

# Research on Adaption of the Film “A Thousand Years of Good Prayers”

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## Abstract

The film adaptation of literary works has been a popular research point. We can find numerous research results online about novels and the movies adapted based on them. However, there are few studies in the academic world on the works of Yiyun Li, a Chinese-American writer and the study on the film adaptation of her novel *A Thousand Years of Prayer*. So in this paper, the focus is on the comparison between the fiction and the movie. From the paper to screen, the father figure has become more fleshed out, and the daughter's inability to speak out her true feelings in intimate relationships has become more justified. The film adds more scenes of the father's daily life, which is more in line with the visual carrier of film. The deletion and modification of some plots in the film are better fit the character image. The conclusion evaluates whether the film adaptation is successful and gives some responses to the family problems reflected in the film.

## Keywords

Yiyun Li; *A Thousand Years of Good Prayers*; Film adaption.

## 1. Introduction

The film and the novel tell a story based on this background: Mr. Shi, a retired engineer who lives in Beijing. His wife has passed away and his only daughter lives alone in the United States. She has divorced a long time ago. He visits States with two intentions: traveling as well as helping the daughter rebuild her life. However, 12 years of separation has already made the father and daughter fail to have the normal affection. It seems like the daughter Yilan treats her dear father like a supervisor. We can hardly assume they are father and daughter if we don't know them. But the father insists on helping his daughter get over the divorcement in his way before leaving. The daughter works as a librarian during the day. At night, she either retreats to her bedroom or drives away and comes home at late hours, leaving the two little chance to communicate with each other. As for Mr. Shi, although he doesn't know much English, he is able to communicate well with the locals especially a woman in the park who speaks Farsi. By contrast, there is lack of communication with her daughter. Mr. Shi wants to know more about his daughter while he is extremely opposed to her lifestyle. He can perceive her unhappiness, but he can do nothing to help. As for the daughter, the father's care is more like a probe of her privacy. So she tries to repel it. She thinks she lives a free life and enjoys this freedom. She once says English is a better option for her to express herself. But what Mr. Shi sees is a lack of faith and principles in his daughter's life. Most of the communication between the father and daughter ends in failure. Yiyun Li, the author of the novel and one of the screenwriters of the film, was born in Beijing in 1972. As a Chinese writer living in America, she insists on writing in English and refuses to have her work translated into Chinese.

## 2. Contrast the Novel with the Film

### 2.1. Inheritance of the Theme: From Novel to Film

In the novel, the daughter explains the phenomenon of aphasia between her father as follows: the father rarely communicated with his wife and daughter at home when Yilan was a child because of his occupation as a rocket scientist. Everything about his work was top secret so he couldn't talk about any detail at work except with his coworkers. When he came home, he had little to say to his wife and daughter which is plausible considering that era. Back at that age, people was still quite conservative. When rumors like Mr. Shi was having an affair with his subordinate going on in their town, he never clarified it in front of his family. Instead, he allowed it to spread because it was just based on unsubstantiated evidence. Unfortunately, everyone in the town took it for real. Mrs. Shi and Yilan was informed and mocked by the neighbors. Mr. Shi never thought his wife and daughter was already informed despite he was demoted because of this. The couple just pretended nothing had happened. "Children acquire inappropriate interpersonal communication patterns and destructive conflict resolution strategies from their parents' marital conflict, and indirectly reinforce this misconception through their parents' behaviors and outcomes in marital conflict." [1] Growing up in such a family, the daughter inherited the mode that the way her parents dealt with marriage crisis. As a result, she found herself unable to tell her ex husband that she no longer loved him. "A new language makes you a new person." [2] For a long time, Yilan has difficulty expressing herself in her mother tongue. But the alteration of language has changed her. This plot is based on the author's own experience. "In many interviews, she mentioned the special experience of her childhood, that is, when she was five years old, she saw four men tied up for a trial... she remembered her mother's admonition: 'imagine your mouth is a zipper and try to pull it up.'" [3] It's possible that one's mother tongue brings more restrictions than the sense of belongings. The novel explores the influence of language on one's character and family problems presented in the relationship between daughter and father. The film retains this theme and deepens it by giving it a lot of details.

### 2.2. Added Details

The film enriches the character image of Mr. Shi through the following details. Mr. Shi marked his luggage by tying a red scarf (worn by the Chinese Young Pioneers. It is a triangular red scarfs that symbolizes a corner of the revolutionary red flag . Only Chinese primary school students wear them.) This apparently refers to the obedient Yilan when she is little. The movie alludes to the Mr. Shi's vision of Yilan still in her elementary school. In the original novel, Yilan's "wide open and unrelenting eyes" reminds him of her in her younger years. He also uses it to tie the curtains when he arrives at his daughter's house. He buys a wok to cook Chinese food for his daughter and hangs a Chinese character meaning "fortune" on the door. All he does shows his determination of visiting America: he wants to turn his daughter into the good and obedient Chinese girl she once was. He also wants to keep an eye on her so she would not repeat the failure of her first marriage. He tries to strip the Americanized side of her by cooking a table full of Chinese food. However, she eats less and becomes quieter.

Mr. Shi always volunteers to talk with people in his limited English. On the flight to the States and in the neighborhood he stays, he proudly talks to everyone he meets that he was a rocket designer before he retires. People are always surprised and enthusiastic to have conversation with him. When Yilan picked her father up at the airport, Mr. Shi points at a big billboard with the word "kum" and asking what it means with his notebook and a pen already took out. Yilan is a little embarrassed. She answers it is just the informal of spelling "come". The meaning of this scene may be to show that the two people tend to hide the truth or true feelings.

The film also added a lot of scenes for the Iranian wife. Her son is rather successful in the States. But after his grandson is born, he sends her to a nursing home. She had a daughter who was killed in the Iran-Iraq war. Mr. Shi's feelings towards this wife are very complicated. The wife can enjoy the happiness of being a grandmother. Like many parents in China, Mr. Shi really wants to see the birth of the grandchildren. He comforts himself that at least his daughter is alive.

### 2.3. Plot Modification and the Reason Behind It

In the movie, the father-daughter outburst is arranged after the father caught her breaking up with a man. Earlier that night, Yilan left a message saying she wouldn't be home very early so Mr. Shi doesn't have to stay up. Mr. Shi is worried so he went to the bus stop nearby. The last bus arrives but Yilan isn't there. However, a car with Yilan in it comes. She goes out with a Russian man. Yilan refuses his proposal and tries to convince him to "work on getting your wife and daughter to America". "You might think how much money you make is important for your daughter. But maybe, you just don't know girls as daughters. Some day, before it's too late, you may want to explain something to her, something about love, men and all the things her mother doesn't know..." We can feel the love of Mr. Shi towards Yilan. It's deep but reserved. It is the kind of love never saying "love you". "Girls who have good relationships with their fathers are likely to have higher self-esteem, which helps girls cope with the obstacles that arise during adolescence. Furthermore, fathers may significantly influence the development of their daughters' personalities, including their self-esteem, confidence and happiness levels during adolescence and adulthood. Scholars generally believe that fathers influence their children from childhood to adolescence, the father's unique role is irreplaceable by the mother." [4] When she is home, Mr. Shi questions her about the man's identity and talks about her failed marriage. She has to come clean. She divorced her ex husband because she had an affair with the Russian guy. That day is also a formal farewell to the man. In the novel the outburst is arranged after one supper. But nothing can be more dramatic and reasonable than putting the quarrel after the father finds his daughter breaking up with a man she never mentions.

The name of the subordinate that was accused to have an affair with the father in the novel is Yilan. The movie turns Yilan into the daughter's name and gives it a fatherly meaning: long time ago he once took a train to the rocket base. On his way, he saw a little girl selling sweet potatoes outside the carriage at Yilan station. Her red hands in the winter aroused his love and longing to care for her. This love was expressed by naming his daughter Yilan. Ironically, the relationship between father and daughter is almost like familiar strangers.

In the movie, the father apologizes to his daughter and clarifies that he had not falling in love with the subordinate, but not in the novel. At the end of the movie, the father leaves to visit other cities in the United States, and he insists that the daughter should not go to see him off. At last, the daughter chooses to respect the father's wishes. The daughter, sitting in her office, hears the train whistle outside her window and smiles, as if the relationship between father and daughter has been restored. The ending of the novel is arranged in Mr. Shi and the Iranian wife sitting on a bench expressing his true feelings towards that subordinate, his wife and daughter. The daughter does not have a chance to hear his heart and maybe never. That conflict could have been the ice-breaking point for both of them, but they tacitly choose to leave it there. We seem to be able to foresee that in the novel, father daughter may continue to be polite to each other without opening up who they really are.

### 3. Conclusion

Overall, the film *A Thousand Years of Good Prayers* is a successful adaptation. It adds a lot of reasonable details and scenes to fill out the characters. The climax of the film is a father-daughter dispute, which the film does a lot of foreshadowing before it. Conflict is inevitable in

this case. At the same time, it also deletes and changes some unreasonable plots, making the whole story more smooth and harmonious.

With the rapid development of China's economy in recent decades, the two generations are living in very different times and have increasingly different interests. Generation gap and the situation of "aphasia" between parents and children are likely to occur in any era. While attempt like having real conversation with family is always welcome. It is always a good thing to see a father like Mr. Shi trying to communicate with the daughter. However, if such an attempt has been made in the daughter's childhood, the relationship between the two generations maybe be better.

## References

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