

■ Identity Politics and (Re)Construction: Toni Morrison Studies in China

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Abstract

As an Afro-American female writer who has received many prestigious awards for literary writing, including the Nobel Prize in 1993, Toni Morrison has drawn great scholarly attention both at home and abroad. Her fiction offers such a profoundly moving meditation on racial, cultural and gender issues in American society that the readers find her texts indispensable to the understanding of what it means to be an African American. Ever since Morrison was first introduced to China in 1981 by Dong Dingshan in Dushu, Chinese critics have written remarkable reviews on her highly acclaimed novels. This essay intends to draw an outline of the evolution of Morrison criticism in China, focusing on how the Chinese scholars respond to Morrison's view of identity politics as reflected in her novels and in what sense the Morrison criticism in China is similar to and different from that in China.

Keywords: Toni Morrison, identity politics, Morrison criticism in China

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The 1993 Nobel Prize laureate Toni Morrison now has established a stable status in canonical American literature. Her brilliant novels have been widely enjoyed by readers of different ethnic groups, thoroughly explored by the critics both at home and abroad and scholarly discussed in such university curricula as feminist literary criticism, Afro-American literature, and Afro-American cultural studies. The numbers of monographs, reviews, journal articles and MA theses and PhD dissertations on Toni Morrison have been increasing and the critical approaches to Morrison have become diversified. It is no exaggeration to say that as an ethnic minority female writer, Toni Morrison has now established herself as a significant novelist in contemporary literary arena. Since both the Western critics and Chinese scholars have spent strenuous efforts in evaluating Morrison's works and got remarkable achievements, it is high time that a comparative criticism on Morrison studies was made so that the Morrison scholars may communicate with and learn from each other. This essay intends to draw an outline of the evolution of Morrison criticism in China, focusing on how the Chinese scholars respond to Morrison's view of identity politics as reflected in her novels and in what sense the Morrison criticism in China is similar to and different from that in the U.S. The Morrison studies are significant in the sense that they help people understand how Morrison's stories depict the lives of the marginalized minority people in terms of race, gender and class and how her novels address to readers the issue of viewing the cultural identity in the age of globalization.

Morrison's Dynamic View on Identity Politics

Identities are ways in which people come to understand who they are in relationship to others and the social world. An individual's self-awareness may be based on race, ethnicity, class, gender, religion, physical ability, sexual orientation, etc. Social movements can also shape an individual's self because when individuals come together to enact some social changes, they tend to create a unified way of seeing themselves and the world. It is usually easier for members of the same social group to use their similar experiences as a source of collective resistance to their commonly felt injustice. Identity politics then is the political activities founded in the oppressed members of certain social group to change the social status and liberate themselves from social inequality. Proponents of identity politics believe that it is important to unite those who confront similar experiences based on social group characteristics because the same identity groups share an identity and therefore the same political strategies (Ryan 1). Based on some similar experiences, members of an oppressed group may organize to change their status in the social

structure. So identity politics played a very important role in the civil rights movement of Martin Luther King and the Black Power Movement, where black activists called for a collective identity to fight against the horrific assaults of the white racist rulers. In order to liberate black people from the burden of racial oppression and discrimination, Afro-American people have been frequently called on to unite together for meaningful social change, and they are more inclined to help each other to end racial inequality. It is true that Morrison's novels reveal her appreciation of identity politics as an important strategy of fighting against the dominant white cultural hegemony, her attitude toward identity politics is far more complex than those of the black nationalists. Her later novels, with *Tar Baby* (1981) as the transitional work of her oeuvre, show her opinion that racial politics cannot be simply premised on the monolithic collective identity. In *Tar Baby*, *Jazz* (1992), *Paradise* (1998), and *Love* (2003), she seems to focus more on the internal conflicts and intra-racial differences among the blacks. Besides, as an Afro-American female writer, Morrison undoubtedly stresses the bonding and solidarity of black women in the double adversities of racial and gender discrimination, but in novels like *Tar Baby* and *Love*, Morrison also intends to reveal that within the category of black women, there are some other identities that work to keep them from recognizing gender commonalities. To Toni Morrison, identity is a social construction that is always fluid and multilayered. That is why Morrison in 1992 wrote that "It is clear to the most reductionist intellect . . . that the time for indiscriminating racial unity has passed" (Dubey 2). Apparently she disagrees with the black nationalists' view that black people share a unified set of political agenda and argues for more plural forms of resistance. So in incorporating this dynamic view in her novels, Morrison actually goes beyond the identity politics advocated by black activists and thus avoids falling into the trap of essentialism exposed in identity politics.

Morrison's eight well acclaimed novels reveal an ongoing process of her meditation on black identity. Her early novels are very good evidence of trying to unmask the dire consequences of West-centered hegemony and dominant white discourse and culture. *The Bluest Eye* (1970), for example, by depicting the black girl Pecola who believes herself to be ugly and prays every night for blue eyes like Shirley Temple's, unveils how the dominant cultural values of physical beauty assimilate and internalize the black individuals, hence leading to the devastating effects on them. The black community, in accepting the white cultural values and totally denying their own cultural tradition, is apparently not as nurturing as those in her later novels. Pecola's parents, cut off from the nurturing collective memory of black cultural tradition, alienate their own helpless daughter and breed no love for her; consequently she goes mad. Although it uneasily

tolerates Sula's freedom and defiance, the Bottom community in *Sula* (1974), however, is punitive to Sula because of her unusual sexual promiscuity with white men, and even with her best friend Nel's husband, her indifference to her mother's death and her sending of her grandmother to the old folk house. It is true that the Bottom community excludes Sula because of her violation of some group norms, but it is also a nurturing place where Sula finally returned after ten years of absence. *Song of Solomon* (1977), on the other hand, gives a most positive depiction of the black community which provides a crucial balance between individual liberation and reciprocal obligation (Rubenstein 152). The novel describes how the protagonist Milkman Dead tries to search for his identity with the help of his aunt Pirate. His immature, selfish personality and his incapacity of loving any other one result from his own father who accepts the dominant white values of "owning things." Only when Milkman abandons the pursuit of material values and embraces the connection with his ancestors can he find himself. By traveling southward and tracing the family history, Milkman is finally accepted by the black community. So in these three novels Morrison seems to convey the idea that black communities can function as structures that sustain and preserve the individual, if they firmly stick to their own cultural tradition.

With the exception of *Beloved* (1987), from the fourth novel *Tar Baby* onward, however, Morrison begins to question the unified function of the black community and treats the difficulties among members of various economic levels within the black community. Besides she no longer focuses exclusively on the black community, setting her novel in the Caribbean and thus incorporating several different cultures, including the island natives, Philadelphia Negroes, and Western imperialists. All of them are mutually dependent on one another and are alienated from any sense of community. Even within the category of black people, there are differences and contentions among the Philadelphia Negroes, the Caribbean natives, the black cultural bearer Son and the black cultural orphan Jadine. In accepting the dominant white values, Jadine is also different from those black women in *Eloe* whose roles are mainly confined to the domestic sphere. Son and Jadine are both attractive to each other, but their adherence to different cultural values make them finally depart from each other. It is not the differences between Jadine and Son that separate them; it is Son's refusal to recognize the differences. Should one undergo a painful process of stripping away their fixed identity and become multicultural, deciding what to keep, what to eliminate and what to change? Can racial unity offer a clear alternative to racist oppression? These are the questions raised by Toni Morrison in *Tar Baby* that leave an open ending to the readers.

Dedicated to the sixty million who died as a result of slavery, Morrison's fifth

novel *Beloved* narrates the black female slave Sethe's infanticide and the retrospection of the miserable experience in the midst of the community. Morrison highlights the interdependence between the black community and its members to resist the inhumanity of the slavery. By retelling the fragmented experience of Sethe, Morrison recalls the traumatic past of the blacks and speaks the unspeakable truth from the unconsciousness of the black people. In order to fight for the basic human rights, the powerless black people have to form a kind of racial solidarity to resist the inhumane slavery system. So because of the shared adversity, identity politics in *Beloved* is a workable strategy that can resist the oppression and heal the traumatic members. Morrison in this novel examines the black and white relationship, highlights the blacks' oppression by the racists and brings the urgency of anti-racism into light.

After exposing the direct consequences of slavery in *Beloved* (1987), Morrison begins to talk about differences within black communities in *Paradise* (1998). Like *Beloved* and *Jazz*, *Paradise* examines the traumatic history to explore the complex status of black identity and community. It describes at the beginning a brutal black male-led assault on a group of women in the convent who are of different economic background and have accepted into their refuge those individuals who have been marginalized by the rigid code behavior of Ruby. To the male residents of Ruby, the convent which contains adulterers, alcoholics, and unmarried pregnant women, represents a threat to the way of living of the all-black town. The story intends to critique the residents of Ruby who, as the descendents of former slaves, wish to guard against oppression by establishing a rigid, isolationist code of behavior that refuses to allow any new ideas, beliefs or ethnicities to interfere with their sense of racial pride and community (Romero 416). *Paradise* is written in response to the failure of Civil Rights Movement and the Black Nationalist Movement to bring social justice to the oppressed black people by way of advocating unified identity politics. It explores how dreams of utopia based on the exclusive black identity and community finally lead to internal conflict within the black people.

Morrison's most recent novel *Love* is another fiction that reveals her concern with the multiplicity of African-American identities. In this novel Morrison rethinks the relation between race and class by indicating that black identity is not necessarily linked to black poverty. The story tells about a rich black man Bill Cosey who runs a hotel resort for rich African-Americans and how his marriage to an 11-year old low-born black girl Heed Johnson who is his granddaughter's friend results in the division within his family. Bill Cosey, the patriarch of the Cosey family, is himself a complex figure. He is on the one hand presented as a model for self-advancement, a gracious master of ceremonies, and a philanthropist who

“helped more colored people here than forty years of government programs” (Morrison 9), but on the other hand he maintains his patriarchal power by taking control of Heed’s future, destroying the female bonding between Heed and his granddaughter Christine, and hurting the feelings of the other women who make up and sustain his household. As the son of a police informer who betrayed the blacks in the dark trade, Bill Cosey wants to redeem his father’s guilt by doing good to the black people, but his wealth and fortune also makes him treat Heed as a breeder slave, hoping to educate her to become what he desires her to be. As the narrator L. concedes, Bill Cosey is a “good bad man or a bad good man” (Morrison 200). This ambivalence of his character makes one unable to judge him in a simplistic way. The novel depicts him as a man of power, but at the same time shows the devastating consequence of his abuse of power. His marriage to Heed makes Heed and Christine fall into the long-term conflict. Since he has all the attributes of a father figure both to Christine who has lost her own father and to his very young wife Heed who calls him “papa”, the conflict between Heed and Christine actually becomes the contest over the “father’s” love. They compete over who is favored by the father-figure, who has the right to inherit the property and to turn the other out of the house. So even within the same category of black women, Heed and Christine couldn’t form a sense of solidarity due to Bill Cosey’s transgressive sexuality and his failure to foster a sense of family and protect his family members. With the help of the narrator L. who embodies love, the long-time enmity between Heed and Christine is finally resolved. By depicting the black family strife, Morrison continues her critique of black patriarchy and unequal gender relations within the family. Bill Cosey’s uneven relationship with Heed both in terms of economic status and age gap shows the class and gender inequalities within the black community. Besides, his resort catering exclusively to the black bourgeoisie exposes the duplication of the segregationist practices of the white ethnocentric racists. From the story of *Love*, we learn that racial politics is no longer based on the monolithic black community because the intra-racial differences of gender and class demand new forms of political solidarity.

In conclusion, Morrison’s eight novels reveal a process of her meditation on the possibility of black individuals’ search for fluid identities and a sense of subjectivity in the interweaving situation of black and white culture. She subtly focuses in her early novels on the black-white conflicts and critiques the splitting off of black individuals from their own cultural tradition and the complete adoption of dominant white values, whereas in her later novels she pays more attention to black contentions within the black communities. Therefore, to Morrison’s mind the resistance to white racist oppression is far more complex than the employment of a unified strategy of identity politics.

Chinese Scholars' Response to Morrison's View

The young Chinese scholar Tang Hongmei mentioned in her monograph *Race, Gender and Identity: A Study of Novels by Alice Walker and Toni Morrison* (zhongzu, xingbie, yu shenfenrentong: meiguo heiren nuzuo jia ailisiwoke tuonimolisen xiaoshuo chuanguo yanjiu) that although Morrison was first introduced to China in the 1981 journal *Reading* (dushu) by Dong Dingshan, her novels were more simply introduced than critically explored between 1981 and 1993 (Tang 19). This is indeed the case. Wang Jiaxiang expressed her regret when recalling the fact that because of her lack of knowledge she missed a very good opportunity of communicating with Morrison when the novelist visited Beijing Foreign Languages Institute in 1985 (Wang Jiaxiang 11). Before she won the Nobel Prize, Morrison was not very much introduced and analyzed in China, but the situation gradually changed after the mid-1990s. Her novels were widely read and have inspired a large number of reviews, essays, translations, and book-length studies. The first systematic study of Toni Morrison in China is marked by Wang Shouren and Wu Xinyun's monograph *Gender, Race and Culture: Creation of Toni Morrison's Novels* (xingbie zhongzu wenhua: tuonimolisen de xiaoshuochuanguo) (1999) which gives a comprehensive evaluation of Morrison's first seven novels. By adding the analysis of Morrison's most recent novel *Love* in the second edition published in 2004, Wang and Wu present a panoramic view of Morrison's creation. They focus on Morrison's dealing with the black identity in American historical and cultural contexts and give a thorough exploration on the themes and artistic achievements of her novels. The monograph, for instance, in discussing *The Bluest Eye*, points out that although the Breed-love family are the victims of a racist, class-conscious society that has forced them to live unnatural lives, it is their internalization of the mainstream white supremacist attitude and beauty standard that has led to Pecola's tragedy, exposing how the black community in the novel fails to sustain the protagonist due to this internalization. It then emphasizes the importance of black community by demonstrating how the Bottom community is at first punitive to the rebellious Sula and then sustains her before her death, how Milkman in *Song of Solomon* succeeds in embarking on a quest for identity with the help of the black pioneer character Pirate, and how the black community in *Beloved* forms a strong solidarity to heal the traumatic experience of Sethe under the inhumane slavery system. By examining how black cultural, communal values and beliefs contribute to a protagonist's search for identity, the monograph successfully presents Morrison's view on how the community can or should offer to its members the ways of creating a sense of self-awareness, alleviating at the same time the alienation and oppression felt by the

black minorities. It conveys the idea that the bonding among the black community members is a workable strategy in fighting against racial discrimination. In *Tar Baby*, Wang and Wu demonstrates how Morrison reveals the tension between the European-educated black heroine Jadine Childs who has no connection to black cultural tradition and the Florida-born black man Son who clings to the black cultural tradition, exposing Morrison's doubt on the monolithic black solidarity. The monograph also focuses on the discussion of intra-racial conflicts as revealed in such novels as *Jazz*, *Paradise* and *Love*, showing that there might be significant differences among black people due to their different location in the intersections of class, gender, and cultural views. It responds to Morrison's message reflected in these novels that people who look alike may not act the same. Racism has long been the predominant problem confronting African-American people, but in the mean time class struggle and sexist attitude among the black males may also tear the black solidarity apart. This opinion is clearly shown in the authors' discussion of Morrison's later novels. On the whole, Wang and Wu's book successfully interprets Morrison's dynamic view on identity politics as they proceed to explore the novels one by one.

From 1999 onward, after the publication of Wang and Wu's monograph on Toni Morrison, a substantial body of Morrison criticism developed. From 1981 to 2006, about 7 monographs, 382 essays, 148 master theses and 9 dissertations on Toni Morrison were published. Chinese critics present a variety of topics when analyzing Morrison's fiction, ranging from theme analysis, character examination, mother-daughter relationship, narrative technique, naming, folklore interpretation and the construction of black female subjectivity, etc. The critical approaches used to analyze Morrison's novels are also more and more diversified; the feminist, archetypal, postmodern, poststructural, postcolonial and new historical perspectives are skillfully employed. Among them the most notable works and essays that respond to Morrison's view well are as follows. Zhu Rongjie's dissertation "*Pain and Healing: A Study of Maternal Love in Toni Morrison's Fiction from a Cultural Perspective*" (shangtong yu mihe: tuonimolisen xiaoshuo muaizhuti de wenhuayanjiu) (2004) mainly deals with the black female characters' confrontation of multiple oppressions by focusing on the mother-daughter relationship. By juxtaposing the two pairs of mother-daughter relations, Pecola and her mother Pauline Breedlove vs. Claudia and her mother Mrs. MacTeer in *The Bluest Eye*, Zhu reveals how Pauline is assimilated into the mainstream white culture by being enamored with white movies and seeing her physical difference as ugly. Transferring her desire into the white images in the movie, Mrs. Breedlove finds pride in taking care of the white family, ignoring and failing to nurture her own daughter. In contrast, although also a poor struggling black

mother, Mrs. Macteer tries her best to instill a sense of pride in her daughters and makes them recognize their self-esteem and self-worth by taking good care of them and teaching Claudia the black cultural tradition such as singing blues while working in the kitchen. Mrs. Macteer's maternal love helps Claudia fight back the feeling of being lesser in the hostile environment of racial discrimination whereas Pecola becomes the ultimate victim due to the internalization of racial discrimination. Since Pauline Breedlove has no support network within her own black community, she fails to protect her daughter in her maternal duty. Zhu's discussion of *Beloved* focuses on the tension between Sethe as the nurturer and Sethe as the murderer who takes the life of her child in order to protect her from the brutality of slavery system. Zhu agrees that the black community forms a very important role in healing Sethe's traumatic heart. The helping hands of thirty black women in the community support Sethe and manage to bring her to the point of becoming whole by uniting to drive *Beloved* from 124 Bluestone Road. The ghost of *Beloved* symbolizes Sethe's traumatized psyche which makes Sethe relinquish her own right to live, but on the other hand it can also be seen as the incarnation of generations of African-American women's great suffering under the inhumanity of the slave trade; therefore, the solidarity of those black women in the neighborhood is a powerful way of resisting the brutal slavery. When discussing *Paradise*, Zhu focuses on how the town's female voices have been silenced due to the male pride and arrogance in the town of Ruby. The five women living in the convent are in every way incompatible with the rigid moral codes of the all-black town. They are all hurt in one way or another in the patriarchal families. For instance, Mavis Albright accidentally suffocated the twin babies when trying to escape from the abusive husband; Pallas ran away from home when her boyfriend fell in love with her mother, and later got pregnant, most likely after being raped. These women form a female bond in the convent, rejecting the patriarchal "paradise" of Ruby. By analyzing the motivations of Ruby men's attack on the convent, Zhu reveals Morrison's message that those who destroy the convent women for being different are themselves intolerant of the difference.

Some essays by Chinese scholars deal with Morrison's fictional representation of difference within the African-American community. In Xie Qun's essay "Distortion and Transformation in *The Bluest Eye*" (zuilande yanjing de niuqu yu bianyi) published in *Foreign Literature Studies* (waiguo wenxue yanjiu) in 1999, Xie argues that the prejudice within the black community based on skin color mirrors the destructive power of white racism. The light-complexioned Geraldine forbids her son to play with dark-skinned "niggers," teaching him the difference by saying that "Colored people were neat and quiet; niggers were loud and dirty."

The essay makes it clear that Morrison not only critiques the white beauty myth, but also criticizes the black community's intra-racism as some black people internalize the feelings of otherness and degradation. Pecola Breedlove's tragedy is the dangerous result of intra-racism, as well as the consequence of alcohol, poverty, and child abuse. Du Lanlan's essay "*Tar Baby's* Space Strategy and Cultural Identity" (baiyouwawa de kongjiancelue yu wenhuashenfen) uses a postcolonial approach to deal with Morrison's questioning of a monolithic black solidarity in *Tar Baby*. Du mainly discusses why Morrison's *Tar Baby* is located in three different places, namely, Eloe, a small town in Florida that clings to the traditional black cultural tradition; Chevalier, a mythic Caribbean island; and New York; and explores the relationship between the geographic space and cultural identity. Du reveals that Morrison's intention to dramatize the tension between Son and Jadine, the two lovers who represent different sets of perspectives about life, is to cast doubts on the possibility of a monolithic, cohesive black community, highlighting the differences among black people. Son represents a version of authentic blackness that totally embraces the black tradition and opposes white cultural and capitalistic values, whereas Jadine personifies a version of contemporary black female who has embraced white cultural values and feminist ideas. The failure of their relationship shows that the African-American people are not essentially monolithic, or that they are in trouble due to these differences. Besides, Jadine's uncle and aunt, Sydney and Ondine, claim they are different from those lower-class black Caribbean natives, indicating they are the striving middle-class Philadelphia Negroes. These differences raise questions about the nature of Blackness, making the readers consider whether the black identity is essential or something one can choose.

Living in a discriminated society, Afro-Americans tend to join together to find acceptance and emotional support within the same ethnic group. Morrison particularly places black female characters at the center of most of her texts to probe the meanings and implications of marginality and dehumanization black women have suffered for so long a time. In her works, black women feel a bonding with each other because recognizable identity traits continue to draw them together and to provide them with support for attempting social change. This has been thoroughly dealt with by the Chinese scholars in analyzing Morrison's *Sula* and *Beloved*, highlighting the individual female character's relationship with the female ancestors. But Morrison also goes beyond the gender identity politics by situating black women characters at the intersection of racial and class oppression, making the notion of identity a fluid, rather than a fixed concept. Morrison's later novels compel the recognition of multiple identities and divergent interests within the category of blackness. Chinese scholar Chen Fachun, for example, in

his essay “*Paradise: a Satirical Imitation of Dominant American Racism*” (leyuan dui meiguo zhuliushehui zhongzuzhuyi de fengcixingmofang) gives an enlightening analysis of how Morrison satirically depicts the Ruby black town as the imitation of white racist ideology and calls for reclaiming an anti-nationalist model of community (Chen 77). As the American critic Tommie Shelby summarizes the reasons for the internal conflict among blacks— different opinions on what constitutes and who possesses an “authentic” black identity, class differences among blacks, the antagonism between black men and women—, there is undoubtedly an increasing intra-group stratification of blacks (Shelby 249). So Morrison’s later novels tend to deal with the shifting foundations of racial identities. This may complicate but does not undermine her concern with black history, black culture and the need for self-definition within the diversified paradigms.

In the early period of Morrison criticism, Chinese critics tend to put more emphasis on the analysis of Morrison’s individual novel rather than Morrison’s oeuvre and those who deal with Morrison’s single work have the possibility of failing to understand Morrison’s dynamic view on identity politics, but this isolated way of evaluating Morrison’s works has gradually changed. For instance, Wang Yukuo’s essay (molisende wenhualichang chanshi) “Interpretation of Morrison’s Cultural Position” is a comprehensive study of Morrison’s cultural position as revealed in her eight novels. Wang argues that Morrison’s early novels meditate on racism’s damaging effects on the black community at large and on black individuals in particular, whereas her later novels focus on how different gender roles and class barriers within the black community form the different racial identities. The black self which is always questioning and provisional depends on a complex dialogical awareness of its affinity with and difference from others. Without the interactive presence of a sustainable community, the black individuals may have an insecure sense of their own place and meaning, a perception which is revealed in *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*. With *Tar Baby* as the transitional text which deals with the cultural exiles and the interface between different cultures, Morrison’s *Jazz*, *Paradise* and *Love* interrogate the unified collective black identity by analyzing the effects of dispossession, displacement and mobility, criticizing the founding of all-black town and the problems of class stratification within the black community. So viewing the significance of Morrison’s recent works, Chinese scholars are more and more aware of her dynamic view on identity politics and consider her works as an organic whole.

A Comparative Analysis of Morrison Studies in China and in the United States

The first monograph that is entirely devoted to Toni Morrison in the United States is Bessie W. Jones and Audrey L. Vinson's *The World of Toni Morrison: Explorations in Literary Criticism* published in 1985 (Peterson 6). Fourteen years later, the Chinese scholar Wang Shouren and Wu Xinyun published the first significant monograph on Morrison. On the whole, the Morrison studies in China lag behind the American counterpart not only in time but also in scope of evaluation. The American critics' analysis of Morrison's works ranges from comparisons between Morrison and other authors like Ralph Ellison, Alice Walker, Virginia Woolf, Henry James, and William Faulkner, examinations of Morrison's position in African American literature as well as in canonical American literature, to the analysis of Morrison's fiction with a wide range of critical approaches such as black feminist, Marxist, poststructuralist, postcolonial and cultural studies, etc. Generally speaking, Morrison's novels often invite feminist approaches first, and later deconstruction is a tool frequently used by critics besides the feminist and anthropological perspectives (Zhu 3). For instance, the Black feminist critic Barbara Christian published *Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition, 1892-1976* in 1980, a benchmark study of black women writers which includes a considerable feminist discussion of *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*. The black feminist critical discourse gradually evolved. Doreatha Mbalia, on the other hand, provides a Marxist discussion of Morrison's work in *Toni Morrison's Development of Class-Consciousness* by identifying capitalism and imperialism as the major enemies of African American society. Rita A. Bergenholtz's "Toni Morrison's *Sula*: A Satire on Binary Thinking" published in 1996 in *African American Review*, adopts a poststructuralist approach to illustrate how Morrison intends to blur the traditional binary thinking. In contrast, Chinese critics' evaluation of Morrison's fiction is not so diversified. Most of the analyses adopt a feminist point of view, but the examination is not so consciously framed within the wider context of black women's literature and black feminist theory as the American critics have done. Even so there are still some Chinese critics who strive to consider Morrison's achievements in a larger context. The Chinese feminist scholar Weng Dexiu, for example, is very illuminating in putting Morrison in the realm of a series of Afro-American women writers. By exploring Frances Harper, Pauline Hopkins, Jessie Fauset, Nella Larsen, Zola Neale Hurston, Ann Petry, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison and Maya Angelou, Weng gives us a full picture of black women writers' achievements and Morrison's inheritance to the black female tradition (Weng 13).

Among Morrison's eight novels, *Beloved* is the novel that is most amply discussed whereas *Tar Baby* is the least evaluated. Most Chinese critics are able to prove how Sethe's pain is an emblem for the unimaginable collective suffering and how identity politics is a very useful strategy to heal the traumatic individuals, but not many Chinese critics focus on evaluating how Morrison poignantly voiced the complexity of black cultural identities in her novel *Tar Baby*. In contrast, American scholar Maline Walther Pereira, when periodizing Morrison's work, argues that *Tar Baby* plays a central role in fully understanding Morrison's shift of concerns from her early to more recent work (Pereira 71). Yogita Goyal on the other hand argues in her essay "The Gender of Diaspora in Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby*" that the novel is unique in Morrison's oeuvre for its overt references to the currently influential concept of diaspora (Goyal 393). By critiquing Son's essentialist, nationalist and Afrocentric attitude and depicting Jadine as one who values hybridity, ambivalence and cosmopolitanism, Goyal concludes that Morrison muddles the conventional rigid definitions of gender roles, with Jadine symbolizing mobility and Son symbolizing home. Thus the concept of diaspora criticizes such assumptions of unity, emphasizing instead the divisions within the modes of nationalism. So *Tar Baby* is in fact Morrison's serious consideration of the concept of a unified identity politics as a historical anachronism in the post-1960s.

Chinese scholars share some critical opinions with their western counterparts on Morrison criticism. In his monograph, John N. Duvall points out that "Morrison's fiction can be read into two distinct phases. Phase one runs from her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, through *Sula* and *Song of Solomon*, and culminates in *Tar Baby*; the second phase to date consists of her historical trilogy of *Beloved*, *Jazz*, and *Paradise*. What characterizes the former is Morrison's construction of a usable identity as an African-American woman novelist; what characterizes the latter is the author's working out the implications that follow from the recognition that identity may be more a construction than a biological essence" (Duvall 8). He believes that Morrison's later novels suggest a more postmodern articulation of identity as a plural and fluid process. Many Chinese scholars agree that Morrison tries to rethink in her later novels the black cultural identity as a fluid process rather than a fixed position. Du Lanlan, for instance, argues that the space strategy adopted in *Tar Baby* plays a very important role for black characters to resist a fixed and essential identity and search for a more mobile black cultural identity instead (Du 124). Critics such as Wang Yukuo and Tang Hongmei in their monographs also argue that Morrison's recent novels deal more with the different responses of black people to cultural identity in the intersections of multiple oppressions.

Although Chinese scholars on Morrison studies lag behind the western critics in time and scope, they also make some distinctive achievements. Zhang Ruwen and Zhou Qun's essay (tuonimolisen xiaoshuo chonger yuyanyuquanli xianxiang fenxi) "The Analysis of Language and Power Phenomenon in Toni Morrison's Novel *Beloved*" uses Norman Fairclough and Roger Fowler's critical discourse analysis as the theoretical framework to reveal how the language and written texts of the dominant culture have been the potent instruments in oppressing the black people. Through the analysis of the vocabulary, grammar and rhetorical devices used by the white racists epitomized by the school teacher, the essay unveils the intertwined relationship between language and power. As stated by the school teacher that definitions belonged to the definers, not the defined, the white hegemonic rulers have imposed a very passive and inhumane role upon the black slaves, so Morrison's mission is to help release the black slaves' unspeakable truth that has long been suppressed and silenced. The essay is a very good example of using linguistic theory to analyze the literary texts. Wang Yukuo's essay "Reconstruction of *Beloved* from the New Historical Perspective" (zai xinlishizhuyi shijiaoxia chonggou chonger) is based on a comparative study of Morrison's *Beloved* and the story of Margaret Garner collected in *Black Book*. By comparing some slaveholders and abolitionists' response to Margaret Garner's story, Wang's essay reveals how Morrison refuses to distinguish between fiction and history and how she tries to focus more on who is telling the story of the past and how the story confines the contemporary understanding of American slavery. Since Morrison is fully aware that the black history has been disremembered and unaccounted for, her writing about the past tends to pursue a less realistic and more artistic kind of narrative. This kind of narrative pattern works against the construction of a monolithic black history.

Western critics tend to broaden their discussions on Toni Morrison's works by comparing Morrison with other authors, so do some Chinese scholars. For instance, scholars like Tan Ruwen and Hu Xiaoying tried to compare Morrison's *Beloved* with Faulkner's *The Sound and Fury* or *Absalom, Absalom*, and Tang Hongmei tried to compare Morrison with Alice Walker. What is unique is that some Chinese critics strive to compare Toni Morrison with some Chinese-American writers. Ye Zhen in her "Ethnic Cultural Identity in Non-White Immigrant Literature: A Case Study of Toni Morrison and Amy Tan" (meiguo feibairen yiminwenxuezhong de zuyiwenhua rentong yanjiu: yi tuonimolisen he tanenmei de chuanguzuo weili) published in *Journal of Zhuzhou Teachers College* in 2007 tries to compare Morrison and Amy Tan to explore the issue of ethnic cultural identity in non-white immigrant literature. Ye argues that both Morrison and Tan's works deal with the dilemma of non-white immigrants' cultural identi-

fiction in the white dominated American society. Both authors delve into the lives of non-white immigrants, examining how they cope with racism, sexism and other forms of oppression. In order to survive in a new geographic space where their own cultural values are marginalized, their characters have to reflect on how to find a true self worth respecting in a mainstream white culture that often marks them as “other.” So in this sense, Chinese critics contribute to the evaluation of ethnic minority writers’ attempts to reflect on the diasporic experiences in multi-cultural contexts.

A Tentative Conclusion

Morrison is a writer who believes in the power of narrative to help us understand ourselves and others. She thinks that the writer’s stories are the windows through which both the writer and the reader gain knowledge not only of the self, but also of the self in relation to people of other ethnic groups and cultures. Her writing is concerned with her great efforts to liberate African Americans from pain and suffering; therefore she believes that the best art should be unquestionably political and irrevocably beautiful. Art should always function for the group that produced it. By advocating identity politics in a flexible way, Morrison makes her fiction a political act in reality and a strong challenge to the Modernist tradition of knowledge, history, and identity.

Critics of identity politics assert that it prevents uniting with those who work on similar issues but differ in physical or social features. It also tends to ignore the fact that even within the same ethnic group there are differences. Besides, no one has only one single identity; identity politics may lead one to disclaim other identities. By addressing the black people’s thwarted pursuit of human rights and sense of freedom, the contentions among African American themselves, the identity crisis many of the blacks have encountered, and the possibility of self-discovery through the power of black ancestors and cultural heritage, Morrison views identities as the process of transformation. Identities are not fixed; they depend on the specific contexts. This view makes it possible for Morrison to address cultural identity not as an essence, but as a process of becoming. Thus Morrison is able to view identity politics in a dynamic way and avoid the trap of essentialism. From Morrison’s dynamic view on identity politics, we can see that Morrison is apparently very much influenced by the postmodern thought which sees identity as a process rather than an essential deterministic force. In the postmodern context, Morrison’s view of identity politics is undoubtedly conducive to the understanding of black cultural identity in reality. In this

sense, the Morrison studies both in the United States and in China have made marvelous contributions to digest Morrison's view.

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身份政治與重構：莫里森批評在中國

摘要

作為唯一榮獲諾貝爾文學獎的美國黑人女作家，托妮·莫里森的作品無論是在美國境內還是在國外都受到了廣泛的關注。其作品為讀者思考美國社會中的種族、文化與性別問題提供了廣闊的空間，尤其對理解非裔美國人的身份認同發揮著重要作用。自1981年董鼎山在《讀書》雜誌首次介紹莫里森以來，中國學者對莫里森作品的研究已取得矚目的成就。本文試圖通過分析中國學者如何回應莫里森對身份政治的理解勾勒托妮·莫里森研究在中國的發展，並將其與美國的莫里森批評進行比較，以促進兩方對莫里森研究的交流。

關鍵字：托妮·莫里森，身份政治，莫里森批評在中國