

YI YANG

c r o s s i n g l i t e r a r y



THE AKUTAGAWA PRIZE for new authors, established in 1935 to commemorate the work of renowned Japanese writer Ryunosuke Akutagawa, is Japan's most prestigious literary award. In July this year the prize was granted to a non-native speaker of Japanese for the first time. Chinese-born Yi Yang was overjoyed to receive the award: "I'm still not satisfied with my Japanese, and I had no confidence at all in my language skills, so I am really excited about winning this prize."

Yang began studying Japanese after coming to Japan in 1987 at the age of 22. Last year, she debuted with *Wan-chan*, the story of a Chinese woman who acts as intermediary between people in a rural Japanese village and Chinese brides. Set against the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989, Yang's award-winning novel *Toki ga Nijimu Asa* (Mornings When Time Blurs) follows the fortunes of a young Chinese man who suffers various setbacks as he moves to Japan and builds a life there

over the course of 20 years. The novels portray both China and Japan from the inside, taking a unique perspective that transcends borders.

What prompted Yang to start writing novels in Japanese? "Writing is difficult if you don't have an actual life to write about," she explains. "Since I live in Japan, it all started from the idea that I should write in Japanese for Japanese readers." Writing in one's native language comes naturally, but working in Japanese entails thinking all the time and using dictionaries. While this is hard work, Yang is attracted by the restrained and the subtle aspects of the Japanese language.

Yang enthusiastically embraces new forms of expression in her prize-winning novel, working Chinese poems into the Japanese text. "Long ago the Japanese used to read poetry that had been brought from China, so I thought it would be nice to encourage the same sort of thing today," says Yang. The rich potential of borderless literature continues to grow.

b o r d e r s



FACING: *Toki ga Nijimu Asa* (left), which won the Akutagawa Prize, and *Wan-chan* (right), Yang's first novel.