

Conversations with Sau-ling Wang

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SUMMARY

In this interview, conducted on "the lazy and mild afternoon of October 15, 1993," Prof. Sau-ling Wang (U.C., Berkeley) answers questions from a visiting scholar concerning the development of, and rationale for, a relatively new discipline called "Asian American literary studies." Wang discusses the origin of the Asian American Studies Program at Berkeley (which she coordinates), and reasons why it should not be subsumed under the categories of American literature, or Asian literature. She argues that there really are no "unique themes and characteristics" in Asian American literature, since new readers and scholars will always see a different set of such themes and characteristics.

KEY WORDS

Asian American literature
Asian American Studies
Writers of color
Frank Chin
Gender politics

panethnic coalition
provisional solidarity
"denationalization"
dominant society



Professor Sau-ling Cynthia Wong (W), the coordinator of the Asian American Studies Program at the University of California at Berkeley and a founding editor of *Critical Mass: A Journal of Asian American Cultural Criticism*, received her Ph.D. in English and American literature from Stanford University. Since the mid-1980s, she has been active in Asian American literary studies, publishing articles on Maxine Hong Kingston, immigrant autobiography, Chinese immigrant literature, gender and ethnicity issues, and other topics. In 1993 she published *Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance*, which won the 1994 Association for Asian American Studies National Book Award in Cultural Studies. Using contemporary literary theory and adopting a reading strategy emphasizing contexts and intertexts, she analyzes closely such tropes as food, the double (racial shadow), mobility, and play embodied in Asian American literature.

She also holds an M.A. in Teaching English as a Second Language, has published articles on the situation of Asian immigrant students, especially Chinese-speakers, and is co-editor of *Language Diversity: Problems or Resource?* (1988)

The author (L) of this interview was delighted to have an opportunity to discuss with her the history and objectives of Asian American literary studies and other issues related to the field. The interview took place in 3403 Dwinelle Hall, a semi-modernized building on the UC Berkeley campus, on the lazy and mild afternoon of October 15, 1993.

L : How did Asian American Studies as an academic discipline at UC Berkeley come into being?

W : The Asian American Studies Program started with the Third World Students' Strike in 1969, a time when the Anti-Vietnam War Movement, Civil Rights Movement, and Black Power Movement were gathering increasing momentum. The Asian Americans in the Bay Area were very active at this juncture and demanded that a program of Asian American Studies with its own courses be set up. Students went on strike to get Asian American studies institutionalized. Two of the founding members of the program at Berkeley, Profs. Elaine Kim and Ling-chi Wang, in fact, are still teaching here. African-American Studies, Chicano Studies and Native American Studies also constituted part of this ethnic studies movement. Initially, there were no textbooks and instructors had to devise their own teaching materials and make mimeographs of short stories, poems, and articles. In the early 1970s, usable anthologies and books on Asian American studies appeared. Our program now offers a unified and comprehensive undergraduate curriculum, provides a variety of courses, and has seven ladder-rank faculty, some of whom work jointly with other departments.

L : What are the major objectives of Asian American Literary studies?

W : The group now known as Asian Americans first became conscious of itself as distinct and separate in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Prior to that, of course, Asian Americans had been here, but they thought of themselves more in terms of Chinese Americans, Japanese Americans, Filipino Americans, etc. So "Asian Americans" is an artificial label for a group that has already been in existence. The movements of the 1960s made Asian Americans realize that they were a minority in the United States just like other peoples of color. Comparing notes

with each other, Asian Americans from various subgroups learned that they had suffered a lot in similar ways and had similar relationships to the dominant society. With a new-born sense of solidarity, they wanted to consolidate themselves, and part of this effort was to have their own literature. Much work was done to rediscover works that had been neglected or forgotten, so as to maintain a strong sense of an Asian American tradition.

During this period, there were also a lot of innovations concerning the concept of Asian American culture. In the past, what we now call Asian American literature was considered either a pale imitation of mainstream American literature or an inferior version of Asian literature. Now people like the editors of *Aiiieeee! An Anthology of Asian-American Writers* (1974) began to conceptualize the creation of a culture that is neither Asian nor American but not inferior to either, something that is open-ended, thus opening up a space for new cultural production.

An important goal of Asian American literary studies is to nurture this kind of cultural production consciously. The continuous teaching of Asian American literature makes it possible for the books to stay in print. Teaching a course on it, holding a public event on it, inviting a writer to speak, are ways of nurturing the literature. Writing criticism about it is also a way of keeping the space open. In sum, the objectives of Asian American literary studies are to encourage the creation of a distinct kind of literature, to nurture this cultural production, to rediscover past works, and to systematize it and make its transmission possible--to take advantage of its institutional location in order to promote Asian American literature.

L : How do you promote or popularize Asian American literary studies if white or other races show no enthusiastic involvement?

W : It is a battle with many fronts. Barbara Christian's

pioneer work in the field of African American literature serves as a good case in point. When she first engaged in the study of black women writers, she was reminded by people that there was no such thing, or field, or tradition. It took a lot of persistence, of vision, and of struggles to keep on doing what you found worth doing. Finally, people started recognizing it. It was certainly a long, lonely, and difficult road in the past. Now, people hail Barbara Christian as a pioneer in the field of African American Studies and Toni Morrison is not only a well-known writer but won the 1993 Nobel Prize. By and large, this is a kind of work that a scholar of minority literature has to go through. Barbara Christian's effort could be comparable to that of Prof. Elaine Kim, who first started out having to fight for the idea of Asian American literature because people wouldn't take it seriously. When critical mass is created, then it will become easier. For example, when San Francisco State University (where the 1969 Third World Students' Strike started), UC Berkeley, UCLA and other places started offering Asian American studies courses, then a community of scholars was formed -- people who could support each other, recommend books to each other, etc. As far as promotion is concerned, we have to correct the common perception from outside that Asian American literary studies is not a serious field because we are dealing with inferior works or works of social documentary value rather than aesthetic value, and that no body of scholarship exists. The best way to contest this notion is the establishment of a kind of core by doing a lot of solid work in the field. Part of this work consists of the compilation of scholarly bibliographies such as King-kok Cheung and Stan Yogi's *Asian American Literature: An Annotated Bibliography* (1988). Biographies and unpublished letters of writers need to be produced so as to establish a sense of context and tradition. In addition, writing literary criticism on Asian American works in a way moves it beyond a minority status. When you do careful and thoughtful criticism of Asian American

literature, applying methods from mainstream literary studies but making changes whenever needed and adding what is unique to this literature, you will demonstrate that Asian American literature is not simplistic but full of complexity. This would help counter the condescending notion that there are better things to do for a doctoral student in English and American literature than studying Asian American literature. A lot of pioneering work still needs to be done. Imagine a situation where you send a paper on Asian American literature to mainstream journals, people might not even be able to recognize it and think that this stuff is marginal. One way to bypass this situation is to establish a new journal. *Amerasia Journal* at UCLA came out of this need, as a journal specializing in Asian American studies. Likewise, at UC Berkeley we recently started a journal called *Critical Mass: A Journal of Asian American Cultural Criticism*, to fill a gap in this area. In addition, we need to engage in dialogue with other people in the field and work closely with allies in other fields such as African American studies. We have to establish the intellectual and institutional aspect of it. Organization of conferences, sponsorship of research projects, membership in national committees to promote Asian American literature, and publication projects are all ways to promote the field. Internally, we have to establish very solid courses and scholarships; and externally, we have to engage in interaction and dialogue with other people.

L : How do you encourage student enrollment in the program? What kind of strategy do you use to attract students to the program? I mean non-Asians.

W : Your question about attracting non-Asians seems to imply a narrow way of thinking of Asian American courses, only as a way to diversify the curriculum. In fact, these courses have an inherent validity. Depending on the geographical location and demographic composition of a particular place, Asian American courses might do very different things.

If the student population lacks Asian Americans, the primary objective is to introduce Asian American literature. In other places where Asian American students are plentiful such as the Bay Area, Los Angeles, and New York, there is a solid demographic base for Asian American studies. Students have to be served in their interest. In that case, you can have an Asian American Studies Program. After all, Asian American Studies Programs were actually established to serve Asian American constituents. Without any doubt, a political dimension is inseparable from the whole history of Asian American literature and literary studies. But generalizations should not be applied. On some campuses, you might have to form alliances with other departments such as African-American studies in the southern universities, to adjust your courses and to design syllabi in such a way that people other than Asians may be interested in taking the courses. Adaptation should be made to fit individual circumstances. When the student population justifies the existence of courses taken mostly by Asian Americans, I don't think that is a problem of not "reaching out to non-Asians."

L : What are the unique themes and characteristics of Asian American literature?

W : The field of Asian American literature keeps on changing constantly. It is now witnessing an explosive period. Many writers from very diverse backgrounds are producing new works, and it is very hard to generalize. The field of literary studies is changing, too. Depending upon who the scholars are doing the work and what kind of training they have, they will come up with different things. I tried to identify some of the themes and characteristics in my recent book. But there are really no unique themes and characteristics beyond what Asian American literature scholars can discover. The concept of Asian American as a group is constructed, and so is Asian American literature. There are of course certain obvious ones such as generational issues, Americanization, Asian cultural

influence, oppression, search for home, and gender issues. But these are "obvious" only because in the past readers and scholars have noted their importance. New readers and scholars will see a different set of "unique themes and characteristics."

L : Interpretations of Asian American literature tend to put too much emphasis on the social, political and historical aspects rather than on the aesthetic qualities and literary complexities of the work itself. What are your thoughts?

W : I totally object to your question. What is "too much emphasis"? "Too much" as compared to what? What we are doing in Asian American literary studies -- asking that readers be informed about the historical and social background of a literature -- is no different from what scholars of British and American literature ask of their students. For example, when I studied the Victorian novel, I had to know something about the rise of the middle class, the role of the church, the British Empire, etc. Now because of my training in a colonial setting (educated in Hong Kong), I might have absorbed some of this information through other means than literary criticism. But it doesn't mean that I could be ignorant of it and concentrate on "aesthetic qualities and literary complexities" in isolation.

Because Asian American literary studies is a young field, and because so much education tends to be Eurocentric, a critic might have to do more explication of the "social, political and historical aspects" between the two covers of her book. But as the field grows, there will be more knowledge out there. Perhaps some readers will be better informed. When the new generation of graduate students do criticism on Asian American literature, they may not have to put as much of the sociopolitical background explicitly into their work, or they can more easily take for granted that the responsible reader should be equipped with necessary background for understanding Asian American literature.

Comparing the state of Asian American criticism to that

of, say, Anglo-American literature, may be misleading or leveling, unless their different circumstances are taken into account.

L : Why can't Asian American literature be merged into American literature?

W : Why should it be merged? Your question implies that American literature is a superior category into which-called minority literatures all hope to be merged. Actually there are different levels of abstraction for everything we do, and different ways of cutting up the pie. Even within "American literature," the "canonical" part, there may be designations such as Southern literature or New England literature. Works of Asian American literature can be classified and read in different ways. For example, they can be used in a course on women writers of color, or a course on immigrant literature, or a course on a genre such as autobiography. They can and should also be read as part of American literature. But that category is not supreme.

L : What is the ideal reading position or strategy for Asian American literature?

W : There is no ideal reading position (by ethnicity, gender, race, class, etc.) and no single hypothetical reader. Asian American literature has its own kind of validity. Questions arise from misunderstanding Asian American literature, a literature which can't be captured by one single reading strategy. One leaves something out whenever one focuses on something. As far as I am concerned, I must decide which approach will leave out the smallest number of the things that I see as important. It certainly helps to be Asian American when one is interpreting Asian American literature. When I say this, I don't mean that no reader or critic can cross boundaries. I am just emphasizing that in boundary-crossing situations there is often an asymmetry of power that we don't realize. People in the dominant culture often assume that they can cross any boundary. They don't have to know too much

about other groups or literatures, but just from being "universal" human beings, so to speak, and from good will and general literary training, they can do anything. Readers from the dominant society who are accustomed to believing their own reading position to be transcendent, universal, unbiased, tend to see those invested in "minority" literatures as caught up in identity politics. In fact, they are caught up in their own identity politics too, only it's been "naturalized," made invisible. There are certainly limits to any critical endeavor.

In my graduate studies, I specialized in Virginia Woolf, whom I liked a lot at the time. Having completed my thesis on Woolf, I could have gone on being a Woolf scholar. At some point in my career, I realized (not fully articulately) that not being British or an aristocrat made Woolf's works unappealing to me at a certain level. When the literary work in question is already recognized as "good" by the institution, by tradition, if you are a minority scholar, it is easy to blame your own deficiency or lack of training if you feel you can't get too excited about it. You tend to assume a certain amount of value in studying the so-called established canon and you are not encouraged to question. Either at some point you realize that this literature stops appealing to you for good reasons, or you think you have a problem. One has to be very conscious not to fall into this defensive position.

In regard to Asian American literature, I totally grant the theoretical possibility that non-Asians can manage to do excellent criticism on Asian American literature. Some non-African-American scholars have done good work on African American literature and are accepted by their colleagues who are African-Americans. It is certainly possible that non-Asians can do a good job in Asian American literary criticism. So far I haven't seen a whole lot of these scholars yet.

L : It is generally held that Asian American literature should be evaluated by its "representativeness" and "authenticity."

What is your opinion?

W : Frank Chin's idea of representativeness and authenticity is deconstructable and questionable. Representativeness generates a big problem for minority writers because they get saddled with all the extra work or a kind of internal censorship if they are susceptible to this kind of pressure to be the representatives of the whole group. Authenticity is also problematic, to begin with, because it assumes that homogeneity exists in the group. It fails to take into account the fact that when you are talking about Asian American literature, which is by definition culturally dynamic, you have already moved away from Asia but are not fully part of the mainstream. It is not from choice -- it is just that Asians are historically not seen as fully qualified to participate. When we are confronted with this kind of culturally dynamic situation, the meaning of authenticity becomes quite questionable. In fact, if you keep trying to pin down the concept of cultural authenticity, you'd soon realize that even in China, culture has never been fully static and cannot be captured as "authentic." These two concepts -- representativeness and authenticity -- are very problematic. When Frank Chin keeps pushing these two terms, I think, he is being polemical and a gadfly. A lot of times, he makes broad and unsubstantiated claims. If he were a scholar, he wouldn't be able to get away with them. I disagree with Frank Chin in intellectual terms, but I do think that he is doing thought-provoking work. Even though I don't think he is justified in the way he makes some of these attacks, he is, nevertheless, forcing people to confront a lot of these issues of audience, appropriation, and so on, because he makes his arguments in such extreme forms.

L : Why is there an opposition of gender between writers in other groups as well, e.g., in Chicano literature. Perhaps Asian American gender politics has been particularly prominent because of the polemics of Frank Chin. Again, even when Chin is ranting and raving, he is actually raising some important

issues about the interaction of race/ethnicity and gender in American society. One way of looking at it is to say that there is really a problem with Asian American men being seen as feminized by the dominant society. In order to maintain a sense of manhood, they try to put down the female writers. Another way is that given the racial and gender politics in this society, Asian American women, including women writers, do have a relative easy time getting recognition. It is generally believed that the male dominates the female and the white dominates the Asians. When you have an Asian American woman trying to make headway either by writing or by having a career or whatever, it will pose less a thret to the people on the top because of gender and race. If we have an Asian American man whose position is above women but below whites in general, it would become more threatening to the existing order of things for them to get ahead or to be recognized. A third way of looking at it is to say that Asian culture in general tends to be more sexist than western culture. Asian American women come into contact with a set of values which give them more room to become articulate, artistic, creative. Then, they would probably take advantage of it more aggressively because they are coming from a place where the culture is more oppressive to them. There is more opening up. Another possibility is that Asian American men from the same culture tend to be allotted more responsibilities in an economic sense. Consequently, they have less freedom to branch out and write plays or poems. These are all possibilities. I don't think anyone has written a systematic study related to this issue. The issues of cultural contact, access to the publishing industry, and reception by the critical establishment and reading public--all these issues that Frank Chin raised, I think, contribute to this situation of gender opposition.

L : Why can't Asian American literature merge with the Asian heritage? Don't you think it is in a kind of strange and

awkward position?

W : Again, it is "awkward" because of the way that Asian Americans have been treated by both their so-called "mother country" and by America. The awkwardness of this literature is a corollary of the awkwardness of Asian Americans as a group. Historically, Asian Americans are always being seen as awkward from the Asian countries' point of view. They are people who are seen as outside the pale of civilization, deteriorating. On the other hand, viewed from the perspective of the mainstream American society, Asian Americans are marginal, minorities, foreigners. So, in that sense, the positioning of Asian American literature is part of the position of the whole group. It is not a matter of choice. Even if you turn blue in the face to strive to merge, you can't.

Your question seems to assume that it is a desirable thing to merge and that once you succeeded in merging, the problem of awkwardness will be solved and will vanish. No way. First of all, the awkwardness is not entirely of our choice. There are historical reasons for it. Second, a kind of awakening in Asian American culture occurred in the late 60s and early 70s. Its claim is to forget about the awkwardness and to think of it as a new phase where one can create one's own culture. So, in that case, people may not want to merge and they may not need to merge because this offers them a base for resistance, a base for cultural regeneration, whereas if you merge, you have an illusion of blending in but in fact you can't completely blend in.

L : The search for homeland is of critical importance to Asian American writers. Yet they live in America, a place which is not to be considered as their home. As a matter of fact, they are also far away from Asia. Can you comment on this phenomenon?

W : It depends on whether you think of a homeland as coextensive with a geographical location or whether you think of it as a concept of home. If it is the former, Asian Americans

are seen in a lot of ways as outsiders in a place that should be their home. If home means origin, they are already being cut off from the origin because of the history of immigration. So I think home can only signify a kind of spiritual condition. Again searching may not be the best word for it since searching presupposes the home is already there. All you need to do is to hit upon it and to look for it. If you are lucky, you will find it. I don't think it is a matter of searching. It is a matter of constructing a sense of home rather than searching for it.

L : It seems to me that you prefer using a transgenerational and translinguistic definition of Asian American literature. Why?

W : I prefer using this definition because it is the way that the community is. There is a tendency to think "Asian American" begins only when you are born here or begins with the American-born generation. Either way it is an un-dynamic concept. It is too cut and dry. People change gradually and so does culture. You can't say arbitrarily that this is where Asian Americans start. In the same way, language is also subject to change. A lot of people come from a bilingual background. You can't arbitrarily say that only when you speak English can you be considered as an Asian American. So I think the community itself, the way it is defined now, is transgenerational and translinguistic. For me, it is only reasonable to expand the study of literature coming out of this community.

Asian American literature encompasses many elements, just like the community itself. The boundaries of these subgroups and the relationships between them are constantly being negotiated even now, right at this moment. When I group them together, I am not doing so in a static way but in a provisional and coalitional way. It constitutes a method in studying this body of works. But when the need arises, you may actually have a specialty in, for example, Vietnamese-American literature. If demographic and cultural transforma-

tions occur in such a way that this kind of speciality becomes feasible, it will happen.

L : Why does the power politics occur within the field of Asian American studies? Can you comment on the struggle for power among the subgroups of Asian Americans?

W : Is this any different than in other fields? Are you asking whether the power politics in Asian American studies is excessive? I really don't think so. On the other hand, it is important to realize that the term "Asian American" refers to a so-called panethnic coalition. The identity of the group is in constant negotiation. There are times when the common term "Asian American" works, when it is advantageous to employ it. There are also times when it may not be so advantageous, in which case the subgroup identity, such as Filipino American or South Asian American, becomes more important.

Perhaps, the power politics within the Asian American studies field is more explicit because its very emergence is based on a political struggle, whereas with more established fields their political basis has been hidden from view because the powerful groups have been in power so long, they seem to be just part of the landscape and therefore apolitical. There's actually a lot of power politics in other academic disciplines and institutions as well.

Sometimes you hear the view that being Asian American is too narrow, that one should just consider oneself a human being, a citizen of the world, and that Asian American literature is just part of world literature. The idea is that you should not have to identify with any geographical location or political position. To me, such a view is premature, because the concept of world citizenship may apply to individuals but not to groups, and institutions deal with groups. The ideal of world citizenship itself seems to be very promising because it presupposes a harmonious situation where everybody is just the same. Nevertheless, the historical condition for you to function as a world citizen is not there. You are still not a

world citizen, but exist in an institution with a certain type of passport and with a set of political rights or lack of rights.

L : Are you suggesting that the Asian American community is a utopia?

W : As you know, the Asian American community is already there. It is by no means a utopia in a sense of something waiting to happen. If by utopia you mean a group working in harmony without any friction, we are definitely not there. It is difficult, perhaps impossible, for ethnic subgroups to work together without any friction of one kind or another. Currently, we are in fact making the best of this coalition or provisional solidarity.

L : Can you briefly identify the distinction between ethnic studies and Asian American studies?

W : "Ethnic studies" is the umbrella term under which "Asian American studies" is a subcategory. The term "ethnic studies" is extremely complex. It sometimes refers to the study of peoples of color, groups that are "marked" as different from the dominant and "unmarked" group, in other words, groups that are "racialized." It sometimes includes the study of "white ethnics." In a way, the term "ethnicity" gained currency as a reaction to the abuse of the term "race" by white supremacists, as a way to bypass the biological connotations of race, which were used for discriminatory purposes.

L : Your advocacy of a new, if not unique, concept of "denationalization" in the 1993 Modern Languages Association Annual Convention did spark quite a discussion among the participants. What do you mean by "denationalization" and how does it apply to Asian American literary criticism?

W : "Denationalization," as a noticeable recent trend in Asian American literary criticism, refers at least to two phenomena: the easing of cultural nationalist concerns as a result of changing demographics within the Asian American community and theoretical critiques from various quarters ranging from the poststructuralist to the queer; and the

changing relationship between Asian and Asian American studies, two fields that used to be more clearly separated. The economic ascendancy of Asian nations and the changes in cultural dissemination, telecommunications, and transportation furnish the material and historical circumstances for "denationalization." Denationalization places Asian American cultural production in a globalized context, one that tends to de-emphasize the status of Asian Americans as a "domestic" ethnic minority in the United States. Not only does it realign the old Asian American community created in the 1960s and 1970s, but it also broadens the scope of the studies of Asian American culture. Nevertheless, I feel that one must exercise caution in advocating "denationalization" in Asian American cultural criticism. This is not just a trend toward greater sophistication or broader horizons. The trend itself must be historicized. The rise of multinational capital, for example, is a crucial factor in this globalized perspective.

As a brain-storming exercise, the interview, though interrupted at times by a few busy phone calls which seemed to remind us of the present reality, did proceed smoothly and concluded on a happy note. For me, it really opens up the possibility for future dialogue.

