

## BOOK REVIEW

*Narrating Nationalisms: Ideology and Form in Asian American Literature* by Jinqi Ling. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998. 212 pp. Hardcover \$42.75)

Composed of six long chapters and a short conclusion, *Narrating Nationalisms: Ideology and Form in Asian American Literature* explores, in a rigorous and richly documented manner, five formative Asian American literary texts published between 1957 and 1980: John Okada's *No-No Boy* (1957), Louis Chu's *Eat a Bowl of Tea* (1961), Frank Chin's *The Chickencoop Chinaman* (1972) and *The Year of the Dragon* (1974), and Maxine Hong Kingston's *China Men* (1980). Contributory and integral to this rigorous and well-documented exploration is the analytical method the author employs. Here Ling draws on insights from two strains of thought: cultural studies and postmodern and poststructuralist theories on the one hand, and social history and neo-pragmatic perspectives on the other. As he moves skillfully between close readings of primary material, historical commentary, and theoretical engagement, Ling not only reopens discussion of Asian American literary production of the pre-1980 era as an internally complex and multiply affiliative process, but comes up with a strikingly new approach to the study of Asian American literature as well.

The new approach rightly calls for sustained attention to the specific historical conditions under which an Asian American literary text is produced, as well as to a self-conscious foregrounding of the international or diasporic dimensions of the text. Take his analysis of Okada's *No-No Boy* as an example. Ling's critical analysis of the cultural production of *No-No Boy* centers on "the relationship between the text's political critique of wartime racism toward Japanese Americans and its novelistic negotiation of such a critique within the context of cold war American nationalism and assimilationist as-

sumptions” (vii). In so doing, he challenges not only the predominant view held by well-known critics such as Elaine Kim and Shirley Geok-lin Lim as tending to overestimate the success of Ichiro Yamada’s identity quest, but also the more recent position maintained by Gayle K. Fujita Sato as having misunderstood Okada’s attempt to create an ambiguous protagonist. While other critics have overemphasized the interpretive authority of the Momotaro tale, Ling, in his well-balanced study, treats the tale as only one component of Okada’s larger rhetorical scheme for the production and reception of *No-No Boy*. Apparently inspired by Raymond Williams, Ling explores in depth the formal and ideological significance of the tale in relation to the tensions and contradictions of the novel’s historically wrought structure of feeling. His exploration foregrounds the ambiguous nature of Ichiro’s search and the uncertainty of his return. Closely related to such foregrounding is his brilliant investigation into an oft-neglected area—the meaning of Emi’s ambivalence and her mediational function.

Likewise, Chapter 3 begins with an in-depth exploration of the historical backgrounds and the social and cultural conditions under which Louis Chu wrote and published *Eat a Bowl of Tea*. In historicizing the novel, Ling first takes issue with the *Aiiiiiiii!* editors’ situating Chu’s 1961 novel squarely in an English-speaking American literary tradition, thereby neglecting the novel’s possible relationship with resources not based in the English language. One such resource identified by the author is the progressive Chinatown literary movement of the 1930s and 1940s. Another is American left literature during the same period, which espoused “social realism” as the most politically effective means of literary representation. Ling goes on to criticize Asian American feminist critics such as Elaine Kim, Ruth Hsiao, and Lisa Lowe, who, by viewing the novel simply through the prism of generalized gender politics, find fault with its emphasis on male experience, with its inadequate portrayal of women, and with its connections with Asian American cultural nationalism. In light of his critical examination of the political context of the novel’s production, Ling argues instead for treating Chu’s emphasis on male experience

as a historically determined act of articulation. In addition to its well-argued reading for the historical specificity of the novel, the essay is also distinguished by its brilliant and original discussion of the subversive implication of Chu's creation of Mei Oi in a predominantly male, but largely dysfunctional, society. Another strength of the essay lies in its rigorous investigation of the reconciliation between Ben Loy and Mei Oi in the final episodes of the novel. While critics such as Cheng Lok Chua and Elaine Kim have tended to ascribe symbolic meanings to the healing agent for Ben Loy's sexual problem, rather than look into the inscribed meanings within the cultural milieu presented by the text, Ling duly calls attention to the intertextual implications of the significant shift in the novel's discourse—from that of realist portrayal to that of magical solution. Having examined the two kinds of tea throughout the novel, Ling comes to the logical conclusion that "in the textual system of the novel, tea is not so much an enabler of sexual potency as it is a ritual substitute for sexuality itself" (71). Finally, Ling's "transformative reading" (76) indeed sets a valuable example for analyzing Asian American literature of immigration.

Chapter 4 opens with a fairly detailed exploration of why Frank Chin as a historically responsive social critic and artist takes upon himself the moral obligation to transmit a truly identifiable Chinese-American experience, and why Chin considers the dramatic form most effective for open engagement with social issues in a period of ethnic activism. In his subsequent analysis of the playwright's *The Chickcoop Chinaman* and *The Year of the Dragon*, Ling appropriates Fredric Jameson's idea of "the cultural dominant" invertedly, that is, "not as a substantiation of his original formulation of postmodernism but rather as ironic commentary on the social and cultural dilemmas faced by Asian Americans" (179, note 6). Critics of *The Chickcoop Chinaman* tend to view its lamenting of a suppressed Chinese American heroic tradition associated with railroads as evidence of Chin's impulsive endorsement of an American western myth based on violent and expansionist impulses, but Ling calls for a more nuanced and less reductive construction of meaning. For Jinqi Ling, the railroad

memory that Chin invokes through the ironic clash between Tam Lum's and the Lone Ranger's visions brings into vivid relief the illusory nature of Tam's childhood association of the Ranger with the heroism of the Chinese immigrant fathers. Ling also makes good use of the Lacanian notion of the castration complex to interpret the referential rupture from which Tam suffers in the wake of his rejection by the cynical black boxing trainer Charley Popcorn, the symbolic father figure he tries to emulate. While conceding that Chin's search for an ideal father and for Asian American masculinity is problematically predicated on a patriarchal belief in measuring adequacy in terms of male aggressiveness and violence, Ling duly alerts us to the fact that Chin does not make Tam an idealized figure for the Asian American artist. Instead of dismissing Tam's monologues as "hot air, disguised as poetry," Ling treats them as symptomatic of "the plight of the artist that the play addresses" (86). Finally, in his brilliant discussion of Chin's manipulation of performance/audience relationship, Ling centers mainly on the playwright's ironic and critical construction of Tom, an assimilated Chinese American and Lee's former husband.

If, according to Ling, Frank Chin in *The Chickencoop Chinaman* is in the main concerned with invoking the birth of the Asian American artist, his principal focus in *The Year of the Dragon* is on grappling with the burden of representation faced by that artist. Section 2 of the chapter is marked by its superb investigation into the two conflicting roles of Fred Eng, the protagonist: a Chinatown tour guide in public and a struggling Chinese American writer in private. Ling's investigation includes an illuminating discussion of Fred's father (Pa Eng), Fred's sister (Mattie), and brother-in-law (Ross). If the father figure in *The Chickencoop Chinaman* is, to Professor Ling, a recoverable image of the dignity and heroism of the Chinese American tradition, the father figure in *The Year of the Dragon* stands for patriarchal tyranny, narrow commercial values, and the divided consciousness of Chinatown as a cultural colony and racially marginalized slum. In his subsequent discussion of the politics of negation, Ling examines Chin's conscious use of "disruptive complicity" (102). Finally, he

criticizes Michael Fischer for failing to explain the entangled relationship between modernist and postmodernist aesthetics, as well as for evading the crucial distinction between postmodernism as a form of artistic expression and postmodernism as a social condition in America's late capitalist culture.

Chapter 5 focuses on Maxine Hong Kingston's remapping of Asian American historical imagination in *China Men*. Here Ling calls into question two existing assessments of the book's significance, assessments that privilege the correspondence between the book's textual articulation and its authorial intent. For critics such as Linda Ching Sledge, Elaine Kim, and Alfred Wang, *China Men* signals an act of retribution and compensation for the suffering experienced by early Chinese male immigrant laborers. For David Leiwei Li and Donald Goellnicht, the book reflects Kingston's balanced treatment of Asian American men's and women's causes through its simultaneous critique of racism in American society and of sexism in the Chinese immigrant community. For Jinqi Ling, however, *China Men* represents its author's effort to renegotiate her unfinished feminist project through a critical engagement with both the male-oriented idealism that partly informs the ideological controversies over her 1976 position and the assumptions that underlie her writing of *The Woman Warrior*. Overall, Ling's recontextualization of the debate over *The Woman Warrior* is very perceptive and well-balanced. For instance, he duly cautions against regarding Asian American male writers' and critics' negative responses to the book's canonization as merely sexist reactions against Asian American women's artistic freedom or as manifestations of an implicit male desire to maintain control over women. These varying responses, Ling persuasively argues, "need to be viewed as illustrations of how the articulation of Chinese American women's oppression is caught up with that of Chinese American men's . . ." (114). The reviewer is also deeply impressed with Ling's penetrating discussion of how Kingston renegotiates her unfinished feminist project in *China Men* through her manipulation of two narrative movements in the book—the historical and the mythical. Equally impressive is his detailed examination of how Kingston

problematizes the Asian American historical subject troped in “Gold Mountain Warriors.”

However, Ling’s analysis of *China Men* as Kingston’s implicit response to the consequences of her articulation of ideological differences through *The Woman Warrior* presupposes that Kingston did not start writing *China Men* until she had read about the controversies over *The Woman Warrior*. Unfortunately, little evidence is given for such a presupposition. Another fly in the ointment is that the “Conclusion” of the otherwise well-organized book would have been much better if the author had recapitulated the central ideas in the previous chapters and made them into a coherent whole by relating them to the main title of the book. Despite these minor flaws, *Narrating Nationalisms* is marked by its carefully-wrought theoretical and analytical framework, its sustained attention to the historical specificity of a given text’s production, as well as its clearly formulated critical insights.

Wen-ching Ho  
*Institute of European and American Studies*  
*Academia Sinica*  
*Taiwan*