

Panel 6

Reconfiguring Cultural Figures: Nezha, Sang Nila Utama, and Gu Shan

The Gothic in Yiyun Li's *The Vagrants* and Its Implications in the Post-Truth Age

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Set in Muddy River, a generic and industrialised town in China in the late 1970s, Yiyun Li's novel *The Vagrants* centres around the denunciation ceremony of a young counterrevolutionary, Gu Shan, whose execution spurs a democratic rally that eventually ends with brutal government oppression. Focalised through characters who are, in different ways, associated with the dissenter, the work portrays a panorama of Muddy River during a time of unrest through stories of resilience, sacrifice, perversion, and courage. This paper examines how Li's narrative draws on the Gothic to promote alternative forms of being and knowing. I will argue that Gothic tropes of graphic violence and ghostly figures are employed to reveal the sinister and hidden aspects of Muddy River that are excluded from official discourse. In addition, the narrative's focus on social outsiders and their peripheral points of view draws a multi-faceted and heterogeneous picture of the town; these localised and idiosyncratic accounts challenge unified Communist rhetoric. The article further uses Li's work as an illustration to explore the capacity of literature in the current post-truth age. It is contended that while Li's Gothic approach appears to align with the post-truth objective of disseminating alternative facts, it, in fact, yields positive effects. Emotional appeal and perspectivism, which are exploited by post-truth rhetoricians to devalue veracity, are used in *The Vagrants* to nurture readers' critical faculties. The study demonstrates the importance of literary reading in combating post-truth.

Biography

Mengni Kang is currently an Assistant Professor at University International College, Macau University of Science and Technology. She received her PhD in English from Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, and takes interest in unnatural narrative theories, postmodernist fiction, and contemporary literature. Her articles have been published in *Hecate*, *Journal of Narrative Theory*, *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, *Style* and *Frontiers of Narrative Studies*. She can be reached at mnkang@must.edu.mo.