

Living Treasures

Yang Huang

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Huang offers a subtly powerful portrait of a confused Chinese girl's growth through tragedy and conflict into a strong young woman.

A highly competitive university student and an elusive panda bear might seem to have little in common, but in the mind of Gu Bao, the protagonist of this sensitively written first novel, *Living Treasures*, they share a paradoxical status. Both are simultaneously designated “living treasures” by their society and endangered by the actions and policies of that society.

Bao is in many ways a privileged young woman, the daughter of a university professor and a successful student in her own right. But dangers surround her too. Her fellow students are discontented with the corruption that surrounds them, and their youthful rebellion is beginning to provoke harsh responses from the government. Bao's budding romance with a young soldier threatens to bring her into conflict with her family and destroy her academic career. And when she unexpectedly becomes pregnant, the crisis threatens to destroy everything in her life, including things that she has not yet learned to value. During an exile to her grandparents' cottage, Bao is forced to confront both her personal crisis and the crushing injustices that her rural neighbors experience at the hands of callous bureaucrats rigorously enforcing China's one-child policy.

One of the pleasurable aspects of this book is the way that, in author Yang Huang's quiet but evocative prose, Bao unobtrusively but unmistakably grows from a passive, unformed girl into a bold and decisive woman who is capable of seizing the initiative and solving problems without relying on others to guide her. When initially confronted with her personal crisis, Bao allows others to influence her. What she sees and experiences in a village medical office, where her status-conscious parents have urged her to have an abortion for the sake of her reputation and career, is described in prose that is both calmly matter-of-fact and utterly heartbreaking. Later, when she encounters a country woman who is desperate to evade enforcers of the one-child policy, Bao has emotional knowledge of what is at stake, something her younger self could not have comprehended.

Living Treasures is also an intriguing glimpse into a place, a time, and a culture that is unfamiliar to many Americans. Despite China's burgeoning population and growing economic power, it might as well be another planet to mainstream American readers, many of whom know little of its culture beyond a few quaint images and the most sensationalistic aspects of the Chinese government's actions, such as the Tiananmen Square massacre and the controversial one-child policy. Taking this limited knowledge as a starting point, *Living Treasures* expands into a deeply human and sympathetic portrait of people living as best they can in an imperfect society.

BRADLEY A. SCOTT (Fall 2014)

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