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Phoenix Chin, Wendy

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22 The Literary Construction of Identity: A Comparative Study of Chinese Americans and the British Chinese

WENDY PHOENIX CHIN

Abstract

In the context of global transformations, the analysis of cultural production can be a fruitful way of eviscerating the complex negotiations of identity construction for what Stuart Hall calls 'new ethnicities' (1988). The sociological study of creative literature is an area that has been little explored and holds the possibility of offering significant insights into the strategies and ideologies of identity. This chapter offers a comparative study of contemporary Chinese American and British Chinese literature to uncover how the processes of identity construction in narrative fiction are shaped by their different national and political contexts.

Introduction

Creative writing is one of the most important forms of cultural production through which new cultural identities are expressed. The strategies employed in writing make explicit and concrete some of the issues raised by cultural theory about identity formation. The strategies for developing Chinese American and British Chinese identities, therefore, can be found embedded within the narratives of fictional texts that attempt to claim their place and negotiate the dichotomy between assimilation or imagined cultural purity. Claims for full national-cultural designation can be seen as claims to a privileged norm. As Edward Said points out, these claims carry with them 'a formidable battery of other distinctions between ours and theirs, proper and improper, European and non-European, higher and lower' (1978, iv). Views that insist on the 'American' or 'British' qualities of Chinese diasporic writing collapse the diasporic subject into the amnesiac condition of the 'new American' or 'new Brit', a tabula rasa on whom is inscribed an ethnic-cleansed national identity. These views repeat orthodox myths regarding immigrant

abdication of memory in the face of the cultural and material superiority of the intaking state.

The differences between Chinese American and British Chinese literature can be understood in the framework offered by the diaspora paradigm. In contrast to reductive notions of the immigrant as someone without prior entry into the Western state, recent critical theories recognise the historical discontinuities and the psychological violence visited on individuals through the tragic course of wars, famine, and economic dislocations, and the resulting contradictory constructions of social identity that disallow any racial or national essentialising of the subject.

Against this backdrop, the research aims of this paper are:

- To investigate the differences between the identity formation of second generation Chinese Americans and British Chinese as they are reflected in the contemporary fiction of some major authors from these backgrounds.
- To identify narrative themes that are relevant to the construction of ethnic identity and compare the discourses and ideologies embedded within them.
- To highlight how social and historical differences impinge upon and are reflected by national attitudes of belonging. By placing the narrative themes in their sociological and historical contexts I hope to reveal that rather than one following the other in a teleological way, the literary and the sociological have a reflexive and intertextual relationship.

Methodological Framework:

Data Selection

In narrowing the field of research to a comparison of Chinese American and British Chinese literature, I have chosen two of the largest Western diasporic Chinese communities that share both languages as well as long histories of migration spanning back to the 18th and 19th centuries. The study investigates a relatively small selection of the most influential Chinese American and British Chinese novelists from the 1970s onwards.

The writers I have chosen are defining in their genre and highly influential on the basis that their work has received critical acclaim across the board and, with the exception of the two youngest authors, they have produced international best sellers. The latter point may go some way to address the issue of elitism, which is unavoidable when attempting to research culture in general through a high cultural form like literature.

It is therefore necessary to stress the fact that the conclusions I draw in this study are confined to statements about identity in literary forms which contribute to, but do not wholly constitute identity formation in general. I am looking at the narrative depiction of subjectivities, not representation or how such depictions are then appropriated and used in the public sphere. In terms of readership, then, it is also important to avoid the assumption that these texts represent the means by which immigrants construct their identities, as well as the claims that these texts are read by all immigrants.

In the United States, *The Woman Warrior*, Maxine Hong Kingston's groundbreaking 1976 book, is reputedly the most widely read title in American universities today, and it marked her as the pioneering figure in propelling Asian American literature and identity politics into the mainstream. I also study the best-selling novels *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) and *The Hundred Secret Senses* (1996) by Amy Tan, as well as *Typical American* (1991) by Gish Jen. On the British side, I explore the 1982 Booker Prize nominated *Sour Sweet* by Timothy Mo and the newer works *Foreign Bodies* (1998) and *Mammon, Inc.* (2001) by the critically acclaimed ingenue Hwee Hwee Tan.

Discourse Analysis

My study is informed by poststructuralist approaches that foreground the discursive construction of subjectivity. Individual subjects are formed through, as opposed to pre-existing, the frameworks of language and representation through which they live. There is no pre-given essence to subjectivity; it is constructed precariously and is constantly in process. Regarding subjectivity as constructed in and through discourse throws less of the burden of self-construction onto individuals, focusing on the cultural and social processes through which identities are formed. This corrects the tendency to conceptualise identity solely as an individual achievement, or to problematise it through motifs like identity crises. The language of poststructuralism can also help highlight the plurality of struggles that are not focused on economic relations. These theoretical developments, translated methodologically into the field of discourse analysis, open up the possibility of enquiry into new forms of identification.

All forms of discourse analysis share in common a rejection of the idea that language is simply a neutral means of describing the world. They also share a conviction of the central importance of discourse in constructing social life. Discourse analysis enables a researcher to reveal constructions of meaning and power relations not only within the text, but also in conjunction with social issues. Applying these concepts to literary texts, I aim to identify and examine the discursive strategies that are embedded in the novels I have selected, not only in their content, but also in their form, style and structure.

Grid of Analysis

The themes that emerge from the novels and which are elucidated by elements of textual analysis show various ways of dealing with the tensions of multiple identities. By comparing these themes which slice across both the American and British texts, I examine the differences in sentiment about coming to terms with being of Chinese descent in American and British society. I look at how the extremely inclusive ideological nature of American nationality, on the one hand, and the more exclusive nature of British nationality on the other, effect and impinge upon the views of identity exhibited in the texts. Inspired by three main approaches: the linguistic, the psychoanalytical and the socio-historical, the seven themes surrounding identity construction that I analyse are:

1. Narrative form
2. Inclusion/Exclusion
3. The Racial Shadow
4. Narrative Unconscious
5. Food and Resistance
6. Confucianism
7. Narrative Resolutions

The theme of narrative form takes a linguistic approach to explore the ways in which dialogues are constructed between the text and the reader. In particular, I concentrate on how direct address and disruptions of the primary narrative create interrogative spaces.

From a more psychoanalytic perspective, Inclusion/Exclusion teases out the discourses underlying the complex relationship between the desire to assimilate and the pressures of racism.

Continuing in the psychoanalytic vein, incidences of the racial shadow represent the discursive split experienced by a subject coming to terms with what is perceived as two halves of the self. Having imbibed the racist stereotypes of the dominant culture, the subjects project undesirable ethnic traits onto an ethnic other, their racial shadow. Fundamental differences in discursive positions on identity reveal the contingent influences of national ideologies.

The theme of narrative unconscious takes up these issues further by looking at the permeation of different discourses, whether dominant or reactionary, into the narrative. In particular, accounts of cultural misunderstandings are analysed to reveal the often conflicting unconscious perspectives that the novels pass on to the reader.

The themes of food and resistance and Confucianism deal with the weight of cultural scripts that define ethnic traits and attitudes. Stemming from the socio-historical importance of food production for Chinese immigrants on both

sides of the Atlantic, *Food and Resistance* reveals that the degree to which catering may debase one's ethnicity is a function of the group's place in society.

The theme of Confucianism explores some of the ways in which the authors create dual critiques of Western and Chinese ideological scripts, viewing the assimilation of identity through the prism of the assimilation of Confucianism.

The discussion of narrative resolutions closes the analysis by examining the significance of the endings of novels in the delivery of a text's ultimate stance on identity.

Excerpt from Narrative Analysis

This section will provide an excerpt from the narrative analysis to demonstrate the methodology of the study.

The construction of an implied reader puts writers in a powerful position, in the sense that they can assume shared expectations, attitudes and experiences. Actual readers in the target audience are likely to take up the subject positions of the constructed implied reader. One way for the writer to set up an intimacy with the reader is through the use of direct address, a practice that Fairclough calls 'synthetic personalisation' (1989, 62). In the case of the authors in this study who are, as minorities, writing from the assumption that the majority of their audience does not share their expectations, attitudes and experiences, the relationship between reader and writer becomes more complex.

Following Mary Talbot's distinctions between declarative, imperative and interrogative texts, this section compares the discourses embedded in the narrative forms of Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* and H.H. Tan's *Foreign Bodies* (1995). Both Kingston and Tan set up an interaction between the narrator and the reader that is explicit. The reader is constructed as a character and given an imagined perspective in the text through the use of direct address.

In *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston's novel about her 1950s Californian childhood that blurs the boundaries between autobiography and fiction, the narrator employs a declamatory form of direct address to ask: 'Chinese Americans, when you try to understand what things in you are Chinese, how do you separate what is peculiar to childhood, to poverty, insanities, one family, your mother who marked your growing with stories, with what is Chinese? What is Chinese and what is the movies?' (p.6). This passage is deceptively simple in the seeming transparency of its discourse, but it is in fact multi-layered and operates on several contradictory levels. First, although the target audience is white middle-class America, the author addresses Chinese-Americans in a way that calls upon ethnic solidarity and excludes others. These

elements are characteristic of an imperative textual mode in a novel that is distinctly interrogative in its fragmented postmodernity. The reader is pulled into a subject position identical to that of the narrator by the first person narration and simultaneously pushed away by the distancing effect of the ethnic rallying cry. Secondly, the imperative form of the passage, which underlies an exclusive message and implies essentialist notions of Chinese identity, stands at odds with the content, which takes an anti-monolithic view focused on the peculiarities of identity. Finally, the didactic tone of this passage creates a disruptive fissure in an otherwise neutral albeit unconventional narrative style, which lends the entire text a self-reflexive quality, challenging fixities of meaning and subject positioning. These contradictions of form contribute to the challenging interrogative experience of this novel and mirror the contradictory experience of growing up Chinese American.

In *Foreign Bodies*, British writer H.H. Tan's debut novel, the use of direct address occurs within the interlocking first person narratives of the three main characters. The novel is about a trio of transnational twenty-somethings, Singaporean-Chinese lawyer Mei, her English boyfriend Andy, and her Singaporean childhood friend Eugene, also a friend of Andy's. When Andy is framed for a serious crime, Mei must find a way to prove his innocence. Mei begins her opening monologue with the phrase: 'Believe me ...' (p.1). In a similarly conversational vein, Eugene opens his narrative as if he has been prompted by someone to speak: 'Oh, right. I guess it's my turn now. Erm, what shall I say?' (p.46). In this novel, the shifts in voice and perspective highlight the self-justifying of each character and implies the self-justifying nature of narrative in general. In these instances of direct address, the characters speak in a way that resembles the testimonies of witnesses on the stand and constructs the reader as a judge or member of the jury. The reader is thus invited to scrutinise and question the narrative, as the theme of the trial becomes a metaphor for underlining the subjectivity of truth.

Findings:

As illustrated by the previous example, the examination of narrative form investigates the ways in which discursive dialogues are constructed between the text and reader. Using distinctions between declarative, imperative and interrogative texts, the passages that are compared highlight an American tendency towards a more exclusive message of Chinese American collectivism and an essentialist notion of cultural identity. The British text, on the other hand, encourages the questioning of ideologies and fixed positions that suggests a more fluid approach to identity construction.

The theme of inclusion/exclusion probes the discourses underlying the relationship between the desire to assimilate to the majority culture and the

pressures of racism. In comparing passages from *The Woman Warrior, Typical American* and *Mammon, Inc.*, it emerges that the American texts reveal a strong national ideology of assimilation that supports a yearning for inclusion whilst being constructed and defensively constructing the self as the other. In contrast to the prevalence of binary constructions of identity in the American novels, the British narratives of inclusion and exclusion acknowledge and engage with the problematic ease of essentialism whilst opening a space for finding alternatives.

This binary is psychoanalytically illustrated in the theme of the racial shadow in which the narrative device of doubling represents the discursive split experienced by the protagonist coming to terms with what is perceived as two halves of the self. The projection of undesirable ethnic traits onto an ethnic other indicates the acceptance of the racist stereotypes of the dominant culture. In comparing passages from *The Woman Warrior, The Hundred Secret Senses* and *Mammon, Inc.*, the contingent influences of national scripts are revealed by the seeming indoctrination of the Chinese American characters to the inescapability of the 'one of us or one of them' mentality on the one hand, and the British Chinese rejection of both dominant and reactionary fixed positions on the other. This fundamental difference can be traced to the fact that American myths of nationality promise the attainability of an ethnically neutral national identity whereas the impossibility of this status in Britain allows for a greater acceptance of the self and the search for a more fluid concept of identity.

These issues are further explored by looking at the narrative unconscious, or the permeation of different discourses into the narrative that are then transferred to the reader. In the comparison of incidences of cultural misunderstandings involving clashes and confluences of Chinese and Western cultural discourses, I have used passages from *The Joy Luck Club, The Woman Warrior* and *Sour Sweet*. It emerges that the American authors favour and bolster American cultural norms at the expense of Chinese views whilst the British example affords a more balanced and sensitive depiction of cultural hybridity.

The theme of food and resistance is born out of the socio-historical importance of Chinese food both in terms of its production and its role as a cultural carrier in the United States and Britain. The analysis of *The Joy Luck Club* and *Sour Sweet* reveals that in the Chinese American case, the alimentary is used as a reactionary weapon against racist stereotypes through culturally excluding exaggerations of 'ethnic' food habits. In contrast, dominant discourses and typical power relations are subverted by the British Chinese in an example that casts the ethnic food producer as cultural imperialist.

Confucianism is another theme in which the authors grapple with the weight of cultural scripts about ethnic attitudes. In the passages examined from *Sour Sweet* and *Typical American*, the assimilation of identity is viewed

through the negotiation of Chinese and Western cultural norms and the authors achieve this by creating dual critiques of Western and Chinese cultural scripts. In both the American and the British texts, the indictment of the reproduction of Confucianism in Chinese diasporic culture as a violent socio-economic system is balanced by a simultaneous critique of a second moral system. This device guards against the tendency to label Chinese beliefs as traditional and Western ones as progressive.

The narrative analysis concludes with a discussion of the narrative resolutions of the novels in terms of unveiling their ultimate stances on identity construction. Ranging from the reinforcement of myths of cultural essentialism to the sobering assertion that there is no place for Chinese Americans in the national identity, the American examples from *The Joy Luck Club* and *Typical American* offer little scope for an open and inclusive notion of identity. The British example from *Mammon, Inc.*, on the other hand, presents a dark picture which nevertheless allows for the emergent possibility of an alternative script, that of transnational identity.

Despite the fact that Chinese Americans are demographically, economically, and politically stronger than the British Chinese, there is nevertheless a disabling factor in the openness of the American identity that does not seem present in the UK. On a number of levels, this reveals the inadequacy of essentialist notions of identity and the fruitfulness of the poststructuralist framework, as such a contradiction would not exist if identity were indeed fixed. Furthermore, it attests to the inadequacy of simplistic socio-political and socio-economic explanations that do not take into account the role that such elements as cultural production and discourse have in the construction of identity.

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