

BEN ELDRIDGE

Isabelle Li, *A Chinese Affair*  
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*The void of loneliness is everywhere.*

– Isabelle Li

One of the most striking elements of Isabelle Li's *A Chinese Affair* is its sense of melancholy. Her inaugural short story collection is comprised of sixteen subtly oppressive tales, divided into four suites; nearly all are starkly told, and haunted by the weight of what remains unarticulated. There is an authorial confidence to *A Chinese Affair* that belies its existence as a debut collection; showing a restraint that tends to elude many (younger) writers. In fact, I suspect that the collection as a whole may prove to be understated to the point of frustration for many readers: many of the tales are devoid of clear resolutions, startlingly opaque on even the most basic level of narrative. Even the structure of the collection seems designed to obscure, with the connections between stories tending towards the elusive. Characters weave in and out of one another's narratives without ceremony, and it is not difficult to entirely overlook many of the allusions that comprise their complex web of interrelations. What will not be missed, however, is the thematic obsession of the limitations of communication, always complicated by some form of geographical or temporal dislocation, and constantly dancing on the borderline of interpersonal and intrapersonal perceptibility. At its best, *A Chinese Affair* is a powerful reflection on the difficulties of localised belonging in a globalised world.

The majority of these stories are told with such sparsity as to be almost anaemic; the first lines of the opening and title story are representative of the whole:

I dream of my mother again. She is sitting in front of the sewing machine, crying. (3)

Each word seems so carefully considered that the prose itself seems spectral; all information to which we have access seems the ghostly residue of a repressed meaning. This is an almost *silent* prose, but this is a *cacophonous silence*; a silence that speaks volumes:

I suddenly had a thought, and once it emerged I felt it had been there for many years:  
*I'm a person without a first language.* (284, emphasis in original)

Throughout the various narratives, the plainness of the prose heightens dramatic impact (as it does in both above excerpts), but this is not purely a rhetorical gesture, nor simply an aesthetic choice. The economy of the prose is also a thematic manoeuvre; as the various narratives unfold, we encounter the various focalising characters reflecting one another in an almost dreamlike logic, and we can begin to see the significance of the uncannily reserved prose. In this world of Chinese characters, English is, at most, a second language, and the minimal linguistic communication also functions as something of a defense mechanism for many of its practitioners. There is fear here; fear of the blatant racism which rears its head at various

junctures throughout the text. There is also the echo of isolation; isolation from self, isolation from society and culture, isolation from even the idea of home and language. The modest syntax proves to be an expeditious method of character construction; these are characters whose minimalist narration is an integral part of their respective identities. The downside to this approach in such a collection is that many of the characters do tend to bleed into one another; this method of showing their psychological depth also severely limits the amount of individual identity their internal narration is able to demonstrate. It is evident that most of these stories have been previously—and separately—published in various literary journals; the text is best consumed in small doses as the stories, for the most part, are astute and effective, but there is nonetheless a level of monotony when *A Chinese Affair* is approached in its entirety.

Tellingly, the most successful stories, in this format at least, were the ones that moved away from the strictures of first-person focalisation. This also impacts on the structure of *A Chinese Affair*, with most of the more adventurous stories occurring in the collection's final section. Perhaps the most accomplished story in the collection is, ironically, the point of greatest departure: the quirky, and most linguistically ostentatious, "Go Troppo". Structured in a contemporary epistolary form—an assemblage of unsent emails—"Go Troppo" continues many of the collection's recurrent themes: illicit love, communication breakdown, and unspoken (perhaps unspeakable) mysteries. The markedly more complex syntax in this story is a direct reflection of the written form of discourse; the typed format of the emails in distinct contrast with the monologic narration of the other tales. The emails are equal part imagistic diary entries and damagingly wrought and stylised pieces of failed communication. There is a marked irony here which lies with the *production* of the discourse: the tale's presentation as *text*, removed from the interiority of the central character, allows the effect of the psychological pain to be intensified.

*A Chinese Affair* also ends on a high point. The most frequently represented of Li's recurring characters is the enigmatic Xueqing—a Chinese immigrant in Australia, who works as a professional translator. Her immigration has left her relatively free to sever her past and recreate her identity—exchanging her Chinese name for an English name, Crystal. Crystal is a master of the structure and form of two tongues, but is comfortable with neither, on a purely personal level. The closing story "Two Tongues" is narrated by Crystal, in a gloriously revealing second person perspective:

You had thought characters had their own life, stories their own truth, and the writer was merely the teller. (316)

Over the course of *A Chinese Affair*, we discover that the direct address that is the endpoint of the text is targeted: the "you" is both character and audience, the writer is never the objective teller; never the clear glass prism of representation. Language has its own inherent distortion effect, and various iterations of language only serve to exacerbate this alteration. For a debut collection, *A Chinese Affair* is a sophisticated one, and I'd hazard to guess that Isabelle Li's distinct distortions of language will be ones to watch for in future.

