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## Jing Li, Associate Professor of Chinese Language and Culture

### **Abstract**

In this first Next Page column of the 2017-18 academic year, Jing Li, Associate Professor of Chinese Language and Culture, shares recommendations for Chinese folktales that will help readers “see China in plural forms,” her favorite book to give as a gift, how she got her hands on magazines and comic books to read for fun during her childhood in China, and much more.

### **Keywords**

Musselman Library, Gettysburg College, reading, books, interview

### **Disciplines**

Chinese Studies | Library and Information Science

# Next Page

## Jing Li, Associate Professor of Chinese Language and Culture

August 25, 2017

*In this first Next Page column of the 2017-18 academic year, Jing Li, Associate Professor of Chinese Language and Culture, shares recommendations for Chinese folktales that will help readers “see China in plural forms,” her favorite book to give as a gift, how she got her hands on magazines and comic books to read for fun during her childhood in China, and much more.*

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*Jing Li, Associate Professor of Chinese Language and Culture*

*Your scholarship is in Chinese folklore. Are there any titles you would recommend to someone who is exploring Chinese folktales for the first time?*

[\*Yeh-Shen: A Cinderella Story from China\*](#), retold by Ai-Ling Louie and illustrated by Ed Young is a good place to start. It is a tale dating the 9<sup>th</sup> century in China, and is considered the earliest written version of Cinderella. It would be an interesting comparative reading to see how the ideal womanly virtues were depicted in different contexts. Both parents and children could greatly enjoy this beautifully illustrated picture book.

I also recommend [\*The Magic Lotus Lantern and Other Tales from the Han Chinese\*](#), edited by Haiwang Yuan. If you want to know folktales that are popularly disseminated and widely recognized in China’s contemporary mainstream society, this is a good collection. For the best known stories like Mulan, a brief history of transformations is included to reveal their vitality and development trajectories.

*What is your favorite folklore title?*

My two favorite folklore titles are The Penguin Classic, [\*Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio\*](#) and [\*Imagining Women: Fujian Folk Tales\*](#), edited by Karen Gernant. *Strange Tales* is a collection of classical Chinese stories by Pu Songling (1640-1715), who was good at using supernatural tales, especially those of ghosts, fox spirits, demons, to criticize social injustice and corruption. Yet, the tales themselves have a gripping effect on readers. The romance tales between beautiful, talented, and

sometimes unpredictable ghost/fox spirits and humans set the stage for countless successful literary and filmic adaptations in today's China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and even Southeast Asia.

I love the collection compiled by Karen Gernant because these tales depict unconventional female images — women who may not have a position in official histories, but were embraced by the folk matter-of-factly through storytelling. It powerfully shows that alternative values could often find their expressions in folklore despite such deeply-rooted ideological systems like Confucianism. It helps to see China in plural forms.

### *Another of your specialties is ethnic film. Who are some of your favorite directors?*

People's Republic of China has 56 officially recognized *minzu* (民族, nationalities) with the Han Chinese as the dominant nationality and 55 ethnic minorities. Ethnic minority films are a distinctive genre with specific Chinese characteristics. Since the 1950s, these films have been produced with the governmental support and guidance as a way to promote national unity and socialism — “the main melody.” Therefore they are really something that is made by the majority and for the majority to imagine their national Other. However, the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century started to see the rise of a different kind of ethnic minority films. They are often narrated in ethnic languages, performed by ordinary villagers, and directed by ethnic native filmmakers with a noticeable desire to interpret their cultures in their own voices.

One of my favorites is Tibetan director Pema Tsenden's debut film [\*The Silent Holy Stones\*](#) (2005). The story is quite simple and uneventful — young lama's 3-day home visit to his parents' village during the Tibetan New Year and then return to his monastery. But the story deeply unfolds the uneasy meeting ground between the traditional and the modern, the native and the foreign, and the religious and the secular in these peoples' everyday life. Tsenden once said in an interview that “many people have told the stories of my homeland through text or image... they often sincerely claim what they represent is authentic... But this kind of authenticity makes the true face of my homeland even more obscured” (my translation, <http://news.sina.com.cn/s/2005-11-18/08127471829s.shtml>, accessed August 15, 2013).”

To me the film opens a window to see a different dimension of contemporary Tibetan communities in China. I love the director's virtuoso way of showing the profound transformations and conflicts in these communities through a slice of quotidian life and this 12-year-old's genuine emotions. Unlike the romanticizing or mystifying gaze in conventional minority films, this film reveals a complex reality of hybridity and uncertainty that is expressed through this young lama's everyday desires, confusions, and decisions.

### *What is your favorite book to give as a gift?*

[\*China in Ten Words\*](#) by Yu Hua and translated by Allan Barr.

Yu Hua 余华 is one of the most influential writers in contemporary China and the first Chinese writer to win the James Joyce Award in 2002. His novel [\*To Live\*](#) (*Huozhe* 活着, published in 1992, adapted to a [same-title award-winning film](#) by Zhang Yimou 张艺谋 in 1994) won Italy's Premio Grinzane Cavour

prize in 1998. In *China in Ten Words*, Yu Hua took a very novel and insightful approach to tell readers about China, which is through ten commonly used words. Each word epitomizes a particular political-social-cultural climate/context. It is fun to read, and, most importantly, it challenges you to think again about your perceptions of China.

## *Who is your favorite writer of all time?*

There are many writers on my favorite list. And I find that my preferences change as I go through different stages in life and work. Lu Xun (鲁迅, 1881-1936) would be one writer that greatly influenced my understanding of literature during my college years. He is a household name in China and recognized as one of the greatest writers in China's modern literature history. Majoring in Chinese language and literature, I was required to read many of his works; later I was attracted to the critical power of his short stories and I admired his efforts to use literature to change the mentality of the Chinese in a time of national crisis.

One of his most famous metaphors for this crisis is a sealed, windowless iron house in which people are sleeping and suffocating to death but couldn't feel the sadness/pain of the imminent death. Lu Xun, who originally studied medicine, chose to be a fighter to wake up these dying people and to heal their soul (not the body) through his writing. In his view, once few people wake up, there will be hope to smash this iron house.

## *What did you like to read as a child?*

I didn't have the luxury to enjoy books from libraries or to buy books (except textbooks) when I was young — public libraries didn't exist in a small city like my hometown. Plus our school system determined that we didn't have much free time to indulge ourselves in reading other than textbooks. It was not encouraged, either. Whoever did so was easily regarded as the opposite of the model students.

But things were more relaxed when I reached the middle school. I remember reading magazines that contained all kinds of stories (folktale or literary tales). My favorite was called *lianhuanhua* (连环画, literally meaning "series/strips of drawings"), something similar to graphic novels or comic books here in the U.S. They were like pocket-sized booklets, with a drawing in the center and characters on the bottom to narrate the story. I couldn't afford to purchase them, but there were vendors who rented them on the street. After school or during noon time, this was often the place kids hang out and the price was one Chinese cent for reading a book.

The stories in these books ranged from folktales to patriotic, socialist stories. I especially enjoyed and still enjoy the stories adapted from *The Journey to the West* (*Xiyouji* 西游记, a classical novel published in the 16th century), which focused on the supernatural adventures of the Tang Buddhist Monk Xuanzang (玄奘, Tripitaka) and his four non-human disciples when they traveled to India to obtain sutras.

## *Do you have a favorite book or literary character from your childhood?*

My favorite character is Monkey King, the eldest disciple, who was playful, cunning, and rebellious and always saved the day. I would strongly recommend the animated film titled [\*Uproar in Heaven\*](#) (*Da Nao Tiangong* 大闹天宫 I & II, 1961, 1964) produced by the famous Wan Brothers, who created China's first animated feature film in Shanghai in 1941 under the influence of Disney's *Snow White* (1939). In this film, one of the most memorable for many Chinese children in the past and now, Monkey King showed his rebellious spirit to the fullest through fighting against the Jade Emperor of heaven. The animation was beautifully made with very unique Chinese flavor, such as its Peking-opera-influenced music and the style of Chinese ink painting and so on.

## *What are you planning to read next?*

I plan to read and know more about the poetry of Yu Xiuhua (余秀华), a female peasant poet with cerebral palsy from Hubei province, China. Her poem "Crossing Over Half of China to Sleep with You" went viral online in 2014 and brought her overnight fame. She was further awarded the first prize at the 3<sup>rd</sup> Farmer's Literary Award Ceremony in 2016 and has gained international attention. She has been hailed as "China's Emily Dickinson" though she refused such a label herself. A documentary film *Still Tomorrow* has also been made to show her transformation from a peasant to a public figure and her struggle to end her marriage. I am very curious why her poems could resonate with the minds of so many people in today's China, what factors led to her fame (e.g. gender, class, disability, etc.) and how social media plays a role in this process.

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