

Identity in Chinese Literature of the Twentieth Century: Its Margins and Diaspora

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Five of the eight essays and one interview, collected by Peng-hsiang Chen (Shih Hsin University, Taipei) and Jenn-shann Lin (University of Alberta, Edmonton), have a common origin. The five papers are the revised versions of some ten contributions originally presented at a panel of the Montreal ICANAS 36th Congress of 2000; the panel, chaired by Chen and Lin, explored the theme of “Identity/Gender/Decolonization in Chinese Literature.” The papers by Tee Kim Wong and Jennifer W. Jay, as well as the interview by Yiu-nam Leung were prepared for the *Tamkang Review* and added later.

All the papers are discussing Chinese writers or writers of Chinese origin, and all concern writings of modernity, often belonging to the geographic margins and diasporic boundaries of Chinese culture and language (for instance Malaysia, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Canada); they are focussing on questions of cultural identity, the self, and space. In ordering the papers, we have attempted to combine considerations of chronology, with those of geography.

In “The Dandy and the Woman: Liu Na’ou and Neo-Sensationism,” Peng Hsiao-yen sketches the fascinating short life and work of the Taiwanese *littérateur*, *cinéaste* and dandy Liu Na’ou (1900 or 1905 to 1940). Benefiting from his family’s wealth, he was exposed to Japanese, Chinese, English and French culture, travelled a

lot and opened two bookstores in Shanghai, where he became a leading figure of the group of Neo-Sensationist writers. After his murder by unknown powers at a time of conflict and turmoil, he left behind important diaries. The author's revealing analysis of the diary entries and writings by the Neo-Sensationists pay particular attention to Liu Na'on's dandyism and misogynic depiction of the new woman as sexual predator. Baudelaire's dandy, and the elucidations of this type of male *flaneur* by Benjamin and Foucault, help greatly to clarify the behaviour and opinions of this cosmopolitan writer and film maker, who "having crossed the boundaries of nations through his pursuit of art and diaspora in different countries, [. . .] became the target of the international communities of Shanghai." In the context of this article, worth mentioning is the fact that recently Shanghai of the 1930s has become the subject of several popular English and American novels of varied literary merit.¹

In "Constructing Cultural Identities: Space and Cultural Politics of Difference in Wu Chuo-liu's *The Orphan in Asia*" I-chun Wang explores the colonized space of Taiwan literature of the 1940s, its exposure to the Japanese *kominka* (propaganda) discourse, and Wu's attempt to present in the novel written from 1943 to 1945 a protagonist, Tai-Ming, who is a traveller, a self-conscious intellectual, wanderer at the threshold of cultural identities. At first willing to accept the official discourse, Tai-Ming learns through personal experience the various forms of social-spatial exclusion, the discourse of segregation and the process of boundary erection established by the imperial power. Using the tools of post-colonial and cultural studies, the author analyzes the protagonist's increasing sense of being orphaned, displaced, and disillusioned, but who finds a way to his own self and to an understanding of the full meaning of colonial power.

In "Zhang Wei and the Soul of Rural China" Terrence C. Russell analyzes the prominent contemporary Chinese novelist's vision of man's relationship to nature, especially to the rural landscape. Drawing on Zhang's novel *Old Boat* (1986), *September Fable* (1992), and other works, but most particularly on his post face to *September Fable*, "Blending into the Untamed Land" (originally published in 1993),

Russell presents the writers insistent but subtle view of the rural landscape as a source of individual and communal restoration. While the benefits of pastoral life, and the concomitant decadence of cities, appear quite regularly in world literature since ancient Mesopotamia and the Old Testament, Zhang deals with a specific Chinese dilemma of great actuality and far reaching consequences. In his fiction and nonfiction, he combines intimate impressions of life in the countryside with cultural and metaphysical speculation. Disturbed by the loss of traditional values, of the particular relationship between rural people and their environment, he has profound reservations about the rapid engagement of his country in technological and industrial development. Zhang feels that for him personally, but also for many others, living and working in a rural environment allows a Daoist mystic union with nature and the relinquishing of humanity's imagined position at the centre of existence. This may not fit everybody's needs, but such a space and opportunity should be validated against the dominant discourse of progress—at least for those who wish, and are able, to blend into the Untamed Land: “I know from direct perception alone that it is only in the truly untamed lands that people can ignore the ordinary and discover the dance of the immortal cranes” (“Blending into the Untamed Land” 326).

Terry Siu-hap Yip in “Geographical Space and Cultural Identity: Self in the Age of Globalization” discusses selected short fictions by the contemporary writers Tie Ning (b. 1957), Xi Xi (b.1939), and Ye Si (pen name of Liang Bingjun, b. 1949), and a play by Gao Xingjian (Nobel prize of 2000) in the perspective of the impact of globalization on the individual, the formation of identity, and the relationship between self and the world. The selected texts privilege the significance of place in helping to define or redefine a person's identity. Tie Ning's small village (“Ah, Fragrant Snow” 1982) and Xi Xi's Hong Kong (“The Drawer” 1981) are specific places, although they also signify archetypal images. The focal point of Ye Si's “Transcendence and the Fax Machine” (1990)—which reminds me of the German expressionists' fascination with and fear of technological objects (*die Tücke des Objektes*)—and Gao's “Nocturnal wanderer” (1995)

consists of the romantic dream of many people to transcend their physical/body existence. As observed by Yip, “theirs is a dream, which is quite unsettling for the dreamer.” Wishing to go beyond their space, their cultural and geographic boundaries, they lose their unique individual identity and direction in life, sever their social and sexual ties.

Kwok-kan Tam in “Voices of Identity Gaps in Hong Kong Writers” deals with the feeling of frustration among the Hong Kong people in the 1970s to 1990s, and especially the mixed feelings provoked by the 1997 hand-over to China. While “the alternative voices that can be found in the 19th and early 20th centuries [. . .] are those that yearn for a return to the Chinese tradition [. . . and] the motherland,” “the voices around the year 1997 are those that show the puzzlement of identity, loss, nostalgia and fear of uncertainty” (the author’s concluding sentences). Tam finds that the particular situation of Hong Kong, and the discourse of its present writers, justify the application of Homi Bhabha’s idea of a bridge that “*gathers* as a passage that crosses” when “the boundary becomes the place from which *something begins its presencing*,” as well as the labelling of Hong Kong as “an anomaly of postcoloniality” (a term first used by Rey Chow).

TEE Kim Tong in “Looking for Zhu Ling: Self-Identity in Li Yongping’s *Yuxue feifei*” argues that the concern of the writer’s most recent novel/memoir *Snowflakes flying: Borneo childhood chronicle* (2002) is not the representation of his national and cultural identities, but a journey within to search for his self or personal identity. His narrative frame does not suggest a nostalgic recollection of memories of his tropical island but serve his introspective journey to his own heart of darkness. A self-exile in Taiwan, Li Yongping—the protagonist and author, estranged by the decadence of metropolitan Taiwanese culture, turns to an inward journey by writing the past and finding his self in an imaginary homeland to which he may consider trying to return. The author contrasts this narrative with Li’s previous uses of the figure of Zhu Ling and his fascination with Taiwan and its socio-political development.

Jennifer W. Jay in “Gold Mountain and Maple Leaf: Identity and Landscape in Chinese Canadian Literature” offers a broad inquiry into writings about Canada by writers of Chinese origin, born in the country or more recent immigrants, using English and French, and authors expressing themselves in Chinese. The author finds that some local-born writers construct their Canadian identity and Chinese culture from Tangshan legends in China and from the injustices suffered by their ancestors in Canada’s Gold Mountain, the immigrant authors draw upon their Chinese cultural and literary traditions to configure a component of Canadian identity by appropriating the new landscapes and the maple leaf as the literary symbols of their adopted country. Jay concludes that “in the local-born authors’ search for their roots, and in the immigrants’ process of constructing a new identity, the blending of two cultural traditions draws from a Chinese ancestry and a Canadian life experience to produce some degree of hybridity in Chinese and Canadian literary cultures.”

During a period of research in the Department of English at the University of British Columbia, in Vancouver, Canada, in 2002, Yiu-nam Leung conducted a number of interviews with scholars and writers. “From Australia to Canada: A Conversation with Sneja Gunew” concentrates on the personal career and academic work of this important international (transnational?) figure in contemporary Postcolonial Theory, Feminist Theory, Critical Multicultural Theory, and study of Minority Literatures in English. Gunew’s contributions to these areas of scholarship, based on the writings of the periods of modernity and post-modernity, have many common points with the topics, methods and questions of the papers assembled in this issue of the *Tamkang Review*. Gunew is also one of the organizers and intellectual initiators of the international three-year Transculturalisms project. Using, in part, herself as an example, Gunew underlines those globalization and migration processes of the latter half of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century that are eroding essentialist notions of personal and collective identity, even of citizenship, and creating new, hybrid or transnational spaces and beings.

A student of Comparative Literature, who has never studied Sinology and does not know the language, I was, nevertheless, exposed to teachers who were versed in the classical Chinese tradition and who, working in a country with a socialist ideology, were obliged to ask their students to read, in translation, a few Chinese novels inspired by Marxism and the proletarian-peasant revolution. It has been for me, since these early days half a century ago, a great discovery to learn more, through Western publications and those by Chinese scholars using English, about the vitality and the varieties of modernist (and lately, post-modernist) Chinese writings from Mainland China and the ever widening diaspora. This group of papers, published by the *Tamkang Review*, which is present in many research libraries of the world, is also greatly contributing to this impression. As I am not the only scholar in world literature without some of the ideally required language abilities, publications like this one are a forceful reminder to us that the Western perception of the literary canon of the 20th century may need revisions before it can claim to represent what is best and most representative of humanity's creativity. In this respect, certain anthologies of World Literature considered to be standard academic sources at least in English speaking countries, such as those published by Norton, have—it seems to me—a more balanced coverage of the “classical” past than of the more recent literature. Admittedly, this is always a more complex and controversial task.

As a comparatist who has worked a little in the domain of Canadian ethnic studies, I should like to comment more about the two articles about the writings of authors of Chinese origin in Canada and, as a person with a typologically similar background as that of Professor Gunew, add additional considerations prompted by her interview. Jay's article, very well informed and penetrating as a whole, has at least two specific important merits. It is, firstly, one of the rare attempts to investigate, without losing sight of specific details, the whole range of writing by Chinese immigrants and Canadian born descendants, published in English, French and Chinese.² Secondly, the author identifies a peculiarity of that corpus, curiously overlooked so far by critics: second and third generation Chinese Canadian writers largely

ignore specific Canadian landscapes, even the unique site of Vancouver, while immigrant writers seem to be more sensitive to the environment and the Canadian national emblems.

The interview with Professor Gunew, and the references to publications it contains, eloquently articulate a contemporary point of view, strong in departments of English in North America and the United Kingdom and in some other academic and media circles (including prominent publishing houses such as Routledge). Contrary to the traditional clinging to purity and rejection of mixtures, be they biological or cultural, this new attitude speaks in favour of hybridity and the transcendence of the nation state, it documents and critiques the limitations and consequences of the nation state ideology. This perspective also often includes a favourable stance towards post-modernity and at least some of the results of globalization. Being myself of mixed Balkanic ancestry (known and unknown by the family, because who can claim ethnic or racial purity in that space), I happened to speak German before my Serbo-Croat (as it was then called) mother tongue, had German governesses, went to a German primary and high school, continued then in a Yugoslav high school, at first under Russian linguistic and political influence, and studied in Belgrade, Vienna, Strasbourg and Tübingen. I taught World Literature and Theory of Literature at Belgrade University and since 1966 Comparative Literature, German, French, and English at the University of Alberta, in Edmonton, Canada, and elsewhere, using for teaching purposes primarily the English language and sometimes French and German. I hold myself two passports (of which the Yugoslav was recently changed in name and statehood a number of times, with another change expected soon). In other words, I can easily empathise with this acceptance of contemporary changes in both the realities of life and their positive appreciation. I am, nevertheless, in this context still worried by five very heterogeneous questions, which may merit more reflection or even research: 1. Are we not now going from one extreme to another when we condemn, wholesale, nationalism and all traditional concepts of self and identity? 2. Are movements and blending of populations typically modern phenomena? ³ Is the

migratory, even nomadic existence of certain professionals and specialists today different, and if—how exactly, from that of the miners, shipbuilders, construction workers, artisans and artists, mercenary soldiers and officers in the distant and not so distant past, who were settled elsewhere or changed countries temporarily? What hybridities, if any, were created by the numerous tribes and nations that disappeared in pre-historic and historic times, or those like the Jews and Roms who survived exodus, persecutions, and mutations, as well as of exiled religious groups, such as the Puritans, Huguenots, and Mennonites, to name but three? 3. Being middle-class intellectuals and professionals, do we not take too lightly the personal and collective cost of transformations involved in the processes caused by globalization and leading to post-modernity? 4. Are we sufficiently aware who is gaining most from these processes? Is it really the individual, with his increased options and alternative life-styles, or certain financial, economic, political and military powers that apparently care little for human beings and less for the ideas of academics? 5. Last but not least, why are progressive academics of so little influence in the present body politic, not only with the powers that be but also with the electorate, especially in English speaking countries? Could it be, among a great variety of possible causes, also because of our profession's present concentration on the opportunities offered to the individual and the abandon of ideals and goals of collective progress?

Be that as it may, these papers on modern Chinese literature and its diasporic margins analyze the advantages and difficulties of rapid change and contacts among nations, languages and cultures in a broad Asian-Pacific space of the turbulent 20th century. They explain how writers of diverse backgrounds experienced these changes and struggled, both personally and in their works, with the need for new spaces and identities, as well as with the gradual emergence of new hybrid, nomadic or transnational selves. They seem to acknowledge the pertinence of Euripides' words in *Andromache*: "Experience and travel . . . are an education in themselves." They should prove to be useful to the specialist and the scholar interested in trends in world

literature of the 20th century.

NOTES

¹ For example, J.G. Ballard's *Empire of The Sun*, Christopher New's *Shanghai*, Kazuo Ishiguro's *When We Were Orphans*, and Bo Caldwell's *The Distant Land of My Father*.

² Even the existing two book length overviews of Chinese Canadian writing, one by a Chinese immigrant and the other by a young German scholar, both cover only publications in English [Lien Chao, *Beyond Silence: Chinese Canadian Literature in English* (Toronto: TSAR, 1997); Susanne Hilf, *Writing the Hyphen: The Articulation of Interculturalism in Contemporary Chinese-Canadian Literature* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2000)]. This is also the case of most articles known to me.

³ Similarly, questions of national identity and patriotism can be traced in Europe, and probably elsewhere, well before the second half of the 18th century, beginning with the French praise of *la belle/or la douce France*, and the Middle High German claims of German trust and honesty compared to French fickleness and immorality; or one could begin with the documents issued by the Serbian medieval rulers of the Nemanja dynasty and their apologists, who connect language, origin, nation and state well before Herder and the German Romantics.