of understood shared history or feeling that Americans have who grew up here together, watching the same television shows, seeing the same events through the same perspective. And so I find myself, sometimes, feeling as though I’m watching things from a distance when I am supposedly participating in them. We can call that “Ruiyan as Outsider, Part One.”

“Ruiyan as Outsider, Part Two” started when I was eighteen, visited China, and became an outsider again. I spoke English, read English, wrote English every day for eight years. And so speaking to everyone in Chinese—family members, passersby, shopkeepers—became incredibly awkward.

Simultaneously, in Shanghai, culturally, even physically, everything had changed so much—it didn’t feel like a homecoming. Or, at least, it didn’t feel like only a homecoming. And I had changed too, of course. So even if China had somehow frozen in time, I wouldn’t have been able to just step back in.

Obviously I’m not the first person to experience or try to write about this feeling. Immigrant fiction, for example, often deals with the sense that you’ll never feel entirely at home in either culture. Non-immigrant writers know and deal with this, too. Writers can almost be defined as professional outsiders.... You often have to step outside of a situation to observe it.”
siders. It’s just part of the job. You often have to step outside of a situation to observe it—to choose the right details—to reshape a mess of events into a narrative.

What did you research for your novel, and what did you make up?

The story takes place in the summer of 1999. I lived in Shanghai during that summer, and I probably couldn’t have set the novel in Shanghai during any other period. When I came back and began writing the book, my memories determined, or at least informed, how I depicted the city in my book. I drew on specific images and scenes that I could recall. But just as important was the feeling the city had while I lived there—a mixture of old and new and glittering and impoverished. So even when I made things up, I stuck to the ambience I experienced firsthand. Generally, though, the book’s interior spaces were imagined, though perhaps informed by specific memories. Outside spaces tended to come from what I could more specifically recall.

My book follows a character who loses the ability to speak. His condition is called aphasia. I first read about aphasia during college, and I immediately felt some personal connection to the disease—a sense of recognition. Moving to the United States as a child, fighting through a new language, and then later losing my original language...aphasia seemed like an exaggerated, accelerated version of what I had experienced myself. So even before I started writing my novel, I had studied it through my coursework in cognitive science and neuroscience.

Probably no two writers will agree on how to research for fiction. My method is to read as much as possible on the topics or themes relevant to the story.
“[Writing]... allows you to see the world differently, as if writing was actively sharpening your vision.”

I’m writing—to read widely, but also to read haphazardly. Eventually I decide I’m ready to write. But it’s hard to write with a medical text next to you and the Internet open on your laptop. So I take all of the books and articles and whatever else I’ve read and put it away. And then I just write. My assumption is that the prep work will inform my writing, that all the information I picked up will come out almost unconsciously.

At certain points during the revision process, I had to go back and fill in details—and I needed to do supplemental research. I’d check on things I thought I had made up—little details of the book—and sometimes they turned out to be true. Who knows; maybe I read about things similar to those details during my initial research, put them into the novel without remembering where I’d gotten them from, and now was relearning them all over again. Or maybe I just guessed right. Anyway, in terms of the medical research, I sent my manuscript to a doctor friend to make sure I didn’t get too much wrong, and was quite relieved when she gave me her approval.

Which writers helped inspire this novel? Who influences your writing, and how?

I was just graduating from college when I started this book. I was reading Marguerite Duras, Michael Ondaatje, and Susan Minot, and all of them had at least some influence on my style. The style of those writers, at that formative age, definitely penetrated. I responded to the saturation (for lack of a better word) of their prose, I think, and wanted to create that feeling in my own work. But my style has changed too, over the years. Prose style, for me, was and remains a moving target, one I think about a lot, and something I often question myself about. I
will always be in love with words and sentences, but these days I find that my writing feels a little looser, my sentences aren’t quite so careful. It’s definitely been interesting.

It’s hard to say that other writers are direct influences on this book. There are, of course, writers I love (W. G. Sebald, Marilynne Robinson, Alice Munro), but they are all geniuses. Geniuses are impossible to crib.

At one point, when I was struggling with the structure of the novel, trying to figure out its shape and pacing, I was drawn back to some of my favorite nineteenth- and early twentieth-century writers: George Eliot, Henry James, Edith Wharton. They wrote about flawed men and women, about the links between marriage and money, about bad choices and lack of foresight. And so much happens in all those books! So those novels made me think about my characters in a different way—about how they, despite their best efforts, were trapped by their languages and cultures and circumstances, by the society around them. Maybe the choices they made were the only choices they could make.

Apart from books, did other works of art play a role in the creation of *The Lost and Forgotten Languages of Shanghai*?

That’s a difficult question to answer. I don’t know if any works of art directly played a role. I did listen to a lot of Arvo Pärt during the writing, but it wasn’t so much an inspiration as it was an accompaniment.

The messier answer, and probably the more important one, is that just about everything that passed through my life during the years I was writing my book could have played some role in how I wrote it.
It’s one of the advantages of writing a novel. You spend so much time with it that you start to see the world through the prism of the book. Everything is potential material. You notice new things, notice old things in a different light, notice everything more intensely through whatever you’re working on. Something you overhear, a work of art you see, some random gesture or the shape of a room—anything can fit into a character’s life or plug into some dramatic moment. This is one of my favorite things about writing—the way it allows you to see the world differently, as if writing was actively sharpening your vision.

It’s even more fun when this happens by accident. You’ve stepped away from the book and you’re going through everyday life, and the novel is hidden away but still shaping itself in the back of your mind, and then all of sudden you see or hear something that just drops into place and completes a scene.

To capture some of these things, I take notes, especially if I’m in the middle of working on something. Maybe the notes make it into the book, but more often than not I don’t look at them again. I think taking notes just trains me to observe, to take in details and be able to evoke them when they’re needed. You grow extra sensors when you’re writing—does that sound silly? The world becomes more alive to you. Some of what you see is terrible, and sometimes things are so strange or beautiful that you can’t quite believe it. And all of it makes me more engaged with being alive, and I hope it makes me a better writer. It definitely makes me a better person.
When I was ten years old, I moved from Shanghai, China, to the United States. I didn’t speak any English then, and I remember being so frightened, for I was in an entirely new place, a place where I didn’t speak the language. The day before fifth grade started, I remember pleading with my mother to let me stay home; I was scared to not understand, and not be understood.

Eight years later, when I returned to China for my first visit back, English had become the only language I was fluent in. After not using Chinese for so long, I could no longer read or write it, and even my spoken Chinese had deteriorated to the point where talking to my family in Shanghai was slightly difficult and awkward. At eighteen, I was afraid of saying the wrong thing or not being understood all over again. It made me frustrated and sad, for I felt as though I had abandoned—through my own neglect—my first language. And I began to realize that I had slowly lost access to my childhood, my memories, my relationships with family members, and my cultural history through my estrangement from my native tongue. I didn’t remember the names of my childhood friends—because their names were in Chinese. My conversations with my grandparents and cousins were shallow—it seemed impossible to get to the heart of the matter without the right words. I couldn’t read the books that I’d loved as a kid at all. Taxi drivers and shopkeepers assumed that I had been born and reared abroad. That keen sense of loss I felt then—the idea that when you lose a language you also lose so many other things—has stayed with me ever since.
When I came across the concept of aphasia in a cognitive science class in college, I immediately felt a sense of connection to the disease. After all, isn’t aphasia—suddenly losing the ability to produce or understand a language—a rapidly accelerated version of what I had experienced? The idea of writing about a fictional character with aphasia took root in my head, and when I returned to Shanghai at the age of twenty-one, this time for a three-month stay, that idea grew roots and expanded, taking on more details. Thus began *The Lost and Forgotten Languages of Shanghai*.

In telling the story of Li Jing—a Chinese man whose first language is English, and who sustains a brain injury that results in bilingual aphasia—I am quite literally exploring what happens when someone loses a language. Li Jing is isolated from almost everyone around him. His loss of language causes him to lose many things: control of his company, close relationships with his family members, and his own previously unquestioned ease in the world. But it is in his relationship with his wife, Meiling, where his aphasia causes the most damage. Because they can’t speak to each other, and because of their own unwillingness to try to find new ways to connect, Li Jing and Meiling are no longer able to communicate. Their relationship begins to break down; they resent each other but do not understand each other; and Li Jing begins to turn to Rosalyn Neal, his American doctor.

The stories of Li Jing, Meiling, and Rosalyn unfold against the backdrop of contemporary Shanghai. Shanghai, for me, is almost another character in the novel. In writing about the place I grew up in, and the place I returned to as an adult for brief periods of time, I got to experience the beauty and mystery
of Shanghai all over again. The city is undoubtedly dazzling and glamorous and cosmopolitan. It is also isolating, full of customs and traditions, with certain indecipherable codes of conduct that are difficult for outsiders to penetrate. It is, and always will be, my city. And I hope that some of the facets of this remarkable and vibrant city come through in *The Lost and Forgotten Languages of Shanghai*.

For most of the book, Li Jing’s aphasia seems as though it is damaging the lives of the three protagonists beyond repair. The loss of language, in whatever form it may take, is hard to recover from—it shatters not just our ability to speak, but our relationships and our senses of selves too. Still, with each loss there are things we might learn, about how to reach each other in new ways, about how to reform our connections with loved ones. For even when it feels impossible to communicate—with family members, with friends, with colleagues, and strangers—isn’t it still important, isn’t it still up to us, to keep trying?
Recommended Reading

*In the Eye of the Sun*
Ahdaf Soueif

This depiction of a young woman’s journey from Egypt to England, her intellectual and physical awakening, and her straddling of different cultures and languages, gave me a sense of recognition when I read the book. I love that it portrays a woman’s interiority so well.

*In the Skin of a Lion*
Michael Ondaatje

I read this book in college, and it was a revelation. I didn’t know you could write novels like this—for it’s a novel that shifts quickly but precisely among different landscapes and characters and times. Ondaatje is one of my favorite authors for his rich prose, his vivid descriptions of space, and his sympathy for those on the margins of history.

*The Song of Everlasting Sorrow*
Wang Anyi

One of the most important contemporary Chinese writers gives us this expansive and fascinating tale of a woman caught by history in twentieth-century Shanghai.

*Native Speaker*
Chang-rae Lee

A sensitive and sharp examination of an Asian American man in New York City.
Lily Bart, the irresistible but flawed heroine of this novel, is one of my favorite characters in all of literature. She reminds us that women are not often in control of their own fates, and that people are often trapped by their circumstances.

Selected Stories
Alice Munro

Each of these short stories is a gem, encompassing more life and blood than most novels. Every time I read Alice Munro, I am awestruck by her clarity of vision, and her wisdom.

The Man with a Shattered World:
The History of a Brain Wound
A. R. Luria

A real-life account of a man with a severe head injury. Absolutely fascinating, and gives an unparalleled glimpse into the struggles of the brain-damaged patient.
Reading Group Questions

1. How do you think your life would change if you suddenly lost the ability to speak your primary language? Would you still be able to hold your current job? How would your relationships with your loved ones change?

2. Rosalyn comes to Shanghai partly as a result of her divorce. She says that in Shanghai, she has "found a whole new solitude." What else does Rosalyn find in Shanghai?

3. What do you imagine Rosalyn to be like in her normal life, in the United States? Do people behave differently when they travel? Have you ever taken the opportunity to behave differently when you were away from familiar surroundings?

4. Meiling thinks: "Love is about taking care of someone without being asked, about sacrificing yourself...words have nothing to do with love. [But] perhaps in English, with an American woman, the concept of love is entirely different. Perhaps love, in a different language, rushes through and spills out more easily, the words carrying the feelings along." How might Meiling's concept of love differ from Rosalyn's? Do you think the concept of love is different in different languages and different cultures? Have you ever had an experience where love meant different things for you and someone you were close to?

5. Professor Li passes away in the middle of the novel. Would the lives of Li Jing, Meiling, and Rosalyn have been different if Professor Li stayed alive? Why might his presence have made a difference in their lives?
6. After Li Jing’s accident, Meiling tries to keep his company afloat, but does not spend a lot of time with Li Jing himself. Discuss the relationship between Meiling and Li Jing after the accident. Why do you think they grow apart? What could each of them have done to change this?

7. Meiling invites Rosalyn to come to a spa with her. Over the course of the afternoon, each woman judges the other harshly. Are Meiling and Rosalyn’s differences the result of different cultures, different languages, or different personalities? Why can’t they get through to each other despite the presence of Alan the translator?

8. At the end of the book, Meiling and Li Jing seem to reach a tentative reconciliation. Do you think they would have stayed together if they didn’t have a child together? What do you think their relationship will be like going forward?