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Jessie Jia '25 Studies Class Conflicts, Identity of Migrants in America

BY JEFFERY WOODARD | SEPTEMBER 23, 2024

NEWS



BLOOMINGTON, Ill. — Xuanting "Jessie" Jia '25, [one of two 2024 Eckley Summer Scholars](#), set out to explore how writers of migration literature present an alternative vision of America — one where class conflicts, rather than cultural differences, drive racial and ethnic divisions.

The title of Jia's project became, "Rethinking America: The Class Politics in Three Novels of Migration." As an international student from Jilin City, China, Jia said the purpose of her research was to highlight the socio-economic struggle many migrants face coming to America.

"In addition to the hardship of identity construction as they interact with American culture, capitalist oppression and exploitation were also the major challenges that migrants faced," she said.

Jia, an English literature major, focused on three novels on migration in the 20th century: William

Attaway's "Blood on the Forge," which depicts the African American Great Migration; Anzia Yezierska's autobiographical novel "Bread Givers," based on Yezierska's experiences as an East-European Jewish migrant; and Helena Maria Viramontes's "Under the Feet of Jesus," describing Mexican farmworkers in California.

"I chose these texts because they not only represent different waves of migration and various racial and ethnic backgrounds, but also examine the challenges and conflicts faced by migrants from a working class perspective," Jia said.

In addition to the novels, Jia began researching scholarly articles related to the texts and about the historical, social and political backgrounds of migration.

"I found that literary studies have been extensively analyzing migrants' frustration with their cultural identities, yet they are relatively dismissive of the class politics that inform the migrant writers' thinking," Jia said. "Therefore, through a class analysis on migration literature, I would like to argue that migrants' frustration with their identity is closely intertwined with their struggle against poverty and oppression under the capitalist system in America."

Ultimately, her research identified three major themes shared by the three novels: the disjunction between a migrant's dream and reality; gender and mass consumer culture; and religion.

Jia worked with her faculty sponsor, Assistant Professor of English Juan Rodriguez Barrera, to dig into her resource material.

"[Rodriguez Barrera's] knowledge on Marxist theories and [his peer-reviewed article about 'Blood on the Forge'](#) were particularly helpful," Jia said. "They have provided me with necessary terminologies and concepts when I tried to conduct class analysis on the literary texts. His guidance and assistance were so detail-oriented that they resolved my concerns and confusions as I was developing this long and complicated paper."

As a result of her project, Jia said she was able to develop a more thorough understanding of the history of migration in America through the individual experience of migrants. In addition to improving her research skills, academic writing, and ability to share ideas with other scholars, Jia said the Eckley program allowed her to reconsider her own identity as an international student in America.

"I learned how to critically view the social and cultural environment through my personal experiences," Jia said.

After graduation, Jia plans to attend graduate school for English literature while furthering her study of migration literature. She said the Eckley project served as the perfect starting point to understand the academic research process while gaining the knowledge and skills to benefit her future academics, such as her senior seminar project in the spring.

"This fellowship made me realize that Illinois Wesleyan has so much to offer to students. I made almost full use of the library, from borrowing books to searching scholarly articles to simply sitting in a quiet room and studying," she said.

On Thursday, Sept. 26, Jia and Asia Rogers '25 will be presenting their Eckley Scholars summer research projects from 4-5 p.m. in Ames Beckman Auditorium.



Xuanting "Jessie" Jia '25