

**Ouyang Yu: *The English Class*.** Transit Lounge Publishing, 2010. 394 pp. ISBN 978 0 9805717 8 3. **Reviewed by Adèle Garnier,** Macquarie University.

Ouyang Yu is a prolific author. In the early 1990s, he travelled from China to Australia to do a doctorate in Australian literature at Melbourne's LaTrobe University. Australia became his country of residence, and by 2012 he had published 61 books according to his website <http://www.ouyangyu.com.au>. As a writer, Ouyang has embraced numerous genres, especially poetry but also short stories, non-fiction and novels such as *The English Class*, which has won several awards in Australia<sup>25</sup>. His challenging Collage "Essays and Criticism", also published 2010, was favorably reviewed in the *Zeitschrift für Australienstudien* 25, pp 113-119. Ouyang's work as a translator (of both Chinese into English and English into Chinese) is similarly diverse, including *The Female Eunuch* by Australian feminist Germaine Greer, works of fiction by Chinese novelist and playwright Lao She, and poetry in both languages. Ouyang also gives a platform to contemporary Chinese literature in Australia as the editor of the literary journal *Otherland*.

Beyond this diversity of genres, the challenges and opportunities created by encounters between Chinese and Western English-speaking cultures constitute a dominant topic in his often autobiographic work. For instance, in the recent collection of short essays *On the Smell of an Oily Rag* (2007) Ouyang uses personal anecdotes to address the cultural distinctiveness of Chinese and English. *Oily Rag* is a humorous and often light-hearted book, yet Ouyang's cross-cultural encounters are not always as benign in tone. He won the reputation of an "angry Chinese poet" in

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<sup>25</sup> Among other awards, *The English Class* won the 2011 Western Australia Premier's Literature Award and the 2011 Queensland Premier's Literature Award. See the complete list of awards on <http://www.ouyangyu.com.au/>.

Australia by voicing his discontent with both the lack of freedom in his country of origin and the complacency he was confronted with in his country of adoption.<sup>26</sup>

*The English Class's* main character, Jing Ying, shares many features with his creator. Jing is a sensitive individualist who eventually leaves China for Australia after having studied English. He is often upset by the disregard of others for his talent with words. Yet in contrast to Ouyang, Jing's creativity remains hidden to most as he is unable to put down on paper the stories that accumulate in his head. This gives an increasingly tragic dimension to a character who once describes himself as an "abominable headwriter" (389). Ouyang intersperses his own thoughts within Jing's story. He reveals that the writing process of *The English Class* was more time-consuming than that of his previous novels, but also wonders if he is not himself becoming his increasingly introspective and withdrawn character.

In the first part of *The English Class*, sarcastically named "The little aristocrat", Jing, in his early twenties, makes a living as a truck driver in Wuhan, Central China in the mid-1970s. The Cultural Revolution's cancellation of university entrance examinations – a real life event: enrolment was based on political criteria between 1966 and 1977 - has deprived him of the opportunity to go to university to learn English. Yet Jing is determined to pass the exam once he is allowed to do so. Convinced that he is the secret child of a European foreigner because of his pale skin, Jing believes that he neither belongs to the town in which he grew up nor amongst a team of uneducated truck drivers. To escape his condition, Jing conscientiously teaches himself one hundred English words daily in his truck cabin. He is most at ease alone in this cabin as his colleagues, while they

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<sup>26</sup> See Wenche Ommundsen, "Not for the Faint-Hearted, Ouyang Yu: The Angry Chinese Poet" in *Meanjin* 57(3), 595-609, 1998, and *Bias: Offensively Chinese/Australian*, a collection of essays by Ouyang Yu and others on this very topic, Otherland Publishing, Melbourne 2007.

accept him in the team, are wary of Jing's aspirations as well as his malicious disregard for rules. For instance, having accidentally killed a young buffalo, Jing suggests refusing the complaining peasant compensation as he is annoyed with the request, even though he knows, as he grew up in a village himself, how valuable the animal is to a farmer. Jing is reprimanded by his colleague, yet this has no adverse impact on his truck-driving career.

It is not the last time Jing gets away with his boldness. Having succeeded at the re-established university entrance exam, he is admitted in Master Fu's English class at the fictional East Lakes University in Wuhan (Ouyang himself went to Wuhan University). Fu is impressed by Jing's poetry as well as his penetrating eyes. These are also attributes which seduce the dissatisfied wife of his English instructor, Deirdre, who initiates a romantic relationship with Jing. Jing is not attracted by Australia, Deirdre's country of origin, yet as he is determined to leave China he convinces Deirdre to divorce her husband and to escape to Australia with him.

Before he meets Deirdre, Jing immerses himself in her language:

Indeed, from time to time, [Jing] felt as if the sky over him was being replaced by a different sky, called English, with words like heaven and firmament, and he was literally living under English, willingly, masochistically, uncritically and perversely poetically. (234)

Contrary to his lonely learning years as a truck driver, Jing's passion for language is shared by others at East Lakes University. The second part of *The English Class*, "Living under English", features numerous conversations amongst students dissecting the similarities and differences between Chinese and English. Jing is eager to please his fellow students with his inventiveness. In a funny and revealing episode, he chooses, for an oral presentation, to declaim the university rules - love the communist party, work hard, have no love relationships with fellow students - in English at the front of the class. English teacher Master Fu brutally

interrupts the representation and scolds Jing's faulty grammar – if not his insolence - yet Jing earns the respect of Ma, a natural leader amongst students, while the other students, "listening to the unfamiliarity of something that was so familiar" (156), laugh hysterically.

This remains a rare moment in which Jing's mischievous originality shines at the front of an audience. As his aspiration to be a writer becomes firmer, he is riddled with self-doubt and unable to overcome the rejection, or even the lack of interest, of others. Jing's alienation reaches a climax in Australia, in which the third part of the book, "The Price of Freedom", takes place. Ouyang abruptly jumps from Jing's years at East Lakes University to his domestic life as aimless "Gene", with his now wife Deirdre in suburban Melbourne. Deirdre financially supports Jing, who refuses to work in menial jobs as he judges them unworthy of his abilities. Unable to write, he resents what his life has become:

I hate myself so much for being unwhole, for being a traitor to everything I once held dear, for being unable to resist the temptation to fall into delightful peaces, for the delirium that I have courted. (372)

In the last pages of *The English Class*, Ouyang lets the reader know that Jing's future may not be as bleak as this statement suggests. Yet the lasting impression of his emigration to Australia is that of a waste of time and talent.

Ouyang's depiction of Jing's complex, often difficult character provokes laughter, wonderment and irritation – but seldom compassion, as the author stresses Jing's resourcefulness, his ability to overcome obstacles when he is willing to do so, and the mix of fascination and exasperation that his rule-bending impetuosity provokes in others. This is why I found the last part of *The English Class* the least convincing. "Gene" is such an insufferable and passive character that Deirdre's continuous support is hard to grasp; her own personality and motives are barely touched upon. Regardless, Ouyang's elaborated portrayal of

an antihero whose conflicted sense of belonging appears nested in language is compelling, enjoyable and challenging. It also resonated with my own experience of meandering between languages on a daily basis.

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