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Somewhat Queer Triangles: Yiyun Li's "The Princess of Nebraska" and "Gold Boy, Emerald Girl"

King-Kok Cheung

Yiyun Li's "The Princess of Nebraska" and "Gold Boy, Emerald Girl" reveal the pressure on Chinese gays and lesbians to lead compromised lives so as to create the semblance of heterosexual families and to avoid the homophobic gaze of their larger societies. The suspense in reading these two stories lies in ferreting out the secrets and pains the characters try to hide from one another and even from themselves. What haunts all the principal characters is their palpable solitude. Unlike the fiction by early Chinese immigrants and Asian immigrants generally, this story no longer presents the United States primarily as a land of economic opportunity. In "The Princess of Nebraska," the United States provides a refuge from homophobic persecution, but the gay refugee must marry a lesbian in order to emigrate. In "Gold Boy, Emerald Girl," a gay immigrant actually chooses to return to China after being disenchanted by a succession of noncommittal relationships in North America (including New York, Montreal, Vancouver, and San Francisco). The choices made by the characters also reflect their negotiation between interdependence, the predominant ethos in China, and independence, the spirit of the New World. Whether in the US or in China, a heterosexual union is assumed to be the only solution to an unconventional love triangle, in which a person is loved by both a man and a woman.¹

"The Princess of Nebraska"

"The Princess of Nebraska" is told from the alternate perspectives of Sasha, a twenty-one-year-old exchange student planning to have an abortion, and Boshen, a thirty-eight-year-old physician who has been repeatedly harassed for his sexual orientation and gay activism in China. In Beijing, both Boshen and Sasha have fallen in love with Yang, an eighteen-year-old *Nan Dan* (a male actor who plays

female roles in Peking opera) expelled from the Peking Opera School after he is seen with his lover. Yang seems unable to love anyone but himself after being jilted by his first lover, but he agrees to live with Boshen when the latter promises to help him get back on stage. But then Boshen himself is expelled from Beijing for his AIDS activism. During his absence, Sasha is impregnated by Yang during a one-night stand. Boshen soon smuggles himself to the US through a sham marriage to a newly naturalized lesbian. Sasha, too, leaves for graduate school in Omaha, Nebraska. Unable to persuade Yang to leave China with her, Sasha (now four months pregnant) intends to have an abortion. The story opens with a meeting between Boshen and Sasha in Chicago, where she plans to have the operation. Boshen, however, tries to talk her into keeping Yang's child. They stay for a Christmas parade that evening, during which Sasha seems to experience a change of heart.

The story juxtaposes life in China and life in the US. As a gay doctor, Boshen has had a checkered career in China. At thirty-eight, "he felt he had achieved less than he had failed" (Li, "Princess" 71). He is asked to leave the hospital in his hometown after he has established the first counseling hotline for homosexuals. In Beijing, he falls madly in love with Yang, and they live together. Working as a gay activist, Boshen is visited by the secret police and put under surveillance, for "in the post-Tiananmen era, talk of any kind of human rights was dangerous" (71). Then he is banished from Beijing and put under house arrest in his hometown for corresponding with a Western reporter concerning a potential AIDS epidemic; to earn his freedom, he must publish a written confession of his "wrongdoing" (69). The move to the US, an opportunity that Boshen has landed under the pretense of a false marriage, also poses challenges. He goes from being a physician to a helper to a Sichuan chef in a Chinese restaurant. By the end of the story, he and Sasha are entertaining another spurious marriage, between Yang and Sasha, so that her child can have a legitimate father.

Yang is similarly branded on account of his sexual orientation. Trained as a female impersonator in Peking opera, he had lived in the opera school until he turned seventeen, when he was expelled

after being seen with his lover. Boshen meets Yang for the first time when the actor, after being deserted by his first lover, becomes a prostitute, a “*money boy* interested only in selling” (Li, “Princess” 72). After Boshen takes him in, Yang fits into “the quiet life like the most virtuous woman he had played on stage,” animating Boshen’s mundane life: “Yang’s voice splitting the waterfall, the bath curtain, the door, and the rest of the dull world like a silver knife. At those moments Boshen was overwhelmed by gratitude—he was not the only one to have been touched by the boy’s beauty, but he was the one to guard and nurture it” (73–74). Hence Boshen’s promise to help Yang perform again. But the singer is skeptical. “*An empty promise of a man keeps a woman’s heart full,*” Yang recites (73). The prevalence of conventional gender norms is evident in these passages. Even a gay couple continues to gauge one another according to heterosexual norms.

Even more conventional is Sasha, a straight woman who considers homosexuality to be a deviation. Sasha undergoes several about-face changes in the course of the story. At first, she finds Yang vain and disparages him and his admirers, including Boshen. Yet she is quite vain herself. She believes she is the first person in Yang’s life who is immune to his charm and thinks “he must be following her around because of that. It pleased her” (Li, “Princess” 78). All set to leave for American graduate school in a month, she does not expect to fall in love: “It was pointless to start a relationship now. Besides, how smart was it to date a boy who loved no one but himself?” (78). But Sasha underestimates Yang’s allure and soon falls in love despite her intention to the contrary. She tries to persuade Yang to go with her to the US after they watch the movie *Pretty Woman* (starring Julia Roberts): “Everything could happen there. A prostitute becomes a princess; a crow turns into a swan overnight” (81). They spend a night in a small hotel and Sasha tries to talk Yang into leaving China with her again the next morning:

“Come to America with me,” she said. “We’ll be the prince and the princess of Nebraska.”

“I was not trained to play a prince,” Yang said.

“The script is changed,” Sasha said. “From today on.” (Li, “Princess” 85)

This passage at once reveals the performativity of gender and Sasha’s refusal to acknowledge its fluidity.² Notwithstanding her strong personality, Sasha is mired in the conventional mores of mainstream Chinese society, which considers homosexuality to be an aberration that can be “corrected,” a script that can be easily altered. She blames Peking opera for “corrupting” Yang, attributing his sexual orientation to his training as a female impersonator. She asks Boshen, who, in her mind, is also to blame:

Why was there *Nan Dan* in the Peking opera in the first place? *Men loved him because he was playing a woman; women loved him because he was a man playing....* Why else do you want so much to put him back on the stage? He didn’t have to be a man playing a woman—I thought I would make him understand. But what did I end up with? (Li, “Princess” 89–90, emphasis original)

Watching the Christmas parade on Michigan Avenue, Sasha marvels at the American youth: “They looked so young and carefree, these Americans.... They were born to be themselves, naive and contented with their naivety” (Li, “Princess” 78). Implicitly, these American youngsters are contrasted with the three Chinese characters, who must derail their intrinsic selves to abide by societal norms. Feeling burdened by her pregnancy, Sasha intends to have an abortion to free herself from the past and from maternity, looking forward to the moment when she is “ready to move on” (69). She believes that “moving on” is an American concept that suits her well, a phrase that calls forth the image of “stapling her Chinese life, one staple after another around the pages until they became one solid block that nobody would be able to open and read. She would have a fresh page then, for her American life” (69). America is thus associated with turning a new page, a fresh beginning; China, with the past and confinement. Sasha wishes to forget the past and start afresh.

However, Sasha, who has felt no affection for the baby growing inside her thus far, experiences its first stirrings during the parade: “A tap, and then another one, gentle and tentative, the first greeting that Sasha had wished she would never have to answer, but it seemed impossible, once it happened, not to hope for more” (Li, “Princess” 90). The ending suggests that she is about to change her mind:

Sasha held her breath and waited for more of the baby’s messages. America was a good country, she thought, a right place to be born into, even though the baby had come at a wrong time. Everything was possible in America, she thought, and imagined a baby possessing the beauty of her father but happier, and luckier. Sasha smiled, but then when the baby moved again, she burst into tears. Being a mother must be the saddest yet the most hopeful thing in the world, falling into a love that, once started, would never end. (Li, “Princess” 91)

Gish Jen, building on the work of cultural psychologists, has expounded two different models of self-construal in a collection of essays entitled *Tiger Writing*: “The first—the ‘independent,’ individualistic self—stresses uniqueness, defines itself via inherent attributes such as its traits, abilities, values, and preferences, and tends to see things in isolation. The second—the ‘interdependent,’ collectivist self—stresses commonality, defines itself via its place, roles, loyalties, and duties, and tends to see things in context” (Jen 7). Jen associates the first with American culture and the second with Chinese culture, though she is quick to add that between these two lies “a continuum along which most people are located” (7). Sasha’s inclination to keep the baby, though prompted by her sense that the US is a “good country,” shows her choice for “interdependence” over “independence.”

Even though Sasha is buoyed by the prospect of autonomy, she is tugged, palpably, by kinship. The prospect of “falling into a love that... would never end” is the opposite of what she regards as the American predilection of “moving on.” To be sure, being in the US is what has brought about her change of heart. She knows that her child would not be under the kind of social surveillance to which Boshen and Yang have been subjected in the home country. But the

freedom in the US, at least at the time of the story, is still limited. If Sasha wants the child to have a legitimate father, she must either marry Yang, the gay biological father, or allow Boshen, another gay man, to be the adoptive father. Or the three can stay together. But the “three-member family” Boshen has in mind would constitute yet another one of the kind of compromises that he has made previously on account of heteronormative constraint: “what right did he have to talk about options, when the decisions he had made for his life were all compromises? He was in love with a boy twenty years younger, and he thought he could make a difference in the boy’s life. In the end, he was the one to marry a woman and leave” (Li, “Princess” 71). Furthermore, Sasha would have to settle for a nominal marriage, not unlike the one depicted at the end of the next story.

“Gold Boy, Emerald Girl”

Like “The Princess of Nebraska,” “Gold Boy, Emerald Girl” opens with a meeting between the two main characters, Hanfeng, a forty-four-year-old man, and Siyu, a thirty-eight-year-old woman. The story is told from their alternate points of view. The two are meeting at the behest of Professor Dai, Hanfeng’s mother who, at seventy-one, plays matchmaker for her son by encouraging him to marry Siyu, her former student and a frequent companion since. At first, Hanfeng seems the only homosexual character in the story. But it gradually dawns on the reader that Professor Dai, Hanfeng’s mother, and Siyu, her former student (and his prospective wife), are far from straight as well.

In this story, the US is no longer the only country of opportunity and not even the preferred abode for Hanfeng. When he tells his colleagues in San Francisco about his plan to move back to China for good, “they had joked about moving with him and becoming the forty-niners of the new gold rush” (Li, “Gold” 207). The joke suggests that immigration across the Pacific has become two-way, that economic opportunity may be even greater in China. But that is not the reason for Hanfeng’s return: “His mother was getting old, he explained to his friends; the thought that he, too, was no longer a young man in need of adventures he kept to himself” (207). He

also leaves unsaid the fact that all his stateside relationships have failed to last. His return may also be seen as the prioritizing of interdependence—the obligation to take care of an elderly mother—over independence.

Although Hanfeng can come out of the closet in North America, he is unable to form a long-term relationship. Like Yang in the previous story, he was reluctant initially to commit himself after his first love abandoned him (twenty-three at the time) for a woman, just before his departure for the US:

America, at first glance, seemed a happy enough place, and when his friend called with the news of his engagement, Hanfeng sought out companions. All he wanted was to have some fun, he replied when more was asked of him... But eventually the reply came back to taunt him: I thought we would have some fun and that's all, his last love had said, a Chinese boy, a new immigrant ... whom Hanfeng had helped support through college. (Li, "Gold" 212–213)

The passage suggests that it is not easy for Hanfeng to sustain a gay relationship in the US, not only because of his psychological resistance earlier, but also because of the American penchant for just "having fun." Li has elsewhere associated such a mentality with the US, where everyone she met seemed to expect her to have fun: "What a strange country, I thought, where fun...seemed mandatory" (Li, "Clean"). In Hanfeng's case, the phrase is linked ironically with lovesickness. Hanfeng has been jilted at least twice. Just as he left for America after the first heartbreak, when having fun was his self-defense against further injury, he returns to China after the last, when his lover has had enough fun.

This theme of love and betrayal recurs across two generations. Hanfeng's father died in an accident when Hanfeng was only two and Professor Dai never remarries. The couple was so handsome that, at their wedding, they were described as gold boy and emerald girl "for their matching good looks" (Li, "Gold" 216). The phrase derives from a famous Chinese reference to the pair of male and female icons accompanying the statue of Guanyin in many temples. Thus it seems rather strange to compliment the groom and bride that

way because these icons are chaste.³ The marriage turns out to be an unhappy one, evidenced in the advice Professor Dai offers Siyu:

[Siyu] shouldn't get married if it was not what she wanted.... You could feel trapped by the wrong man.... You would have to wish for his death every day of your marriage...but once the wish was granted by a miracle, you would never be free of your own cruelty. Siyu listened, knowing that the older woman was talking about herself. (Li, "Gold" 220)

Although Hanfeng's father had died in "an accident that no one could be blamed for," Siyu senses the others' "disapproval of Professor Dai, as if she were partially responsible for the unfair fate that befell the man"; the dead husband, on the other hand, "was always praised as the gentlest person" (Li, "Gold" 216). Given the blameless character of Hanfeng's father, at least in public eye, one may surmise that the marriage was unhappy because it was sexually unfulfilling, at least for Professor Dai, whose sexual orientation is open to question.

This hunch about Professor Dai is reinforced when Hanfeng relates a visit from a woman from a southern province when he was ten:

An unannounced visit, he could tell, when his mother had returned home in the evening and found him shelling peas alongside the guest.... The woman, who had told Hanfeng that she was a very old friend of his mother's and was planning to stay with them for a week, left the next morning.... Still, the image of the woman's face, pale at the sight of his mother, and her hands, which let the peas fall into the pile of shells, stayed with Hanfeng. He could not pinpoint when he understood that there had been betrayals between the two friends. (Li, "Gold" 218–219)

Since Hanfeng has informed the reader earlier that he can always tell what is on his mother's mind, he is probably right in detecting reciprocal betrayals. In "The Princess of Nebraska," Boshen's marriage to a naturalized lesbian friend is judged to be "an

unforgivable betrayal, in Sasha's and Yang's eyes alike" (80). A similar betrayal of homoerotic love by heterosexual union(s) might have occurred in Professor Dai's past.

Professor Dai is not the only one with a secret, however. Siyu, for whom many women have tried in vain to be her matchmaker, also harbors a clandestine desire. When her devoted father remarries, she decides to leave his new family alone: "He did not need her to complicate his life," she tells him, agreeing only to have a "monthly lunch" with him as their only way of sustaining their filiation. She knows that to others she must have come across as "ungrateful and coldhearted," but "how could she stay in his sight when she was going through her life with a reckless speed known only to herself, all because of a love she could not explain and did not have the right to claim in the first place?" She adds that were people to know her secret, they would interpret it as her yearning for a mother, "but Siyu did not believe that things would have turned out any differently had she had a mother" (Li, "Gold" 217-218). Although Siyu never names the object of her secret love, Professor Dai is undoubtedly the older woman in question. While a female student's infatuation with an older male professor is all too common, hardly requiring explanation, a similar crush on a professor of the same sex beggars description, understanding, and acceptance in a heteronormative society. At best, it would be seen as a search for a surrogate mother, an assumption Siyu pointedly refutes.

The attraction Siyu feels for Professor Dai seems at once erotic and platonic, as obsessive as any heterosexual passion, evidenced by her getting up at six every morning as a student to ensure seeing the professor as she parked her bike (Li, "Gold" 206) and by her turning down all invitations during holidays on the odd chance that her mentor should call. Because she could not predict when the older woman would be so inclined, for two decades, Siyu tried to "keep herself uncommitted, which meant that most of the holidays she spent alone" (204). Such behavior of putting herself "on hold" and reserving all her time for one person is again not untypical of straight women in love, but in this instance the beloved is of the same sex.

While a romance between an elderly man and a much younger woman is commonplace, and while a relationship between an older and a much younger man (as between Boshen and Yang) is not noteworthy, attraction between an older woman and a much younger one is, as Siyu implies, unspeakable and, therefore, unspoken. Even Professor Dai might have been unaware of Siyu's crush on her at first. Since Siyu has seen photos of handsome Hanfeng in Professor Dai's apartment, the older woman might have assumed early on that the student wants to befriend her so as to be close to her son. When Professor Dai finally tries to arrange a marriage between Siyu and Hanfeng, Siyu herself wonders if the matchmaking has come "as a result of a beguiling impression she had left of her interest in a good-looking bachelor" (Li, "Gold" 211). The word "beguiling" is sufficient, however, to indicate the absence in her of any romantic interest in the son. The reader is soon told explicitly that "it was not the thought of the boy that had made her wait on the bench outside the biology building in the mornings during college; nor was he the reason she continued to befriend Professor Dai in a manner allowed by the older woman" (217-218). Then what's the reason?

The ending of this story, like that of "The Princess of Nebraska," is infused with tempered poignancy:

[Siyu] had remained unmarried for Professor Dai... and she would, with her blessing, become a married woman. She would not wish for her husband's death, as his mother had, because the marriage, arranged as it was, would still be a love marriage. Siyu had wished to be a companion for Professor Dai in her old age, and her wish would now be granted, an unexpected gift from a stingy life. (Li, "Gold" 221)

Although neither Siyu nor Hanfeng loves the other in an amatory way, they both care deeply for Professor Dai, who has allowed all three of them to cohabit without raising societal eye brows, an arrangement Siyu considers to be a "gift from a stingy life." Professor Dai indeed has been sparing in her affection, but as in most of Li's fiction, those who seem most niggardly with their emotions, Yang and Hanfeng included, have usually been badly hurt by a previous

lover. Perhaps Professor Dai is no exception, as the encounter with the woman from the Southern province intimates. Like Hanfeng, and as he has suspected, the mother might have been betrayed in the past. Both of them now find a loyal companion in Siyu, but the three will likely continue to maintain a discrete distance from one another: "They were lonely and sad people, all three of them and they would not make one another less sad, but they could, with great care, make a world that would accommodate their loneliness" (Li, "Gold" 221). Like Professor Dai and her husband, Hanfeng and Siyu will be another gold boy and emerald girl, who must lead sexually unfulfilling lives, as hard and cold as gold and emerald, but they will remain together.

The two stories by Li underscore the constraints of gender norms and the social pressure not only on gays and lesbians, but also on women and men who do not conform to patriarchal codes of masculinity and femininity. Li refers so often to the hostile gaze of society that it seems a ubiquitous regulative force, which may further explain the aloofness of just about all the principal characters (perhaps with the exception of Boshen), who lead rather "stingy" lives. Yang is kicked out of the Peking opera school on being seen with his gay lover. Boshen is sacked by his hospital and later expelled from Beijing and put under house arrest in his hometown for being a gay activist.

Both lesbians and gays, as well as single and professionally driven women, are constantly subject to unrelenting social scrutiny. Professor Dai, who used to spend most of her time studying animals, was seen as deviant; a similar obsession in a male zoology professor would most likely be commended as professional dedication. After retirement she is ridiculed for her dedication to learning the piano, instead of doing what other women her age do—"taking morning walks with a companion, gossiping and bargaining at the marketplace, watching soap operas in the afternoon" (Li, "Gold" 208). On seeing his aged mother perform in front of a mocking audience, Hanfeng reflects:

His mother had always been a headstrong woman.... Still, seeing her through *other people's eyes*, Hanfeng realized that all that made her who she was—the decades of solitude in her widowhood, her coldness to the *prying eyes of people* who tried to mask their nosiness with friendliness, and her faith in the notion of living one's own life without having to go out of one's way for other people—could be deemed pointless and laughable" (Li, "Gold" 209–210; my emphasis).

Hanfeng feels that, now that he is becoming a parent to his mother, it is incumbent upon him to protect her "from the hostility of the world" (Li, "Gold" 209).⁴

Siyu likewise has been considered eccentric by others for various reasons. These include the distance she keeps from her father, her passion for Charles Dickens, and her status as a single (albeit good-looking) woman, not to mention her unspoken love for a matron. She is aware of how she is judged unfilial "in the eyes of old neighbors and family friends" (Li, "Gold" 217). She relates that ever since she turned twenty, neighbors and acquaintances have tried to find a husband for her, but "with those men"—and presumably with any man—she has known "from the beginning that she would not bother trying to impress them. Over the years, she had developed a reputation as *unmatchable*" (207). That matters of personal intimacy should be translated into communal reputation bespeaks the staking out of private lives.

The characters themselves reiterate heteronormative mores and assess one another accordingly, notwithstanding their own nonconformity. Sasha disparages Boshen as "the type of man as fussy as an old hen" (Li, "Princess" 70). She looks askance at Yang for being a kept man: "Go back to the man who keeps you if this is not a place for a princess like you" (83). She blames Peking opera for Yang's sexual orientation, but does not scruple to assume the masculine role in their relationship: "She called him 'my little *Nan Dan*,' and that was what he was to her, a boy destined to play a woman's part. She paged him often, and invited him to movies and walks in the park. She made decisions for them both, and he let her" (77). Yang, who has internalized public prejudice toward AIDS, denigrates Boshen's effort to raise awareness and to staunch the epidemic: "Why are you

concerned with that dirty disease?" (74). When Sasha asks Yang to go with her to America, he tells her that "nothing humiliates a man more than living as a parasite on his woman" (88). (Yet Yang has no compunction about living off Boshen.) Boshen can only think of using matrimony and paternity—the trappings of patriarchy—to lure Yang to the US. He tells Sasha: "If you could marry Yang, he would be here in no time" (80). Even Hanfeng, a gay bachelor of forty-two who should know better, wonders why Siyu, four years younger and "beautiful in an unassuming way," has remained single (Li, "Gold" 206). "I imagine for the obvious reason of not having felt the need to get married," his mother interjects. But Professor Dai does not venture the less obvious answer—that Siyu prefers her to any male companion. The behavior of all the characters attests to the power of official discourse and social pressures.

Although the US is presented as a country of relative tolerance, where anything seems possible and permissible, the American Dream remains elusive for many, and individual freedom is sometimes attained at the expense of companionship. Sasha tells Yang that a crow can become a swan in America, but the reality for many Chinese emigrants is closer to the experience of Boshen—a physician turned chef's assistant. The New World is also depicted as a place of instant gratification, where relationships are often transient and individualistic pursuit sometimes translates as a lack of commitment. Sasha, who at first welcomes the American concept of "moving on," and Hanfeng, who for some time indulges in the American proclivity for "having fun," have in the end chosen a lasting relationship over immediate pleasure, interdependence over independence. "Freedom is like restaurant food," Hanfeng tells an old friend in California, "one can lose one's appetite for even the best restaurants" (Li, "Gold" 208). In his mind, he may be also linking his flings in North America to restaurant food, none of which offers the comfort, familiarity, and personal touch of a home-cooked meal, even when that home is devoid of sexual intimacy.

Siyu tries to envisage herself in her new residence as nominal wife: "the room which served as a piano studio for Professor Dai would be converted into the third bedroom.... She could see herself

standing by the window and listening to Hanfeng and Professor Dai play four-hand, and she could see the day when she would replace Professor Dai on the piano bench, her husband patient with her inexperienced fingers" (Li, "Gold" 221). She definitely sees her marriage with Hanfeng as a permanent one, lasting beyond Professor Dai's passing. For her "the love for his mother that they could share with no one else" is a sufficient reason to attach herself to Hanfeng: "he as a son who had once left but had now returned, she who had not left and would never leave" (221). Despite the unconventional sexual orientations of the three principals, they hail from a culture that puts great stock in interdependence, including filial obligation; the domestic arrangement they settle for at the end reflects the cultural ethos. Without an appreciation for the solace of kinship, of abiding companionship, it would be difficult to understand Hanfeng's relinquishment of sexual freedom in North America for compromised domesticity in China.

Furthermore, as "The Princess of Nebraska" indicates, there are still legal and social sanctions and discrimination against homosexuality stateside. Boshen has come to the US under the guise of a heterosexual marriage, and he wants Yang's child to have a legitimate father through another union of convenience, between Yang and Sasha: "Yang could choose to live with either of them... they could—the three of them—bring up the baby together.... If only he knew how to make Sasha love Yang again" (Li, "Princess" 90). As Sasha suspects from the beginning, "Whatever interest [Boshen] had in the baby was stupid and selfish" (71). The *ménage à trois* Boshen tries to engineer is obviously unfair to Sasha. He wants Sasha to love Yang enough to marry him so that Yang can come to the US, so that Yang can be his lover again.

Whether in China or in America, a heterosexual union is envisioned as the only resolution to the love triangle in each story. Yet Boshen has described his earlier marriage to a lesbian as "an unforgivable betrayal" (Li, "Princess" 80). If Yang marries Sasha so as to give her unborn child a legitimate father, he will betray Boshen in turn. If the three decide to cohabit, Sasha may end up as the "jade girl," the love-lorn spouse. The only long-term love Sasha conjures

up by the end of the story is not with a spouse, but with her own child. Professor Dai, to spare her gay son and possibly lesbian protégé a fate similar to her own—one fraught with loneliness and subject to the critical gaze of the world—has knowingly matched the two young persons linked only by their love for her. The dispassionate marriages entertained at the end of the two stories are not of the “happily ever after” ilk, but are, perhaps, to borrow the title of Yiyun Li’s latest novel, “kinder than solitude.”

Notes

1. See also Ha Jin, “The Bridegroom,” which features a marriage between a gay man and a homely woman.
2. The theme of gender fluidity is introduced earlier when Yang reminds Sasha of “a statue of Kuanyin, the male Buddha in a female body” (76).
3. In fact, one of the most famous Cantonese movies, *Princess Chang Ping* 《帝女花》, is about how the Gold Boy and Emerald Girl are punished for being erotically attracted to each other; they must do penance by being reincarnated into human beings who suffer lovesickness unto death.
4. Like Hisaye Yamamoto’s eponymous character in “The Legend of Miss Sasagawara,” a strong professional woman, especially one who does not gossip in accordance with gender norms, is looked at askance as eccentric and temperamental, if not outright insane by a community living in close quarters.

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Although Hanfeng can come out of the closet in North America, he is unable to form a long-term relationship. Like Yang in the previous story, he was reluctant initially to commit himself after his first love abandoned him (twenty-three at the time) for a woman, just before his departure for the US:

America, at first glance, seemed a happy enough place, and when his friend called with the news of his engagement, Hanfeng sought out companions. All he wanted was to have some fun, he replied when more was asked of him... But eventually the reply came back to taunt him: I thought we would have some fun and that's all, his last love had said, a Chinese boy, a new immigrant ... whom Hanfeng had helped support through college. (Li, "Gold" 212-213)

The passage suggests that it is not easy for Hanfeng to sustain a gay relationship in the US, not only because of his psychological resistance earlier, but also because of the American penchant for just "having fun." Li has elsewhere associated such a mentality with the US, where everyone she met seemed to expect her to have fun: "What a strange country, I thought, where fun... seemed mandatory" (Li, "Clean"). In Hanfeng's case, the phrase is linked ironically with lovesickness. Hanfeng has been jilted at least twice. Just as he left for America after the first heartbreak, when having fun was his self-defense against further injury, he returns to China after the last, when his lover has had enough fun.

This theme of love and betrayal recurs across two generations. Hanfeng's father died in an accident when Hanfeng was only two and Professor Dai never remarries. The couple was so handsome that, at their wedding, they were described as gold boy and emerald girl "for their matching good looks" (Li, "Gold" 216). The phrase derives from a famous Chinese reference to the pair of male and female icons accompanying the statue of Guanyin in many temples. Thus it seems rather strange to compliment the groom and bride that

way because these icons are chaste.³ The marriage turns out to be an unhappy one, evidenced in the advice Professor Dai offers Siyu:

[Siyu] shouldn't get married if it was not what she wanted.... You could feel trapped by the wrong man.... You would have to wish for his death every day of your marriage... but once the wish was granted by a miracle, you would never be free of your own cruelty. Siyu listened, knowing that the older woman was talking about herself. (Li, "Gold" 220)

Although Hanfeng's father had died in "an accident that no one could be blamed for," Siyu senses the others' "disapproval of Professor Dai, as if she were partially responsible for the unfair fate that befell the man"; the dead husband, on the other hand, "was always praised as the gentlest person" (Li, "Gold" 216). Given the blameless character of Hanfeng's father, at least in public eye, one may surmise that the marriage was unhappy because it was sexually unfulfilling, at least for Professor Dai, whose sexual orientation is open to question.

This hunch about Professor Dai is reinforced when Hanfeng relates a visit from a woman from a southern province when he was ten:

An unannounced visit, he could tell, when his mother had returned home in the evening and found him shelling peas alongside the guest.... The woman, who had told Hanfeng that she was a very old friend of his mother's and was planning to stay with them for a week, left the next morning.... Still, the image of the woman's face, pale at the sight of his mother, and her hands, which let the peas fall into the pile of shells, stayed with Hanfeng. He could not pinpoint when he understood that there had been betrayals between the two friends. (Li, "Gold" 218-219)

Since Hanfeng has informed the reader earlier that he can always tell what is on his mother's mind, he is probably right in detecting reciprocal betrayals. In "The Princess of Nebraska," Boshen's marriage to a naturalized lesbian friend is judged to be "an