



Eternal Seeking

— *A Research on Literary
Tradition in Chinese American
Women's Literature*

无尽的探寻

— 对美国华裔女性文学传统的研究

Compiled by Cai Qing & Zhang Hongwei

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蔡 青

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Chapter One

Introduction

I . A Brief Introduction of Identity-seeking Theme in Chinese American Women's Literature

Asian American literature could be defined as works by people of Asian descendents who were either born in or have migrated to North America^①. It gathers together writers of diverse national origins, including Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, Filipinos, south Asians (Indians, Pakistanis, etc.). The term Asian American writer is often also extended to include Asian Canadian writers. Chinese American writers may trace their ancestry to China and Singapore. When Chinese American literature is mentioned, it might refer to three types of definitions according to Zhang Ziqing:

Firstly, it refers to works written in English by Chinese American writers who were born in, were brought up, were educated, work and live in the United States.

Secondly, it refers to works written in English by Chinese American writers who were born in China but receive education, work and live in the United States.

Thirdly, it refers to works written in English by Chinese American writers who were born in foreign countries (excluding China and America) but grow up, receive education, work and live in the United

① King-kok Cheung, *An interethnic companion to Asian American Literature*, 1

States^①.

Defining the border of Chinese American literature is not an easy task. No matter defining it by geographical and national border, by ancestry or by cultural identity can arouse controversial issues. A good definition of Chinese American literature needs to avoid simple justification of the criterion. In this book, we tend to define Chinese American literature from a broader sense. Chinese American literature refers to works written in English by people of Chinese descent who were either born in or who have migrated to the United States. Since it is a book dedicated to academic studies on Chinese American female writers, therefore, famous writers' names collected in this book are: Sui Sin Far (Edith Eaton), Chuang Hua, Lin Taiyi, Adet Lin, Jade Snow Wong, Amy Tan, and Mai Mai Sze.

Chinese American literature has witnessed a fast growth in recent 30 years and has become an important part of American literature. Chinese emigrants and their descendants in America were located in the conflicts of Eastern and Western cultures. The merging and conflicts of the two cultures are reflected in their literary works. As a product of the world migration phenomenon, and under the global trend of multiculturalism, Chinese American literature has received increasing attention from literary circles home and abroad in recent years. It is of great significance to study Chinese American literature nowadays.

Firstly, Chinese American literature studies can help researchers have a full understanding of American literature and anticipate the trend for its development. Secondly, Chinese American literature studies will contribute to a better understanding of American public thoughts in the mid and late 20th century, and therefore facilitate cultural exchange between China and the United States. Furthermore, for Chinese scholars,

① 张子清《与亚裔美国文学共生共荣的华裔美国文学》(《华裔美国文学译丛》总序)

Chinese American literature studies can improve our understanding of Chinese heritage through re-examining the cultural heritage from Chinese American writers' perspectives. Generally, as Elaine H. Kim has claimed that, Chinese American literary studies are not only of significance in the literature level but also of social review function and of historical research value.

The fact that most works of great influence and well received by the reading public and critics are those by Chinese American female writers is one of the reasons for this book to choose Chinese American female writers as its academic focus. This is clearly seen in the enthusiastic reception from the reading public and critics to works by Maxine Hong Kingston, Amy Tan, Gish Jen, and many other established or emerging women authors.

Another important reason for studying Chinese American women writers as a group is that these women writers break stereotyped female characters in male writers' works through voicing themselves. These Chinese American women writers have looked within and written out of themselves. Besides describing their living experience in the United States, their literary creation proclaimed a most fundamental message: the affirmation of self in opposition to all forms of domination and negation. A comprehensive study of Chinese American women writers is therefore of great significance.

As we mentioned before, Chinese Americans are Americans who are of Chinese descent. Chinese Americans constitute one group of the Overseas Chinese and are a subgroup of Asian Americans. Numbering 2.7 million in 2000, Chinese Americans make up 22.4% of Asian Americans (larger than any other Asian American subgroup), and constitute nearly 1% of the United States as a whole.

If it is defined by citizenship, then legally all ethnic Chinese born in

the United States are American citizens as a result of the Fourteenth Amendment and the 1898 United States v. Wong Kim Ark Supreme Court decision. Upon naturalization, immigrants are required to renounce their former citizenship. The People's Republic of China does not recognize dual citizenship and considers this a renunciation of PRC citizenship.

Chinese Americans have made many large strides in American society. Today, Chinese Americans engage in every facet of American life including the military, elected offices, media, academia, and sports. Many Chinese Americans (along with other Asian Americans) have blended the American lifestyle over the years in with a more natively Asian one, further enhancing the accuracy of term, melting pot.

Perhaps the most common landmark of the Chinese impact in America are the prolific Chinese restaurants that have cropped up in every corner of the U.S. Along with these culinary traditions, Chinese heritage is celebrated not only by most Chinese Americans, but also mainstream America; the most prominent of these is the Chinese New Year celebration.

Although Chinese Americans grow up learning English, some of them tend to make their children learn Chinese too, due to a feeling of pride in their cultural ancestry. However, some Chinese Americans make assimilation a priority and prefer not to make their children learn Chinese, instead letting them completely immerse in an English-speaking environment, whilst others make it the top priority for their children to speak both the native tongue and English together.

Cities with large Chinese American populations include New York, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Houston, Seattle, Chicago, and Philadelphia. In these cities, there are often multiple Chinatowns, an older one and a newer one which is populated by immigrants from the 1960s and 1970s. In

some areas, Chinese Americans maintain close relationships with other Asian groups, particularly Vietnamese Americans. These relationships are helped by the fact that many Vietnamese Americans are ethnic overseas Chinese, although most ethnic Chinese Vietnamese Americans do not classify themselves as Vietnamese American.

In addition to the big cities, smaller pockets of Chinese Americans are also dispersed in rural towns, often university towns, throughout the United States. Chinese Americans formed nearly three percent of California's population in 2000, and over one percent in the Northeast. Hawaii, with its historically heavily-Asian population, was nearly ten percent Chinese American.

As a whole, Chinese American populations continue to grow at a rapid rate due to immigration. However, they also on average have birth rates lower than those of Caucasian Americans, and as such their population is aging relatively quickly. In recent years, adoption of young children, especially girls, from China has also brought a boost to the numbers of Chinese Americans, although most of the adoptions appear to have been done by white parents.

The Chinese American identities in the United States are quite varied. There are two main aspects to that identity: ethnicity and culture. A person can claim the Chinese American identity through either his / her ethnic affiliation or cultural affiliation, or both. For example, some Chinese Americans identify themselves as ethnic Chinese, but not cultural Chinese, and some Chinese Americans identify themselves as cultural Chinese but not ethnic Chinese.

If a person claims the Chinese American identity through his / her ethnic affiliation, he / she might belong to the following groups of people according to the classification on the encyclopedia quoted from the website of answers.com:

He / she might be: first generation Chinese Americans (recent immigrants, either residents or naturalized citizens); or 1.5 generation Chinese Americans; or second generation and later generation Chinese Americans, also known as American-born Chinese or ABC; or Chinese students studying in American universities or Chinese children adopted into non-Chinese American families.

Many Chinese Americans, mostly those who are immigrants, identify mainly as Chinese or Overseas Chinese without much identification as being American, even though in many cases they may have American citizenship or have resided in the U.S. for long periods of time. These Chinese Americans still consider their place of origin to be their homeland, and feel that they are sojourners who are displaced from home, as opposed to considering the U.S. as their home and are ethnic minorities living in their homeland. These people belong to the Chinese-centric identification group.

Some other people agree with the cultural identification. They consider themselves as Chinese Americans through their identification with the Chinese culture, but they may or may not identify themselves as ethnic Chinese.

Some decide that neither Chinese ethnic, nor cultural affiliation is appropriate and self-identify as just American. So they claim their American identity.

Still, there is another way of classification, namely, bicultural identity. Many Chinese Americans claim bicultural identity - affiliating with both Chinese culture and mainstream American culture.

Chinese Americans are facing the problem of identification, therefore,

the theme of searching for self and search for identity naturally become Chinese American writers' main concern in their creation.

Then what is the definition of identity? The word can be defined in the dictionary as the following:

1. The collective aspect of the set of characteristics by which a thing is definitively recognizable or known.
2. The set of behavioral or personal characteristics by which an individual is recognizable as a member of a group.
3. The quality or condition of being the same as something else.
4. The distinct personality of an individual regarded as a persisting entity; individuality.
5. Information, such as an identification number, used to establish or prove a person's individuality, as in providing access to a credit account.
6. Mathematics.
 - a. An equation that is satisfied by any number that replaces the letter for which the equation is defined/
 - b. Identity element.

In the encyclopedia, identity, in philosophy, is a problem of distinguishing sameness from change, or unity from diversity and is primarily examined in connection with personal identity, universals, and the law of identity in logic. In personal identity the concern has been to determine whether anything in the body or mind remains constant; philosophers have reached no general agreement on this point. The term identity has also become increasingly important in modern psychology, largely through the work of Erik Erikson. He has used the term to designate a sense of self that develops in the course of a man's life and that both relates him to and sets him apart from his social milieu. The

terms identity crisis and identity confusion introduced by Erikson, have gained a wide usage, which often varies from their intended technical sense.

In literary perspective on identity, if we tend to agree what has been stated in Ruth Yu's paper in which a comparison was made between the stages of development in Jewish American literature and Chinese American literature. Jewish American literature expresses four stages of the evolving selfhood characterizing their Americanization. In the first stage, the writers, caught between two cultures, engage in preserving their former self while embracing the new world. In the second stage, as the children of immigrants emerge as writers, they strive to lose their marginality as Americans but ultimately feel trapped in a world not of their own making. In the third stage, the strained relationship between the self and society relaxes as more of the social and cultural barriers are removed by the self's adaptation to American society. Generally a flowering of ethnic literature occurs at this point. Many of the writers whose works exemplify this stage are major literary figures in the larger society. If they deal with ethnic material, this becomes universalized to represent the human condition. In the fourth and final stage, the self appears secure in its dual identity. No longer preoccupied merely with the quest for selfhood, the writers turn to artistic quests, in search of affirmation of their art. They, the descendants of immigrants, now reach back to their earlier avatars and the source of their ethnic heritage. Compared with the Jewish writers, most writers of Chinese descent tarry longer in the first two stages, only one writer has entered the third stage, and none is found in the fourth. Social barriers and racial differences have prolonged their self-perception as outsiders and thus hampered their