

Laureate's mission is to bring poetry to the people

By John Stewart

MISSISSAUGA — Anna Yin was reading Hans Christian Andersen's story, *The Emperor's New Clothes*, to her son - both to entertain him and to improve her English - when she had a revelation.

"I was very sad. In the story only one child in the story tells the truth (that the emperor is naked)," she says. "That's when I realized 'I don't know who I am. I don't have time for myself. I am a wife and a mother and an IT professional but I don't know who I am.'"

Yin, who came to Canada from China at the age of 30, turned her moment of insight/catharsis into something concrete. She translated her unease into a poem about the masks people don for public consumption.

She posted it in her native language on a website in China. She didn't know it at the time, but an artistic career had been launched.

Her poem *Toronto, No More Weeping (In Memory of Cecilia Zhang)* won a poetry award in 2005 and got her on CBC Radio. Poems written for a creative writing course became her first collection, published four years ago. Now, she's the Ontario rep for the Canadian League of Poets. Her third collection of work is just being launched. Fifteen years on and several crises of confidence later, Anna Yin was recently appointed Mississauga's first poet laureate.

It might seem counter-intuitive to appoint a laureate whose first language is not English. Yin may represent a minority art, but she represents a majority of residents in this municipality, who were born outside of Canada and have struggled to find a new identity in a place where the language and the culture are unfamiliar.

"Mostly it's subconscious writing," Yin says of her simple, impressionistic style, full of natural images, which has been described as "heartfelt and mysterious" by fellow poet, UTM professor and Governor General Award winner Richard Greene.

A chat with Yin at a coffee shop near her Churchill Meadows' home reveals a woman on a mission to make "Poetry Alive" a lot more than a school-visitation program in which she participates. It's obvious she is more likely to be a guerrilla warrior for poetry than an ambassador.

"I see other poets who don't go out," she says. "They just struggle in the circle. I want always to break out, to outreach. You must do that to help bridge the culture."

Yin has already bridged countries and cultures so bridging the gap between the poet, whom American modernist poet Wallace Stevens defined as "the priest of the invisible," and the public shouldn't be that hard.

Yin has an ambitious agenda to tap into the mainstream, starting with a proposal to launch a haiku walking tour project.



Haiku is the deceptively simple three-line form from Japan, usually centred in nature, which can be both the front door to poetry and, when expertly executed, its zenith. Starting on a Saturday next month, Yin hopes to set up a time and place - perhaps in association with other events (birdwatching, museum exhibitions, Celebration Square festivals) where she will demonstrate the form and let people try their hands at it. She's also planning to incorporate "postcard poetry," wherein writers take their visual cue from a photo, then write a short prose poem that's like the message you'd write on the back of a postcard.

"Eventually I'd like to make a poetry map of Mississauga based on those events," she says.

It's just one of her many plans, which include more public readings, to go with her duty to provide commissioned poems for such special occasions as Canada Day and the opening of the Pan Am Games.

There was a time when Yin was so discouraged with her writing that she decided to quit altogether. Her husband wasn't supportive. She felt she was repeating herself. "I could feel the limitations. I didn't know how far I could go.

"For one week I quit reading and writing. After a week I was so miserable. Then a poem came to me.

"Poetry saved me," says Yin. "It let me discover myself and who I am. It got me connected to other people and to the world."

Now she plans to show the rest of Mississauga how they can do the same.