

FICTION

What Makes a Good Chinese Father? In a New Novel, It's Complicated.

By Lysley Tenorio

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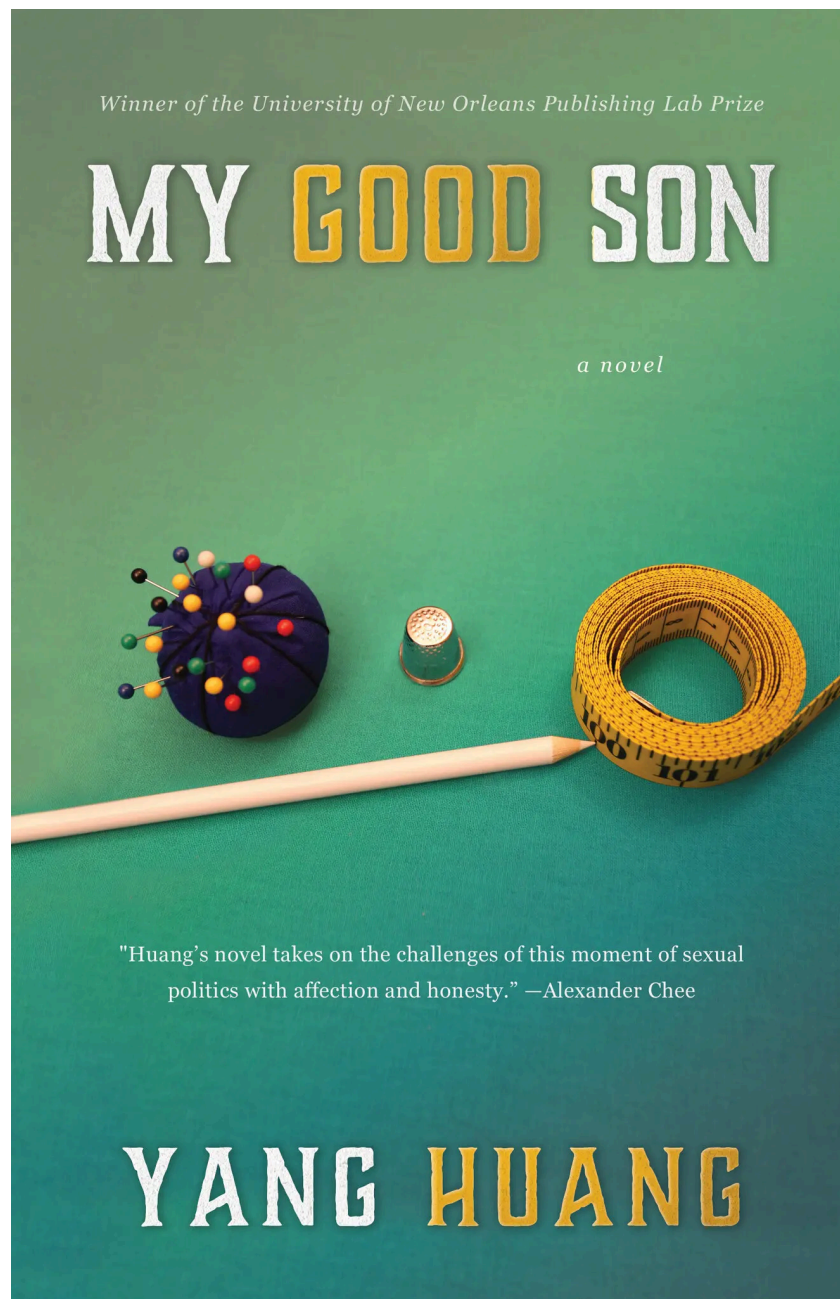
MY GOOD SON

By Yang Huang

Early in Yang Huang's new novel, "My Good Son," we see a middle-aged tailor, Mr. Cai, working in his shop. "All his planning, cutting and sewing took final shape," Huang writes. "In the end the garment itself made sense." For Mr. Cai, it's a rare moment of pride, a recognition that there is value, even contentment, in a hard day's work. But the rest of the time, he sees his working-class life as a cautionary tale for his aimless 22-year-old son, Feng. Determined to save him from a life of tailoring, Mr. Cai makes it his mission to send Feng to a university in the United States. All Mr. Cai needs is an American willing to sponsor a student visa for Feng.

Enter Jude, an American expat and Mr. Cai's newest customer. Mr. Cai asks Jude to persuade his father, a Texas businessman, to become Feng's sponsor. Jude agrees but wants a favor in return: Jude is gay, and believes that Feng, by posing as his "best friend" (which Mr. Cai suspects is code for "gay lover"), might help persuade Jude's father to accept his sexuality (Jude has yet to come out to his family). It's a convoluted scheme; Jude's logic that a Chinese "best friend" might push his conservative father toward acceptance is difficult for Mr. Cai (and, admittedly, this reader) to track. Nonetheless, Mr. Cai tells his son to play along, convincing him that his only hope for success is to study abroad. "Don't be a loser," he tells Feng. "All my labors are wasted if you end up like me."





As with her previous books, “Living Treasures” and “My Old Faithful,” Huang’s latest explores the generational push-pull of family life in post-Tiananmen China. While Mrs. Cai is easier on Feng, Mr. Cai pushes. But Feng isn’t always worthy of his father’s efforts. He’s moody and quick to tears. At times, he’s a spoiled brat. Yet Mr. Cai’s devotion to Feng is unyielding. In one instance, rather than allow Feng to stand in an all-night line outside the American Consulate before a visa interview, Mr. Cai, with “a folding stool and palm fan, which he used to drive away

mosquitoes,” waits in Feng’s place, so that Feng can get a good night’s sleep. Other parents are doing the same thing, a detail that highlights the novel’s beating heart: what it means to be a good parent or, in Mr. Cai’s case, a good Chinese father.

But is Mr. Cai actually a good parent? That question ultimately drives the narrative. For all he’s accomplished, Mr. Cai devalues, heartbreakingly, the very life he’s made for himself as a way of pressuring Feng to strive for more. But when Feng expresses interest in the family business, Mr. Cai is conflicted: “He had shown his son the mundane life of a tailor. If this hadn’t scared Feng off but rather attracted him, was this not a credit to himself as a father?” The possibility lingers: Can Feng achieve success by following in Mr. Cai’s humble footsteps?

The story moves quickly, rendered in straightforward prose. While occasionally flat, the deliberate plainness of the writing reflects Mr. Cai’s no-nonsense mentality and his willingness to articulate harsh truths. “Face it,” he says of Feng, “he isn’t a girl who can marry up with her looks.” While securing Feng’s future is always Mr. Cai’s objective, the novel contains other dramatic threads: an unplanned pregnancy, Feng’s interest in the girl next door, a back story about Mr. Cai’s first true love. At times, these threads compete, and the scheme with Jude, the novel’s initial dramatic engine, ultimately feels rushed and underutilized. Fortunately, Mr. Cai remains front and center, always compelling, a man doing everything for his boy, the way a good father — supposedly — should.

Lysley Tenorio is the author of the story collection “Monstress” and the novel “The Son of Good Fortune.”

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By Yang Huang

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