

## Reflection on Cultural Identity for New Generation of Chinese American Women Writers

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**Abstract:** Compared with the older generation of Chinese-American female writers, the new generation of Chinese-American female writers have properly connected the two cultures and tried to achieve a balanced coexistence of diverse cultures. They get Chinese blood, Chinese culture, and American life, modern social consciousness in the main body of Chinese American women unified. This paper takes Lan Samantha Chang and Kim Wong Keltner as research objects to deeply analyze how they establish their cultural identity under the multicultural background through their works and writing techniques. These Chinese American female writers have been active in American literature by prominent style of writing. The ways of exploiting narrative techniques, exploring cultural motivation behind the narration and reflection on cultural identity are more significant for the readers.

### 1. Introduction

China story told by a new generation of Chinese American writers that is not limited to traditional narrative model. As the representative of Chinese American female writers, Lan Samantha Chang and Kim Wong Keltner could exploit Chinese memory from the older generation. For them, they no longer placed themselves in the position of “marginal” or “otherness” in American society, but placed themselves in the perspective of “assimilation”, that is, the perspective of the Americanization of ethnic writer. Therefore, some characteristics of American academic writing displayed in their works. With subverting the traditional creative methods, they explored new immigrant stories as writers in the cultural centre.

### 2. Writers

#### 2.1 Introduction to Lan Samantha Chang

As for the new generation, Lan Samantha Chang was one of the representative of Chinese American female writers, who can be praised as famous as Amy Tan and Gish Jin. Lan Samantha Chang was born in Appleton, Wisconsin. Due to her parents came to the United States to escape the war, she was considered as the second generation of immigrants. Chang has been fond of reading since her childhood. When she applied for university and chose her major, she abandoned literature for medicine under her mother's pressure. However, after several months of study, she told her mother that her real interests deviated from her parents' expectation. She had to admit her great interest in literature. After being an editor in *Yale Daily News*, she thought that the job was not the most suitable job for her. Later, she switched her research to East-Asia study. During her study, she gradually began to understand the life of her parents. Her parents became the most influential and important people in her life, and she was willing to learn more about her parents' story and the country, China, where she had never been to.

After receiving her master's degrees, in 2005, she was appointed the director of writers' workshop in University of Iowa, who was the first Chinese writer as well as the first female writer. Her most representative works include *Hunger* and *Heritage*. In *Hunger*, the experience of Chinese American immigrant families and their complex family relations and conflicts were vividly presented to the readers. As a new generation of Chinese American female writer, Chang presented

some new elements in her works, which differed from previous writers.

The story takes place in Brooklyn, New York, and it tells the story about a Chinese man, Tian, who immigrates to the United States in order to realize his music dream. Tian comes to New York and experiences the collapse of his music dream and the failure of his career. Chang adopted an uneasy but reliable strategy to deal with the pain of her characters' immigrant experience by her depiction of protagonists' inner struggles, complexity and remorse.

## 2.2 Introduction to Kim Wong Keltner

Kim Wong Keltner mainly wrote about the course of urban women's growth and struggle among the new generation of Chinese American female writers. As the fourth generation of Chinese family in San Francisco, she was regarded as the third generation of Chinese who were born in the United States. Her family has been thoroughly Americanized, with the exception of her deceased grandmother, who has retained some of Chinese sense of life.

Her parents did not impose their expectations to her interests and future decision, which differ from other immigrants family. Since she had strong passion for literature from elementary school, her parents encouraged her to become a writer, with such an optimistic attitude, which inspired her to the University of California, Berkeley, where she received her two bachelor's degrees in arts and literature. Her personal experience propelled her lead an optimistic life, and she decided to be a happy Chinese American girl.

In her masterpiece, *The Dim Sum of All Things*, Lindsey Owyang, a young Chinese American woman, lives in the gap between Chinese and western cultures. Her parents are born in the United States and she doesn't know much about the culture of her ancestors. Lindsey attends Chinese school as a child, but she often skipped classes. In college, she majors in French literature. In life, Lindsey is only interested in white men rather than Chinese men. Wong's works can bring readers a sense of freedom and freshness all the time with her optimistic attitude as well as her liberal creative concept.

## 3. Writing Techniques

### 3.1 Chang's Ghost Narration

In American minority fictions, writers are often marveled at the extraordinary narrative techniques. These writers expressed their unspeakable experiences, memories, and traumas of their own ethnic group. Chinese female writers framed the whole work by choosing some unique narrative techniques. Chang's ghost narration is a unique narrative skill. In *Hunger*, as the mother as well as narrator, Min has already passed away, but she did not give up her responsibilities as a housewife and mother, nor did she give up the narrator's responsibilities. Even after she died, she was still waiting in the sky of the house, telling the story of her family to the readers as a ghost.

In *Hunger*, as the story teller and ghost narrator, Min was still shuttling back and forth between reality and dreams, hallucinations and meditation. These supernatural descriptions also form an obvious contrast with the objective reality, which forms a female ghost narration. In the story, we see that reminiscence, hallucinations and dreams are important ways for Min to survive in this difficult and dangerous environment. After they came to the United States, Min has not returned to their homeland, and her hometown only appeared in her dreams where she can not go back. As many works of American minority women writers, mother in the hometown was the source of wisdom and power for the heroine either in life or after death. What's even more amazing was that Min was able to see her hometown and relatives in dreams. Though Tian kept mouth to his hometown, life and parents, Min had insight into the secret of her husband's deep heart. In this story, the subconscious mind plays as important role as the conscious mind. Memories that are repressed in consciousness and can't to be remembered or mentioned when they wake up and come back in dreams and subliminal minds in various forms, which haunts the characters and makes them uneasy all their life. In *Hungry*, subconsciousness that appears constantly in the form of dreams, hallucinations and meditations makes the home an uneasy place, and its owners becomes strangers

even enemies. All of these are observed and experienced by women's perspective beyond reason and objectivity. And the unspeakable reality of life that the author can convey to readers through the mouth of ghost narrator by the narrative method of magic realism.

In this story we see that another obvious feature of the female's ghost narration is the narrator's "ghost talk". According to scholar Sarah Maitland, women can only express their own history in "ghost talk". As the tradition is under the shadow, man's past is missing or ambiguous, and man's identities as writers or as men's writing objects are either in the hands of men or taken away by men. Chang's novel once again confirms that in order to challenge the women's voiceless and suppressed in literary history, women should firstly create their own language system, and the so-called "ghost talk" is necessary for women to speak. Women's ghost narration is a challenge to women's marginal, small and childish situation, and Chinese American female writers complete their redemption by means of seeking the supernatural power to achieve the unattainable things.

The author's description of the critical state between life and death is so illusory and real that the readers has not been able to distinguish the narrator is the living or the death. From an objective perspective, the narrative can't be accomplished by a living narrator (that is, a living person), which transcends the narrator's objective vision that only ghosts can do it. What is presented is personal feelings of the narrator without expressing objective and rational discourse.

The time and space of ghosts are full of life, memory and privacy. It seems that ghost narration is absurd and illogical, but it's even more easy to exploit mysterious valley of their hearts where rational discourse cannot reach and realize. In *Hunger*, the ghost narration undoubtedly challenges our assumptions and beliefs about the world, reality and nature.

### 3.2 Wong's Creative Purpose

Wong has actually created a new narrative style. In the novel, young Chinese women live in romantic urban life. Although the search for Chinese culture roots has joined in the novel, it is obviously different from the previous "search for Chinese roots".

For Maxine Hong Kingston, Amy Tan and other Chinese writers, their works created Chinese-American women as protagonists, they excessively emphasize trials, prejudices and sorrows of life that have become almost a "tradition". In Wong's opinion, the novels take immigrant culture as the background to narrate Chinese story that will certainly be pain, but it doesn't mean some characters go through a hardship. "A lot of funny Asians, they like to laugh a lot". As for Wong, what her works be recognized by Chinese-American readers is important. There's a lot of material in her works, including jokes, that only Chinese people can understand.

As Wong says, her novels do try to run with the hare and hunt with the hounds. The biggest difference between Wong's novel and those of Amy Tan and Maxine Hong Kingston is that *The Dim Sum of All Things* aims at description of younger Chinese generation, which is the combination of *The Joy Luck Club* and *Bridget Jones's Diary* as well as a combination of *Mulan* and *Clueless*.

The reason why Wong's works can give readers a sense of freedom and freshness is her unrestrained creative ideas, in addition to her optimistic attitude.

Although Wong always wants to be a writer, she avoided the conventional approach of studying famous artists before writing her debut novel. From her own experience, Wong points out that those writers and artists who are busy listening to other people's opinions about their works will be interrupted, blocked, and thus lose their own thoughts. But those people who are committed to looking for recognition to acknowledge their creative efforts. She said that she wrote a book for herself, and she told herself that this book was going to be the best book she can make--she didn't need anybody's opinion.

Wong began writing *The Dim Sum of All Things* in 2000, and her motivation originally cherished her died grandmother. In her childhood, she was impressed with a group of elderly Chinese women chatting in mahjong. These childhood memories deepened the intimacy between her and her grandmother. After her grandmother's death, she wanted to write down her grandmother's story while it was fresh memory in her mind. The second reason for Wong's creation is because she wanted to communicate with her peers. For Chinese Americans, few young people can patiently

listen to the older generation about the past history.

While she was planning to write her novel, Wong often wandered around bookstores. She wanted to find out that in contemporary fiction the characteristics of the protagonist who can gain her sympathy and approval. Of the many works she has read, it's basically all about young, well-educated women who made balance through work, family and relationships. But none of the protagonists in books were Chinese-American women like Wong. Indeed, what Wong represents an important characteristic of the Chinese new generation is that they cannot quote a Chinese proverb, but can finish the conversation with the Brady Bunch and recite them all; they know nothing about Confucius and can't speak Cantonese or Mandarin, but they can take years to learn the grammar rules of the west and to connect the irregular French verbs together. On account of being unable to find the right heroine, Wong decided to write about her own experience.

#### **4. Cultural Connotation**

The political and social environment in which the new generation of Chinese American women writers grow up is more friendly and peaceful than that of the previous generation of Chinese American women writers. Therefore, the new generation of Chinese American women writers do not pay attention to serious themes such as race and politics with a strong sense of mission.

The mother-daughter relationship is no longer the main theme in the story, and daughter and father are no longer absentees. Above all, it really realizes the digestion of the image of "the other". In addition to the theme transformation of female relations, there has been a breakthrough in the shaping of female images, and the subjective consciousness of the new generation writers has been further sublimated. In the 1990s, the images of Chinese women were no longer seeking passive compromise and mediation in the cultural conflict between China and the west. They began to seek the self-conformity in the opposite of contradiction and form the complementary multiple construction, then they walk toward the ideal construction of cultural identity for Chinese women.

In these writers' novels, the heroines always had a sense of seeking roots. However, the object of their seek roots is not the "native place of culture" in the previous Chinese-American literature works. Their subjective consciousness has been sublimated after the 1990s, and they paid more attention to women's psychological problems and spiritual world. Perhaps some ethnic elements were presented by plot description in these women's stories, but the confusion or psychological appeal with ethnic characteristics and the causes may better reflect the new universal problems in the process of maturity for racial diversity in the context of globalization.

Therefore, the new generation of Chinese American female writers paid more attention to the satisfaction of subjective desire and psychological or mental disorders treatment. In the face of the pressure of dual cultures, they gave up thinking mode of binary opposition that regularly formed by the previous Chinese-American female writers. They did this by looking for integrating point of two different cultures and tried to achieve a balanced coexistence of two cultures. Chinese blood, Chinese culture and American life style, modern social consciousness are unified with the female subject. They no longer took the traditional Chinese American writers' way to solve the confusion of subjects by means of social appeal. That is to say, it was a consensus for new generation of Chinese American female writers that the change of external environment would have a great impact on the construction of subjective consciousness. However, if the subject, that is, the internal individual does not deeply reflect and exploit, but it blindly attribute the emergency of contradictions to the social environment, in that way, the subjective consciousness can't really go towards health and independence.

#### **5. Conclusion**

In the 1960s, American culture began to change from "melting pot" to "multiculturalism", which insisted that American culture was no longer the composition of a single culture, but a mixture of other cultures and different races. Multiculturalism creates cultural mobility and a relatively liberal social environment for minorities in the United States. At the same time, cultural identity of Chinese

Americans are mixed. In the 1990s, Chinese Americans no longer stood on the edge but crossed the edge and became free to walk across the boundaries of multiple cultures. In the late 20th century, Chinese American women's literature not only had the phenomenon of trans-boundary for both ethnic and cultural identity, but also tended to be mixed and diversified in the selection of the material range of works, which expanded the fixed mode of Chinese American, and then opened up a wider range of development.

Therefore, under the influence of multiculturalism, the works of the new generation of Chinese-American female writers with the characteristics of multiculturalism writing reflect on humanity and philosophy of life, aesthetic consciousness and artistic expression.

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