

Comparative Literature: East & West is a peer refereed journal.

COMPARATIVE LITERATURE: EAST

WEST 19

比较文学：东方与西方

Department of Comparative Literature
Institute of Comparative Literature
Sichuan University, China



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Comparative Literature: East & West

主 编: *Editor-in-Chief:*

Shunqing CAO(曹顺庆)

Sichuan University, Chengdu, 610064, China

Phone & Fax: 028-8546-1880

<shunqingcao@163.com>

副主编: *Executive Editor:*

Xiaolu WANG(王晓路)

Sichuan University, Chengdu, 610064, China

<xlwangscu@163.com>

编辑及学术顾问委员会:

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助 理:

Editorial Assistant:

Ying LIU(刘颖)

Sichuan University, Chengdu, 610064, China

<cinderrela@163.com>

Editorial Correspondence:

(For Subscription and Questions)

Rui CHEN(陈蕊, 负责订阅事宜)

College of Literature & Journalism, Sichuan University

Chengdu, 610064, P. R. China

Phone & Fax: 86-28-85412310

中国四川省成都市四川大学文学与新闻学院

邮编: 610064

电话及传真: 86-28-85412310

<cr1283@163.com>

(For Manuscripts)

Xiaolu WANG (王晓路, 负责稿件事宜)

College of Literature & Journalism, Sichuan University

Chengdu, 610064, P. R. China

Phone & Fax: 86-28-85412310

中国四川省成都市四川大学文学与新闻学院

邮编: 610064

电话及传真: 86-28-85412310

<xlwangscu@163.com>

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Crossing Borders and Boundaries: Ways of Reading Some Contemporary Asian Australian Women's Fictions

Carole FERRIER

*School of English, Media Studies and Art History,
The University of Queensland*

中文摘要：20 世纪末以来，亚裔妇女作家在澳大利亚兴起成为一个独具特色的创作群体。她们的创作往往被视为一股多元文化力量，既是对传统“白澳”观念的挑战，同时也推动了多元、异质的澳大利亚文化认同的形成。作者在此文中围绕亚裔妇女文学及其新近批评情况，采用动态的历史批评观，反思了在澳大利亚研究、亚裔澳大利亚研究、多元文化主义、身份研究等研究领域内对亚裔妇女文学创作僵化和单一的解读模式。作者认为，在全球化条件下，作为离散文学，澳大利亚亚裔妇女文学创作事实上要复杂得多，它们与澳大利亚主流权力和话语之间既对抗又迎合，并且还受到以唐恩美为首的美国亚裔文学先例的影响。

In recent years, fiction by Asian Australian^[1] women writers has emerged into prominence and has been read within various frames as a defined body of work within Australian Literature. This diverse group of authors includes, in the past couple of decades, Dewi Anggraeni, Yasmine Gooneratne, Moni Lai Storz, Simone Lazaroo, Beth Yahp, Arlene Chai, Hsu-Ming Teo, Lau Siew Mei and Lillian Ng—and more.^[2] Their fiction has been interpreted within the field of Asian Australian Studies, that has been growing since the 1990s, in relation to how far it presents styles of counter-narrative to the dominant discourses of White Australia, and intervenes into dominant notions of “the national”, as well as offering new ways of

thinking about the positive social value of multiculturalism. These writers have been read as embodying new possibilities for hybrid cultural identities in Australia through the crossing of borders of nations and nationalities, as well as offering contestation of dominant assumptions, especially orientalist and gendered stereotypes. They have also been read in relation to the longer-standing emergence (in terms of a constructed “field” of study) of some Asian American writers, and the influence of the critical/publishing dominance of that work. Twenty-first century writing and criticism is often particularly interested in the complexities of diaspora, as well as varieties of understandings of the relationship of the past to the present—both for individual authors and the characters their fiction creates, and the geospatial contexts of the societies through which they move or in which they live. This requires a scrutiny of notions of the transnational as they inform these discussions, as well as an awareness of how these approaches operate in relation to globalisation, capitalism, and the dominance of the English language.^[3]

For those engaged in critical and cultural critique of an Australian imaginary community, Lars Jensen commented in 2008 upon the possibilities that he considered the “emerging field” of Asian Australian Studies offered “to reassess Australian Studies that continues to be informed by an Anglo-Australiancentric discourse”(543-4). Growing out of postcolonial, feminist, and anti-racist, interventionist modes of critique, he saw Asian Australian Studies, like these others, as challenging “received notions of an Australian national self as white, male and Anglo Australian”, and as setting “an agenda for a reconceptualisation of Australian culture away from the prevailing forms of national representation” (Jensen, 544).

The way these other approaches operated, Jensen suggested, was to encourage the production of counter-narratives:

The intervention can take many different forms depending on whether it is radical feminist, Aboriginal or Asian Australian [...] I am suggesting these three driving forces because to challenge the nation is to insist on not just the (tolerated) presence of other narratives, but also on their necessarily deeply disruptive force. (549)

It was, of course, in the context of activist movements in the Australian community that these approaches developed in the academy. These days, Dorothy Wang wryly remarks, “Certainly, like the terms cosmopolitan and transnational, diasporic is imbued with a certain global verve that the terms minority, ethnic and migrant lack (Wang, 6)”^[4].

The mention of “tolerance” of the presence, even disruption, of other discursive practices recalls Ghassan Hage’s discussion of this concept, and of how being tolerant is usually the preserve of those with social power (Hage, 88)—or an expression of, as bell hooks would have it, of “imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy” (Hooks 2012, 4). Moni Lai Storz argues that “Racism is like stress: it can only be managed. You can’t get rid of racism because it’s about power. The only way to get rid of it is to get rid of the power structure” (Giese, 269). Dorothy Wang also foregrounds the importance of not forgetting that what used to be called discrimination—“the pervasive and persistent racial interpellation minority subjects face” (7)—has not gone away in the everyday lives of non-dominant groups.

In contemporary circumstances, Jensen argues, the nation can be “a historic remnant and increasingly redundant category” or “a continuing dominant force in a globalised world” (Jensen, 549-50). The forms of critique need, accordingly, to operate on transnational, national and local levels, in looking at how—from the standpoint of the Australian cultural imaginary—Asian Australian Studies can challenge “received notions of an Australian national self as white, male and Anglo-Australian” (Jensen, 544), perhaps continuing the unfinished project of multiculturalism—another term that might now seem to express an old idea.

Tseen Khoo ended her piece in Wenche Ommundsen’s *Bastard Moon* in 2001 with the question: “does the increasing literary production of Chinese and other Asian Australians add to or add up to national narratives?” (105). Ommundsen expands this question in 2012: “Why is it that, in spite of this shift in critical attention, the dominance of Anglo-Celtic writers remains largely unchallenged?”

If *all* Australian writing is transnational, is there no special case to be made for writers whose recent experience of migration and resettlement, whose more direct connections with other languages and other cultures, define their writing in ways that clearly has appeal to readers and scholars alike? (Ommundsen 2012, 2)^[5]

This connects to questions of identity, a term which can seem another from yesterday. Ien Ang writes in 2003: “identity politics is never innocent; its implications and effects are not predetermined but depend upon context.” (152). Ommundsen argues “while the question of identity politics figures large in Asian Australian writing, as it does in most writing from Asian diasporas, the politics of representation which informs the Asian Australian texts makes identity politics much less straight-forward than it appears to be in the work of influential diasporic

writers such as Amy Tan” (2012, 3). She suggests that the perspectives that can be read here relate to post-identity:

Cultural identity is not something which exists independently of the imagination, not something that can be found or retrieved through a search for cultural roots, but a site of instability and metamorphosis, something which has to be constantly invented, written into being. (Ommundsen 2012, 3)^[6]

Multicultural policies were introduced in Australia with bi-partisan government support in the 1970s and 80s. Following upon the 1967 passing of the Referendum, “seen at the time, and since, as about ending discrimination against Aboriginal people in the Constitution”, the White Australia Policy then began to be “gradually dismantled without much opposition. In popular discourse, ‘equal’ treatment would enable the assimilation of minorities into an Australian identity [...] Aborigines and newcomers had the right to become the same as everyone else” (Curthoys and Johnson, 102). This situation was ironically described by Scott Brook in 2008 as supposedly one in which “enlightened values of inclusive diversity finally triumph over policies of assimilation and racially selective migration” (510), superseding the earlier situation of the genocidal creation of the Indigenous peoples as a dying race, and a White Australia policy that prevented most Asian^[7] immigration from Federation into the 1960s.

The policies which attempted to move Australia towards being officially multicultural were challenged in the 1990s (with One Nation leading the charge, see Curthoys and Johnson), and the Howard government dismantled many of the organisations and policies that had been making multiculturalism more visible and recognized.^[8] Following upon this, the Howard government’s 2007 Northern Territory “intervention” aimed at Indigenous communities, “set an immediate course”, as Adam Shoemaker described it, “toward strident police and military intervention of the sort usually reserved for instances of ‘apprehended insurrection’ in other ‘democratic’ societies” (Shoemaker, 3).

For Suvendrini Perera, writing in 2005:

Australian identity is grounded on a particular *triangulated* relation to the Aboriginal and the Asian: the Aboriginal as an internal presence to be denied and suppressed through genocidal and/or assimilationist practices; the Asian as a besieging other to be held at bay [...] or appeased. (4-5)

Moni Lai Storz recalled in 1989 a dinner party she had attended in the 1980s, at which the conversation topic was the anti-immigration views of Geoffrey Blainey:

One day the Blainey issue became a personal issue and not an academic one ... I discovered that some of my friends took the side of Blainey. That was all right. But what was not all right was that these same friends told me—not in so many words, mind you, for they are intelligent people—that I am okay because I am me and am different—not like the others who would come into Australia if the doors were thrown open to Asia.

Have I become an Australian then? Am I really home and finally accepted by my Australian friends because I am like an Australian and not “like them”, the rest of the yellow hordes. (Giese, 271)

With restrictive immigration policies and very low quotas preventing Australia from becoming a home for more than a tiny number of refugees displaced by various wars and conflicts, keeping out the “boat people” becomes a central political issue in the twenty-first century.^[9]

Questions of liminality, diaspora and hybridity pervade discussions of formerly hyphenated identities.^[10] As Hsu-Ming Teo points out in relation to separation from original homelands:

Much has been written about the liminal space occupied by migrants and refugees who leave their own *heimat* (a culturally and regionally rooted, deeply cherished sense of home and intimacy) and cannot find a home, or feel at home, in their new residence. (2008, 527)

Deborah Madsen in 2006 read the representations of Chinese Australian identity in Teo and some other writers as being “neither here nor there” (117). The representation of being in a liminal state between different places invokes the notion of occupying or passing through a physical/mental space between one state and another. Ang writes, with some ironisation of the adjectives, “I would describe myself as suspended in-between: neither truly Western nor authentically Asian” (2003, 150).

Hybridity, for Homi Bhabha, is the emergence of new cultural forms in the contact zones produced by colonisation. Individuals can also have hybrid identities. While to recognise the hybridised nature of cultures can be a move away from homogeneous notions of race or nation/alism/ality, this can, on the other hand, be a nervous condition for the in-between; as Tseen Khoo has suggested, “the state of *being* multicultural is not able to be turned on or off according to situation or desire” (Ommundsen 2001, 97). Ang commented in 2003:

Hybridity, the very condition of in-betweenness, can never be a question of simple shaking hands, of happy, harmonious merger and fusion. Hybridity is not the solution, but alerts us to the difficulty of living with differences, the ultimately irreducible resistance to complete dissolution. In other words, hybridity is a heuristic device for analyzing complicated entanglement. (149-50)

Developing some of the complications of this “entanglement”, Katherine Hallemeier discusses the “overlapping yet distinct visions” of Rey Chow and Brian Castro, in relation to “how hybridity is performed through the respective genres of theory and autobiography” (126), and concludes that genre is not determining in arguments for hybridity as repressive or emancipating; rather, “by performing the ambiguity of hybridity, Castro’s autobiography functions as theory, particularly as anti-essentialist theory” (129). A similar argument might be developed for the fiction of the Asian Australian women writers.

From the point of view of, in one way or another, being seen as Australian, Asian Australian women writers’ rise in visibility led to some debate about the influence of Americans; especially, initially, in relation to Maxine Hong Kingston, Amy Tan and Jung Chang. Shirley Tucker, in discussing the prominence of these three, suggested that they “to some extent created space for local writers”, but with “an unfortunate side-effect”—that “these texts have left a *defining* mark on the Australian literary landscape [...] they are often used as a benchmark for Chinese-Australian women writers” (Ommundsen 2001, 125). For Brian Castro, in an interview with Ouyang Yu:

The predominantly female Chinese writers have given the West some false impressions of exile and hybridity [...] I think the Amy Tans have unwittingly played into the hands of host-nation chauvinists because, although the woman’s position in China, particularly in the past, has been one of servitude and degradation, modern realistic depictions of this reinforces the tableau of “victimhood” and underlies the continuing female subject as sensual, oriental and compliant. (Ommundsen 2001, 77)

Lillian Ng, in her interview with Ouyang Yu, comments of Yung Chang’s *Wild Swans*:

I only managed to read half of it. Too cruel. Too heavily edited. You know the tiny little shoes that her grandmother used to wear. That’s her trademark—shock value. It’s got nothing to do with the Cultural Revolution. She’s only crying to get attention and I think she has been taught to do so. (Ommundsen 2001, 118)

Or as Beth Yahp puts it in a powerful piece published in 1996:

The Other Asia in Australia is a slope, chink, swot, skolar, socket face, mail order bride, supporter of gangs and secret societies, rice eater, gook. She can be tragic too. A perfect victim, as the American movie *The Joy Luck Club* demonstrated, two hours of that Other Asia's weeping face, one weeping woman's face after another, until they blur into each other. Straight off the boat, the Other Asia is that kind of victim too, staring through a hash of wire. (Yahp 1996, 64)

Shirley Tucker in 2001 agreed with Sneja Gunew that the "preference for conservative texts has meant that Australian audiences either fail to recognise, or struggle with, the experimental or 'foreign'" (128) and favour "stories about oppressed Chinese women" (Ommundsen 2001, 129). Tucker suggests ironically that: "While patriarchy in Australia is bad enough, it seems that the excesses of Chinese patriarchy are an important reminder, at least to an Australian audience, that things could be worse." (Ommundsen 2001, 129) It is interesting to consider, in this light, some of the readings that have been made of Moni Lai Storz's *Notes to My Sisters*, or some texts by Lillian Ng and Lau Siew Mei. Shirley Tucker and Tseen Khoo have different perspectives on how sexual politics might be read in Lillian Ng's *Swallowing Clouds*. For Khoo:

Ng's estrangement of the suburban space seems to echo the anti-suburban writing which pervades much of Australian literature, yet it does not inflect discourses of Australian-ness and the Australian lifestyle so much as highlight the crude transplantation of Confucian ideologies and sexual fetishisation alongside "Chinese-ness".

The novel's showcasing of Asian "sexotica" is intended for a non-Asian readership. *Swallowing Clouds* reads voyeuristically and the China travelogue only lends this perspective more strength. Where, for example, does this novel position Asian women readers? (Gilbert, 171-2)

Madsen adds, "In response, Ng, a practising gynaecologist and obstetrician, has explained that the narrative is based on the lives of many of the Chinese mainland women who visit her Sydney surgery." (Birns 117)

In Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*, Lindo Song asserts: "I wanted my children to have the best combination: American circumstances and Chinese character. How could I know these things do not mix?" (qtd. Aitken, 254, ff10). Adam Aitken in 2008 said that in his view, unlike in Amy Tan, the notion of retaining an authentic Chinese-ness is not central for Asian Australian writers; he asserted, however, that "the Asian Australian daughters of Asian refugees in Australia, whether Eurasian,

Vietnamese or Chinese, can transcend their contradictory neither-here-nor-there predicament and embrace a more creative notion of a hybrid subjectivity" (Aitken, 445).

Tan-style novels, Aitken considers, "dramatise generational differences, and appeal strongly to white women readers" (445). By contrast, Hsu-Ming Teo's main protagonist, Grace, in *Love and Vertigo* (2000), "negotiates the complex pull of Chinese Singaporean and urban Sydney-Australian cultural influences", but the novel does not," he argues, "endorse a singular essence of Chineseness or Australianness" (447), even though, towards the end, Grace still recognises "the blood of generations of dutiful Chinese daughters flowing in my veins" (282, qtd. Aitken, 451). Pandora, the Singaporean mother of Grace, sank into mental dis.ease and killed herself. Aitken says that the depiction of Grace, along with that of Lian in Eva Sallis's *City of Sealions*, offers "no glib solution to questions of authentic identity"; both are, he says, "too complex to be reduced to allegorical symbols of multiculturalism's success stories" (448). For Aitken, both Teo and Sallis can be read as "fictive hybrids springing up like weeds at the more manicured boundary between communities defined by nationalism" (452).

Dorothy Wang's reading of Simone Lazaroo's *The World Waiting To Be Made* (1994) is that it "counters the discourses of individualism and self-discovery that tend to absorb so much writing by ethnic and immigrant writers" (Gilbert 2000, 49). The narrator returns to Singapore, and rejects material possessions as does Uncle Linus, the wise bomoh: she turns away from "seeking the world waiting to be made in better status, houses, cars, possessions" (Lazaroo, 269).

In *Playing Madame Mao*, Lau ironically depicts an almost carnivalesque but ultimately macabre abandonment of possessions in a block of flats in Singapore:

Out goes the television, the kitchen chairs, iron pipes, ironing board, cupboards, dumbbells, bicycle wheels, potted plants, bamboo poles...might as well chuck this...never liked it...my jade statue of Kwak Yin! What need do we have for material possessions?... And down the chute for the garbageman to discover in the mornings: dead babies, mostly female. ... Who knows from which floor the baby comes hurtling down? In a block of anonymous flats all alike, neighbours crammed together unwilling to listen, to see, there is too much noise, too much vision, it is better to tune out and watch television. (168-9)

Both writers can be read as offering critiques of capitalism and materialism as connected to oppression, especially of women, of combining the personal with the political.

Lau Siew Mei, in *Playing Madame Mao* develops a complicated crossover between Chiang Ching, Mao's wife in China, and an actress with the same name in Singapore. The latter's husband is a journalist who is jailed for dissidence, and she is friendly with a journalist named Roxanne (the American, Roxanne Witke was the biographer of Chiang Ching).

Wang writes of *The World Waiting To Be Made*:

By showing how "Australianness", "Asianness" and individuality are commodities to be bought and sold, Lazaroo makes it clear that the formation of an "Australian" "self" and indeed the very notion of identity becomes for the narrator inseparable from the activity of consumption and of self-commodification, the ultimate causes of which lie outside the individual. (Gilbert, 49)

Beth Yahp, from a Chinese-Malay background, came from Malaysia to Australia in 1984. Kirpal Singh says of *The Crocodile Fury* (1992): "Yahp has no agenda other than portraying the dawn of a female/feminist consciousness, a woman coming to terms with the myths and rituals handed down to her by her grandmother." (Ommundsen 2001, 153)^[1] In Singh's view, Yahp's novel does not contain "diasporic anxiety" (taking diaspora to have two possible meanings of "a state of existence" and "a state of mind") (Ommundsen 2001, 155). But unlike the work of many of the other writers who might be positioned as Asian Australian, Yahp does not set her work partly or wholly in Australia, but creates what Miriam Wei Wei Lo describes as "the representation of a Chinese subjectivity in a migrant situation not located in Australia" (Miriam Lo, 57), in Malaysia. Yahp's novel has three voices: the narrator, the narrator's mother and the narrator's grandmother. Lo suggests: "The grandmother's voice frequently *interposes* with stories of Chinese or Malay myths and superstitions" (59); "the grandmother both mimics and appropriates Western culture in a way which defies the supposed distribution of power" (60)—for example, in exercising despotic relationships. "The mother loses the grandmother's worldview" and she gains release from a painful past (64). Lo also discusses Yahp's use of the myth of the crocodile in the novel, and its uncertain origins in travelling from China to Malaysia or back. The grandmother's crocodile is associated with male sexuality and fears of it (66); the mother's is the tale of the Lizard Boy who fathered her child and became a bandit king. Pillai further reminds us that "bandits" were, in 1948, "the Communist insurgents who lived in the inner depths of the Malayan jungle, fighting against the British re-occupation of Malaya" (Pillai, 179). For the narrator, the crocodile is something

else again: “When the crocodile fury hits there’s a wild urge to run. The in-between time is over, the child shed, the young woman assumed.” (325) But, “The croc doesn’t burn up the past, he sifts through it like treasure” (Yahp, 324).

Lau Siew Mei’s uses mythical animals and Chinese spirituality in her writing in the story “The Mirror People”, in which the narrator sees a fish forming in her mirror.

The discolouration in the mirror was increasingly visible. It really looks like a fish, I said to Lee. It is a fish, she said. It’s a Chinese legend, don’t you know it? Once the world of mirrors and the world of men were not as they are now, separate. One night, the mirror creatures invaded the earth and the Yellow Emperor imprisoned them behind their glass, but one day they will break their barriers.

The first to awaken is the fish. (177)

The story plays with elements developed in *Playing Madame Mao*. Ching’s husband, Tang sees the fox woman on the first day of his hunger strike, and resists the mirror (257-60). Ching has no defences either, simply from being a woman, when the guards come for her.

Women, we all know, are demons disguised. Yes, children, next door a demon woman used to live. She howled for mortal flesh. The way to catch her was to show her her face in a mirror. Demon women are terribly afraid of seeing their own reflections. This is because underneath their disguises they are nothing more than the most hideous beings. The woman next door was one such being. But she has been taken away.

Behind cloth or lace curtains, faces partially hidden, the neighbours, male and female, children and elderly, observe the demon woman shrieking, and the car door slamming on her. (290)

Hsu-Ming Teo, in discussing the communication of cultural difference in literary works, talks of past cultural connections through a metaphor of amputation; one can remain aware of “phantom limbs” that one previously had even though they may have been severed (Teo 2008, 521). Teo is also aware, though, that

many Australians who are haunted by the phantom limb of the homely white nation—increasingly idealized and homogenized through nostalgic remembrance as time passes, its fissures of unease and difference erased—experience this sense of alienation from home as well, particularly when the physical geography of their neighbourhoods are transformed and become “unheimlich”—disconcertingly uncanny and unfamiliar. (2008, 528)