

a thousand years of good prayers

a film by wayne wang



the match factory presents a film by wayne wang
"a thousand years of good prayers"



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synopsis

Mr. Shi is a widower and a retired man from Beijing. When Yilan, his only daughter who lives in the US, has a divorce, he decides to visit her in the small town where she works as a librarian. His intention is to stay with her until he helps her recover from the trauma. He is a "rocket scientist," Mr. Shi likes to tell people he meets in America, and enjoys their attention. But Yilan acts less enthusiastic in his show-off, nor is she interested in his plan to rescue her marriage and reconstruct her life. When Mr. Shi persists in finding out the reason for the divorce, Yilan starts to avoid him.

Disappointed but not discouraged, Mr. Shi explores the small town and meets an old woman, Madam, who fled the Iranian Revolution to the US. Neither Mr. Shi nor Madam speak English well, but by gesturing and talking in their own tongues, Mr. Shi and Madam start a rare friendship, in which they find momentary haven from the world of lies they have to weave to keep themselves hopeful, but the friendship is soon disrupted when Madam's son sends her away to a retirement home.

Facing revelations both from Madam and Yilan's confrontation that Mr. Shi has never been prepared to face, he finally accepts things as they are, and reaches a small understanding with Yilan and her life.

director's statement

When I read Yiyun Li's short story "A Thousand Years of Good Prayers," I was riveted by the idea of language as an agent in both the freeing and the trapping of one's self-expression. In some ways I could identify with Yilan, the Midwestern divorcée whose Chinese husband returned to Beijing while she stayed in the US and continued her affair with a married Romanian man (changed to Russian in the film). The act of speaking English, Yilan tells her father visiting from Beijing, has freed her: "Baba, if you grew up in a language that you never used to express your feelings, it would be easier to take up another language and talk more in the new language. It makes you a new person".

But her father notices that she talks very little, especially to him. Even if she's been freed in the English-speaking culture, she can't convey that freedom back to her father. She has closed off all options for her self-fulfillment by becoming too free in America – free to love another man, free to divorce, free to support herself, free to be terribly lonely. It's a paradox I wanted to explore.

Yilan's loneliness is obvious and visible from the moment Shi is reunited with her. Her condo is sterile and dark, with few signs of an active or engaged life. As he prowls around her bedroom while she's at work, Shi comes upon her unmade bed and notices all the objects lying on it – the signs of a person whose nighttime life is populated by things and not by intimate relationships. As they are eating dinner and the phone rings, Yilan rushes to answer it, crestfallen when she realizes it's a telemarketer. Her love life is not really hers – it's directed by others. It's a mystery to Shi that he feels compels to solve.

That's the basic structure I crafted for this film: I want it to be a mystery that Shi comes to solve. Arriving in a strange land to a strange daughter he hasn't seen in many years, Shi begins to peel back the layers of her life like he takes apart the Russian nesting dolls on her dressing table. Perhaps Chinese parents feel more entitled than Western parents to probe their mature children's personal lives, if only to help them "recover" from a painful condition. Learning of the dissolution of her marriage and immediately assuming she's an abandoned wife in need of help, he prowls through her veiled life to learn the true story. That true story, when uncovered, also solves the mystery of his past as well. Both of them are forced to face a past they'd prefer to keep buried. Their stories are intimately, irrevocably linked since they are father and daughter and neither can escape their legacy of Cultural Revolution-era China.



Wayne Wang



interview with the author

“A Thousand Years of Good Prayers” presents readers with a stunning vision of China, past and present. When you think of your homeland, what thoughts or images come to mind? What are your feelings about China today?

Yiyun Li: I have always said that there are two Chinas. The first is a country filled with people, like my family and many others, who try to lead serious and meaningful lives despite the political, economic and cultural dilemmas they face. The second is a country with a government controlled by one party, made rich from corruption and injustice. I love the first China but do not love the second. So when I think about China today, I always have mixed feelings.

When did you come to America?

YL: I came to America in 1996 to attend the University of Iowa. I had planned to pursue a Ph.D. in immunology and hoped to stay in the medical science field as a researcher.

But instead of becoming an immunologist, you became a writer – that is quite a switch! How did that happen?

YL: I had never thought of becoming a writer nor had I written anything before I came to Iowa. But once there I stumbled into a community writing class, which led to more writing classes, and I began to seriously consider changing my career.

How do you go about constructing a story? What process do you go through, to imagine the characters, structure, and plotline?

YL: I like to ask myself what kind of character would do certain things that other people would not do. For instance, I once saw a news clip that reported a beggar coming into a crowded marketplace with a sign: “If you give me ten yuan, I will let you cut me once; if you finish my life in one cut, you don’t owe me anything”. It was just one of the hundreds of little tales we hear and see every day, but I could not forget the beggar. In my mind, I kept imagining a woman who would come forward and cut the beggar with all justification and tenderness. What kind of character would do this? I thought about this and eventually the character Sansan (from “Love in the Marketplace”) came to me. Most of my stories come this way, with a minor character (sometimes very minor) as a seed for imagination.

I was struck by a wonderful line in the title story about the power of a new language. As Mr. Shi’s daughter says, a new language “makes you a new person.” Did you find this to be true when you began writing in English?

YL: Absolutely. For me, writing in English is the most liberating experience. In English, I am free to express things that I would have consciously censored – both out of political pressure and cultural pressure – had I been writing in Chinese.

The “American dream” is a prevalent theme in your work. What does it mean to you personally, and also in your storytelling?

YL: For me, the American dream meant that I could pick up writing and become a writer, something I had never dared to dream before coming here. For my characters, it means freedom to escape totalitarian control on many different levels – from parental supervision to the ideological control of the Communist party.

America’s history with China is complex, to say the least, and will be a defining relationship for the world of the twenty-first century. What do you think Americans should know about China that they might not already know? On the other hand, what do you think the Chinese should know about Americans?

YL: One time, I met two old women in the street here in America who read “Extra” and loved the story. They said to me, “we both agreed we could be Granny Lin.” Another time someone told me that after reading “The Princess of Nebraska,” he realized every Chinese graduate student he walked past in the street might have a rich story. These are the things that I think people in both countries tend to forget – that deep down we are all human beings, and the pains and joys we have are the same. In a way, I think the two countries are set up in the public view as competitors, which can lead some Americans and Chinese to feel wariness or animosity toward one another. But in the end, people here in America are like what you will find in China, too.

production notes

Wayne Wang came upon “A Thousand Years of Good Prayers” through a series of coincidences. In the Zoetrope offices one day last spring, he met “All-Story” editor Michael Ray, who pressed Yiyun Li’s debut collection of short stories “A Thousand Years of Good Prayers” on him. Then later that same day, Wang went to a meeting at the Center for Asian American Media (CAAM), whose Executive Director Stephen Gong’s daughter attended the same school as Yiyun Li’s kids. Reading the short stories, Wang chose to adapt “A Thousand Years of Good Prayers” into a film because it reminded him of all the Ozu films Wang so admired when he was a film student.

When Wang approached Yiyun Li about making the film, he asked her to write the script. Li didn’t have any previous film experience at that point, but Wang recalled he did little more than provide her with scriptwriting software and urged her to teach herself screenwriting technically. He then gave her a few good scripts to read. In writing the script, they went through the short story and identified what they liked, and discussed the elements they needed to create to bring the script to life. Their script ultimately was very faithful to the original short story.

Next, Wang had to decide where to set the film. The setting in the short story is only vaguely Midwestern – Wang surmised it was probably Iowa, where Li had gotten her degree in immunology before receiving her MFA at the Iowa Writers’ Workshop. Wayne decided to go with Spokane, Washington. The eastern Washington town has more in common with its neighboring state Idaho than

the western part of Washington State in its politics and social attitudes. Spokane culturally evokes “Middle America” much like Iowa does. Wang had scouted Spokane with North by Northwest Productions, a full-service production company that had vast experience in feature films locally, including many “slasher” films. When Wang met with Richard Cowan, President of the company, he was impressed by their commitment to a small independent feature like “A Thousand Years of Good Prayers.”

Spokane proved to be an ideal setting for the film. According to Wang, the town has a vast number of large “village-sized” apartment complexes that intrigued him enough to use one as the location where Yilan, the daughter, would live. In addition, there is a large enough immigrant presence in Spokane, including Chinese, Russians and Iranians, to make the intersection of these cultures plausible as they were in the original short story. Finally, Wang was also struck by the fact that Spokane was the closest inland destination for many West Coast Japanese Americans who were allowed to avoid internment during World War II.

Once in Spokane, Wang came to the realization that professional film actors would be scarce. As a necessity, he decided to use mostly nonprofessionals, but their real-life experiences brought valuable texture and realness to the film. The poolside bikini girl who humorously engages Shi had indeed finished a degree as a forensic scientist and was unemployed at the time she appeared in the film. The condo complex manager was actually ex-CIA and brought his own family stories into the mix. The Mormon elder and disciple who visit Shi are indeed

those in real-life. Even though the antique shop owner in the film is an actor, his speech about the knife used in Custer's last stand is an anecdote taken from the shop's real owner.

Like the nonprofessionals, veteran actor Henry O's (Mr. Shi) life had parallels with the role he performed. During their initial conversations, Wang sensed the deep similarities between Henry's complicated personal history during the Cultural Revolution and that of Shi's. Although Henry never went into details, it was clear he had been persecuted for being an intellectual and removed from his job in theater. It was also understood that he was later asked to return, but refused. Henry has lived in Seattle long enough that he is so proficient in English that he struggled during filming to sound like a Chinese man newly-arrived from Beijing. He was assisted by Yiyun Li's sharp ear for authentic beginner's English in his halting conversations with Madam, and was fastidious in mimicking broken English as best he could.

Those park bench conversations, performed unsubtitled in Mandarin, Farsi and very rudimentary English, are the emotional highlight of "A Thousand Years of Good Prayers." Their facial expressions and physical gestures, not their inability to speak to one another, Wang says, are what result in an emotional connection that is the ultimate goal of their exchanges. From the beginning of his filmmaking career, with "Chan is Missing," Wang has cherished unsubtitled scenes. He hopes viewers will rely on cues other than words to appreciate the eloquence of human contact.

It was an equally daunting task to find the right actress for Yilan, the daughter. She had to be fluent in Mandarin, and newly fluent in English. Most of the actresses Wang saw could only speak one of those languages well. Eventually, Wang surveyed his memory of all the actresses he auditioned and used for "The Joy Luck Club." He remembered Faye Yu, who played Ying Ying, the young woman who drowned her own baby because of her abusive husband. At that time, Faye was very young, still a student at the Beijing drama academy, and spoke hardly any English.

Wang had heard that Faye moved to Los Angeles briefly after "The Joy Luck Club" to study English, and then returned to China to resume her acting career. He tracked her down through a friend and spoke to her by phone. As soon as he heard how good her English was, she was immediately cast in the role of Yilan.

As he felt the actors were so appropriately cast, Wang's biggest directing challenge during the filming was encouraging the actors to not focus so much on acting, and to inspire them to inhabit the characters. Wang said that he and the cinematographer were always observing the actors off-set, looking for mannerisms and actions that could be naturally integrated into their performances.

On a daily basis, Wang found himself changing elements of the script and shooting scenes that hadn't even been written. His organic shooting approach was guided by the desire to add spontaneous authenticity to the complex story of a father trying to unravel the mystery of his daughter's silence towards him.

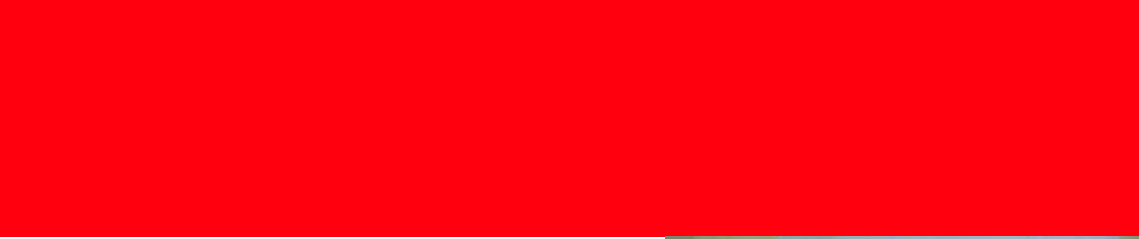
For Wang, the deliberate pacing of “A Thousand Years of Good Prayers” was conscious and necessary. He felt this speed was necessary when creating a film that observes characters in heartfelt conversation, learning to communicate with each other. Wang muses that this shift in filmmaking may have come from the fact that his last several films have been major studio productions. In such films, there is a final tightening edit called a “pacing pass,” in which every pause and quiet moment thought to be unnecessary to the plot progression is excised. In contrast, Wang wants this film (and his viewers) to be able to “take their time,” to allow the occasional sigh, and to come to a deeper and fuller understanding of one’s natural self-expression.

Production Designer Vincent De Felice did a lot of research on recent Chinese immigrants, particularly those from the academic community. The research photos reflected how on the surface the apartments were deliberately intended to look very Western and modern in appearance. But looking closer, it was clear that the most personal and precious of items were always Chinese. De Felice modeled the production design to replicate those living environments. His goal was to attain cultural accuracy in Yilan’s apartment, while also enhancing the emotional depth of the character’s state through the set.

“A Thousand Years of Good Prayers” was shot on a high-end high-definition video camera, by cinematographer Patrick Lindenmaier. Lindenmaier insists on a perpendicular symmetry that is severe at times. The resulting sense of stability complements the groundedness and serenity that story’s mature characters are

trying to find. The other visual idea Wang and Lindenmaier sought intensely was developing a strategy to express the physical separation between father and daughter. Consciously, the apartment was very generic, spare of any style or details. The most particular detail they sought was the precise positioning of a wall between the kitchen and the living room. As the dinner scenes progressed, this visual separation gradually intensified throughout the film.

Wang doesn’t like to be superstitious, but he noted that there is something to be said about how well everyone got along on the production and how smoothly everything went. On the last day of shooting on “A Thousand Years of Good Prayers,” right after the very last take, the wind kicked up so hard that Wang couldn’t shoot one final variation of the wide shot for the editor to work with. Faye Yu went up to Wang and observed that this mysterious omen “must have been a thousand years of good prayers for the film.”



the cast

Henry O as Mr. Shi

Raised in China, Henry was brought up in English and American missionary schools. He started at the Children's Art Theater of Shanghai as an actor and later served as the Deputy Art Director for thirty years. Henry came to America with his wife initially to take care of their grandsons, but was soon asked to audition for a local theater production. Since then he has worked continuously in plays, films, and television. He has appeared most notably in "The Last Emperor," "Romeo Must Die," "Shanghai Noon," "Snow Falling on Cedars", and "Brokedown Palace." He has also had guest starring roles on "The Sopranos", "Evidence," "The West Wing," and "ER." Henry recently completed work on "Rush Hour 3."



Faye Yu as Yilan

Born in Hangzhou, China, Faye first appeared in "Bamboo" when she was just 8-years-old. She later studied acting at the Beijing Film Academy. She lived in Los Angeles for a short time to study English and later moved back to China. She has appeared in a number of films and television series in the U.S. and Asia over the last 10 years, including "Tian Di" co-starring Andy Lau, and "Beijing Rocks" by Mabel Cheung. She first worked with Wayne Wang on "The Joy Luck Club" in the role of "Ying Ying."



Vida Ghahremani as Madame

Vida first started acting in film as a teenager in the 1960s and became one of Iran's best and most popular actresses prior to the revolution. In 1989, after a long absence on the screen, she appeared in the U.S. television production, "Dark Holiday". She currently teaches creative theater and Farsi at the Persian Center in Pleasanton, CA, and is a mother of three.



Pasha Lychnikoff as Boris

Born in Moscow, Pasha (Pavel) Lychnikoff emigrated to the U.S. in the early 1990s to pursue his acting career. Trained at the Moscow Academy of Dramatic Arts, Pasha is active both in theatre and film. He starred as "Balzanov" in the second and third seasons of the critically acclaimed HBO series "Deadwood". He will also be seen in Mike Nichols' "Charlie Wilson's War" and Marco Kreuzpaintner's "Welcome to America" with Kevin Kline. As a theatrical producer, "The Shelter" was his debut, and it received 5 Ovation Awards nominations.



the crew

Wayne Wang – Director, producer

Wayne Wang is a key figure in the development of independent filmmaking, alternating major Hollywood studio films such as “The Joy Luck Club” with smaller, independent work like “Smoke.” Continuing to work in the two different worlds, Wang directed an independent digital film, “The Center of the World,” with Molly Parker and Peter Sarsgaard, followed by Sony/Revolution’s hit comedy “Maid in Manhattan” with Jennifer Lopez. His most recent effort, “Because of Winn-Dixie,” based on the children’s novel by Kate DiCamillo, opened in 2005. His latest Hollywood film, “Last Holiday,” with Queen Latifah and Gerard Depardieu, was loosely based on a 1950 J.B. Priestly film of the same name.

Born in Hong Kong where his family had fled from China after the Communist take-over in 1949, Wang graduated from Wah Yan Jesuit High School, then came to the United States at 18 to study painting and film at California College of the Arts and Crafts in Oakland. His first feature film was a graduate student project, “A Man, A Woman, a Killer,” co-directed with Rick Schmidt. Returning to Hong Kong with a master’s degree, Wang went to work at the public broadcasting outlet R.T.H.K. (Radio and Television Hong Kong), which had become a launching pad for a whole group of young film school-trained directors who were creating what came to be known as the “Hong Kong New Wave.” While there, Wang directed several episodes of the landmark realistic drama series “Below the Lion Rock,” about the daily lives of ordinary Hong Kong citizens.

Frustrated by the cramped creative atmosphere and bureaucracy of the Crown Colony, he returned to the U.S. and began social work in San Francisco’s Chinatown. His experiences there with new Asian immigrants inspired Wang’s second feature film, the critically acclaimed “Chan is Missing.” Made in 16 mm black & white, for just \$27,000, produced, directed, written and edited by Wang, “Chan is Missing” was a decade ahead of the recent wave of “micro-budget” successes like “El Mariachi” and “Clerks.”

Since he left Hong Kong in the early 1980s, Wayne Wang has continued film-making in the U.S.

Filmography as a director:

A Thousand Years of Good Prayers (2007), Princess of Nebraska (2007), Last Holiday (2006), Because of Winn-Dixie (2005), Maid in Manhattan (2002), The Center of the World (2001), Anywhere But Here (1999), Chinese Box (1997), Blue in the Face (1995), Smoke (1995), The Joy Luck Club (1993), Life Is Cheap ... But Toilet Paper Is Expensive (1989), Eat a Bowl of Tea (1989), Dim Sum Take Out (1988), Slam Dance (1987), Dim Sum: A Little Bit of Heart (1985), Chan Is Missing (1982), A Man, a Woman, and a Killer (1975)

Yiyun Li – Author

Yiyun Li grew up in Beijing and came to the United States in 1996 to study medicine. Two years later she graduated from the Iowa Writers' Workshop with an MFA and started writing. Her stories have been published in The New Yorker, The Paris Review, The Gettysburg Review and elsewhere. She has received grants and awards from Lannan Foundation and Whiting Foundation. Her debut collection of short stories, named after one these stories: "A Thousand Years of Good Prayers," won the Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award, PEN/Hemingway Award, Guardian First Book Award, and California Book Award for first fiction. She was recently selected by Granta as Best Young American Novelist and received the Plimpton Prize for New Writers. Yiyun Li lives in Oakland, California with her husband and their two sons.

Patrick Lindenmaier – Director of Photography

Born in Switzerland, Patrick Lindenmaier has been an award-winning cinematographer since 1987. He has shot both features and documentaries, including "Sleepless Nights" by Marcel Gisler, which won a Bronze Leopard at the Locarno Film Festival. Patrick is also an internationally respected expert in digital postproduction, having worked on acclaimed films such as "Sketches of Frank Gehry" by Sidney Pollack and "Waking Life" by Richard Linklater. He first collaborated with Wayne Wang on "The Center of the World" as Post Production Consultant.

Deirdre Slevin – Editor

Deirdre Slevin has been working in feature film editing since 1996. She assisted on such films as "Copland," "K-Pax," "Maid in Manhattan" and "A Map of The World." Her first feature was the independent movie "Gaudi Afternoon" starring Judy Davies and Marcia Gay Harden and directed by Susan Seidelman. This is her fifth collaboration with Wayne Wang. She previously edited "Because of Winn Dixie" with Anna Sophia Robb and Jeff Daniels for 20th Century Fox and "Last Holiday" starring Queen Latifah for Paramount Pictures.

Yukie Kito – Producer, Managing Director, International Division for Entertainment FARM Inc.

Kito started her career at JVC Entertainment Inc. in Los Angeles. In 1999 Kito joined the Tokyo-based Media Suits Inc. and was involved in a development project where she began working with Wayne Wang. In 2004 she joined Entertainment FARM as the head of International Division and brought in "The Namesake," "The Hottest State," "A Thousand Years of Good Prayers" and "Princess of Nebraska."

Rich Cowan – Producer

Rich Cowan, president of North by Northwest Productions, has developed and produced a number of successful feature films and documentaries since the establishment of the company in 1990. He has functioned as executive producer of Showtime's/HBO's "Mel" (sold in over 25 countries) and the documentary "Jazz Seen." He produced and directed "The Basket" starring Peter Coyote and Karen Allen which was garnered the Directors Gold Award at the International Family Film Festival in 2002 among other awards.

Yasushi Kotani – Executive Producer, CEO/President Entertainment FARM Inc.

Former investment banker, Yasushi Kotani joined Japan Digital Contents in 2000 where he started to work on entertainment financing. He participates extensively in working groups and research studies related to the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry in the areas of contents financing. He established Entertainment FARM in 2002.

Taizo Son – Executive Producer

Taizo Son is the founder and CEO of Asian Groove Inc., a broadband entertainment enterprise holding company that manages and incubates new venture companies in Japan. Mr. Son is an experienced habitual entrepreneur in the information technology field, whose latest passion is creating broadband and content-related businesses. Though he maintains independence from larger companies, Mr. Son built several alliances with key strategic partners around the world.

Entertainment FARM Inc.

Entertainment FARM is a Tokyo-based financing and production company. In the past five years the company has been involved in six American films including "The Namesake" by Mira Nair and "The Hottest State" by Ethan Hawke which premiered at the 2006 Venice International Film Festival and Toronto International Film Festival. The company has financed ten Japanese films including the J-Horror Theater franchise films whose worldwide distribution rights is handled by Lionsgate, as well as "Retribution" by Kiyoshi Kurosawa which screened at the 2006 Venice International Film Festival. The company has also two development projects with Wayne Wang. Entertainment FARM pursues cultivating entertainment and working with quality filmmakers.





A Thousand Years of Good Prayers

A film by Wayne Wang

Feature Film / 83 mins / USA, JP / 35 mm / 1:1,85 / colour / Dolby Digital

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ENTERTAINMENT FARM PRESENTS A GOOD PRAYERS PRODUCTION: "A THOUSAND YEARS OF GOOD PRAYERS". A WAYNE WANG FILM. FAYE YU. HENRY O. VIDA GHAREMANI AND PASHA LYCHNIKOFF. CASTING BY: TODD THALER, PHILIP HUFFMAN. MUSIC SUPERVISORS: DEVA ANDERSON, DELPHINE ROBERTSON. MUSIC BY: LESLEY BARBER. PRODUCTION DESIGNER: VINCENT DE FELICE. EDITED BY: DEIRDRE SLEVIN. DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY: PATRICK LINDENMAIER. EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS: YASUSHI KOTANI, TAIZO SON. PRODUCED BY: YUKIE KITO, RICH COWAN, WAYNE WANG. WRITTEN BY: YIYUN LEE. BASED ON A SHORT STORY BY: YIYUN LEE. DIRECTED BY: WAYNE WANG.

