On working through discomfort

Writer M Lin discusses feeling at home, art's political consequences, and why she writes in her second language.

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As told to Amy Y.Q. Lin, 2745 words.

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You write about *aiguo* □□, or love of one's country, as well as love of one's family, one's village, one's spouse. What does loyalty mean to you, and why is it such a ripe topic?

The part about *aiguo*, patriotic love, is unavoidable and drilled into every Chinese child if you grew up there. Patriotic education, which is mentioned in the collection, is very robust. Leaving the country and seeing it constantly now, from very far away—in both the Chinese context and how it's portrayed in English language media—I feel I had to reflect on that emotion and discover that it's not how it was taught to me. I still have patriotic feelings for China, but it's no longer in the ways shaped by my political education. There was one place in the collection where the character was considering how China—as a country, people, and culture—has existed for thousands of years. What we know as [the People's Republic of] China has only been around since 1949. There's nuance. I've been discerning what my feelings are.

Covid-19 is prominent in the collection. Covid put China at the center of the world's attention—and by extension, Chinese people. Chinese citizens living abroad, Chinese Americans, and Asian people had different relationships with how China was perceived. Since I started writing this book during Covid, I dealt with the complexity of that feeling through my characters.

In terms of loyalty, it's different from love, but I'm interested in the fact that you put them together. Now when I think of loyalty, I think of Trump, because that's someone to whom people's loyalty is important. With the word *loyalty*, or the concept of loyalty, there's a blindness in that idea. Love is more expansive.

In the first story of *The Memory Museum*, "Scenes from Childhood," the narrator feels she should act a certain way in front of her village relatives. She asks, "Is this my hometown? Do I belong here?" Your second story, "Magic, or Something Less Alluring," features a couple drawn together even in the middle of a divorce. Would you say you wrote those stories more on love?

One question that was prominent for me during the start of 2020 was, "Is it possible that we can love each other without understanding each other?" It's a question that I'm trying to answer. That's the question for the couple, where they don't understand each other but still have feelings. The woman is disgusted by the man's political views, but she feels that a person is more than that, and she feels affection for him. Understanding is an intellectual exercise, but love is more than that.

The first story is based on my upbringing. My cousins all live in the county seat of the village that's 20 minutes away; we still have the village house, and the older generation live there. I went back in the summer, having written [my book] and knowing that it was coming out. I have a certain understanding of their life, but they have almost zero understanding of my life, how I grew up in Beijing, and what my life is like here—not to say anything of the life of a writer. It's far away from their world, but it doesn't affect the fact that they

love me and I love them. Of course it's complicated—love—but I [tried to explore] the idea of guilt in the first story and how that's part of love.

That first story is a powerful framing story and overture to open the collection. In it you say, "There is home… and there is hometown." What is your home and hometown? How does it feel being in one or the other?

More literally, hometown feels like a place. Even though New York feels like home now, I would never call it my hometown. Beijing is my hometown. Home is an ephemeral idea because it's simpler if your home and hometown is the same place, and that could have been my life. I felt very secure growing up in Beijing, and many of my friends have never left there—or left and returned—and they feel secure in that at-home sort of feeling.

Being away from Beijing has created a stronger [feeling or affiliation] because I have to constantly hold onto it. Otherwise, I feel I can no longer claim it as my home. There is a freshness to being away. This time when I was there, I couldn't help but imagine what my life could have been like if I stayed. I realized that I probably wouldn't have wanted to live there as the person I am now. But because I can't have it, there's always this longing, and the alternative always seems better.

You've said that Beijing is the book's ancestral home, and it will never be read in its mother tongue. When you think of the identity of your first book, what are some words that describe your intention?

I want to call it an emigrant book instead of an immigrant book. The characters—and I—deal more with the consequences of leaving instead of entering. This is different from the immigrant literature about a person trying to build a new life or find their place in another country.

The description of *The Memory Museum* says it's a Chinese diaspora book. I agree with that, though… [the term diaspora] is an academic term that I don't feel qualified to define. In Chinese, the diaspora is translated as *lisanrenqun* □□□□. *Li* is leaving, and *san* is scattered. The Chinese translation is very close to the Greek roots of the word. I'm very interested in both of those concepts, leaving and scattered. Chinese people are scattered all over the world. It's interesting to see how such scattered people can have so much in common.

I was intentional about writing about younger, millennial women mostly from 28 to 36, which is a narrow range. One of the pressing things on these characters' minds is motherhood. That's something that Chinese culture has a particular focus on. Women are forced to think about it at a certain age.

I would also say it's a political book, and I have yet to see the consequences that I will have to face. I consider myself a Chinese writer, even though I write in English. I consider the book more in conversation with contemporary Chinese literature, translated or not… Because of Chinese censorship, I'm hoping this book will fill a void that Chinese writers are not able to write in China. Some stories can be written in English about the reality of China that people are not able to articulate in Chinese.

Could you speak about the challenges in writing political fiction, as well as any rewards?

First, the impulse is natural. The challenge is to have courage. Writing in English and not thinking about publishing when I'm writing helps me to do that. At first, it was just something private that I wanted to do personally. The other challenge is when I was writing "□□□□□ / no prairie fire can destroy all the weeds," the story about the White Paper Protests, the story went dark for me. I was like, "This is awful."

I was getting depressed writing that story, living through that world, and expressing my darkest fears about the politics in China. I was in despair after writing that story, which led me to write [the title story] "The Memory Museum," set in an imagined utopia where it's the opposite of where the country is in the previous story.

There's so much dystopian fiction. All of them are justified because we can see how everything could be heading that way. But it's also important to imagine a future and a world that we want to live in and we are hopeful for. If we can't even realize it in our imagination, how are we even going to do it in real life? I'm not an activist,

and my fiction's aim is not political. If I wanted to actually change things, I should have been an activist. But I also have this hope that fiction would have real-life consequences and political writing would make people reconsider their real lives.

How did your story collection take shape? Did it start with a central story or that "Memory Museum" seed?

No, "The Memory Museum" is the last story I wrote. I started writing fiction in September 2020, wrote my first two short stories, sent them to MFA [programs], and got in. I started writing short stories because the workshops are geared toward short stories. I did not have time to think because I didn't have a reserve of stories that I could bring into workshop. I just had to write new ones. So I was literally writing whatever came to mind. I was so new in fiction writing, so far away from ever considering publishing. I didn't have any ideas for a collection.

[Writing a query letter for] Tin House Writers Workshop was maybe the first time I [realized] I should work toward a short story collection. I probably articulated in that letter the One-Child Policy generation in China, which is still what the book is about. From their age, all the characters are by default part of that generation. There are ramifications that the government couldn't foresee. They didn't consider how this policy would go down in five decades. The things I wrote about are particular to the One-Child generation, which is the generation that coincided with the economic boom, China taking its place on the world stage politically, the coming-of-age of the country.

When I wrote the story "Yulan," I wanted to write a story about someone who lives abroad but returns to China. After writing the protest story, I was interested in exploring joy as an idea, of joy as a form of resistance, which came from an art show I saw at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston [called *Hear Me Now: The Black Potters of Old Edgefield, South Carolina*], about pottery or ceramics that enslaved Black people made. Slavery is such a horrible life, but they were able to have small personal joys through making ceramics, and there was poetry carved on the ceramics. I was really inspired by that.

Then, I must have also seen a nice symphony. Everything just came together.

Was there a specific audience you hoped would read *The Memory Museum*?

First and foremost, I wrote this book for people like me: Chinese people who moved away from China or who have lived elsewhere. This is something I've talked to other writers of color about. I feel like anyone who considers themselves on the margin of what's mainstream in terms of identity, or in any way worries that other people are not going to be interested in their stories because they don't share their identity, I hope that is not true. I believe this book has many entry points for different people.

I found your prose clever yet simple, both very Chinese traits. Who has influenced your voice?

I'm more interested in what other people can tell me my influences are… Even to consider writing in English as a Chinese person, I'm indebted to those who come before me, like Yiyun Li, Ha Jin, Xiaolu Guo. Who else? There are really very few. These writers made it possible for me to even consider writing in a language that's not my first. Then there are also other second-language writers who are not writing in their first language, such as Aysegül Savas. I don't exactly know at what point of their lives they started living in English and being able to compose in English. Just knowing about these second-language writers gives me more confidence.

Do you have a favorite story?

I don't, but I would like to say that I've stolen a lot in this collection. For example, "You Won't Read This in the News": that story's perspective is from Jennifer Egan's "Safari," where it's multiple points of view, all third person, and it also goes into omniscient voice, into the future of the characters. The title of "Magic, or Something Less Assuring" is from a Japanese film called *Wheel of Fortune and Fantasy* (2021). "Scenes from Childhood" is from Schumann's piano suite of the same title. I wanted to write about the village. I had all these vignettes, and I didn't know how to put them in a linear story. Then, I came upon "Scenes from Childhood" and saw

the titles. I thought, “This is my story.” I stole the structure of that. All these things I hold dear, because of how they inspired work in this book—mostly on a craft level, less on an emotional level.

You mentioned Schumann. Could you tell me about piano playing and other creative practices that exist in tandem with your writing practice?

I started studying piano around age 9, and I stopped around 16. I tried to keep playing, but I didn’t take classes again until very recently… I took a semester of piano lessons at Juilliard, relearning or even learning for the first time, because I don’t think I had a prestigious piano education back in China. The teacher told us, “If it feels hard, you’re probably doing something wrong.” Your hands are always supposed to feel comfortable and relaxed. Sometimes I feel like [playing] is impossible, but it’s just something I haven’t figured out yet. I’m not embodying the music or even my own body. I think this is true for writing sometimes. I was 10,000 words into writing my first novel, and I was feeling so wrong. The whole thing felt so wrong, even though it was how I pictured it. There’s a certain instinct that you need to follow. If it doesn’t feel right, it’s probably not, and you can do something else with it.

The other thing about comfort, that I learned from doing yoga, is that you have to work with the discomfort. It’s not necessarily that something is wrong, you just have to work through it. It’s basically stretching. Every time you stretch past your comfort zone a tiny bit, that’s how you can get stronger or more flexible.You have to find that balance with comfort and discomfort in writing. I have had experiences in meditation—and this happens to probably anyone who really meditates—where memories will come up. That sort of subconscious creative work is what writing is to me. When you are really in a piece of writing, things come up on their own. These practices are very related.

In periods when you’re stuck—contemplating or writing without writing—what do you do to ignite your creative spark?

One thing that’s not a hobby but is something I have to do is walk my dog. I’m not the first person to say walking is helpful. For writers, leaving the mental space and returning to a physical sensation in your body is important. Even playing piano is like a physical sport. Because we live so up here [*gestures above her head*] when we’re writing.

The other thing is watching movies and going to art shows. One thing that’s different now that I’m writing is I am more tolerant or sympathetic to anyone who creates anything. I would always, now, prefer to see something interesting than something perfect and good. So I have a lot of leniency for movies that I know are not that good, but I could see that the filmmaker is trying to do something. Maybe they failed, but that’s okay because they were trying to do something new or interesting. I’m not purely enjoying something as a spectator or a viewer, but I think thinking this way has opened more windows in terms of my own creative practice.

M Lin recommends:

Hudson River Park. Looking at an expanse of open water or sky is therapy.

Public libraries around the world. Some favorites are the Rose Main Reading Room in NYPL’s Stephen A. Schwarzman Building, Bibliothèque nationale de France in Paris, Biblioteca Luis Ángel Arango in Bogotá, and Amsterdam Public Library.

CAAAV, a nonprofit community organizer based in New York. The real recommendation is to stop doomscrolling/virtue signaling & do something!

Happy Hour (2015), directed by Ryusuke Hamaguchi

Drinking warm water.

Name
M Lin

Vocation

writer