



The Transmutation of Traditional Chinese Cultural Concepts Under the Construction of Pai Hsien-Yung's Identity

From "The New Yorker" to the Youthful Version of the Peony Pavilion

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Abstract. As a representative writer of overseas Chinese literature, Pai Hsien-yung and his literary creation are one the critical objects of discussion in the academic community. His two works *The New Yorker* and the youth version of *The Peony Pavilion* represent his two creative experiences, respectively. Through the analysis of these two works, it is clear that the transmutation process of "contradiction-return-innovation" of traditional Chinese culture in the construction of his identity, i.e., the dilemma, compromise and self-awareness of identity in the conflict between Chinese and Western cultures. In his creation, traditional Chinese culture has also risen from a touch of nostalgia to spiritual nourishment and then become an ageless youth. In today's era of information fragmentation and cultural globalization, we face the challenge of completing the building of our own values while allowing traditional culture to flourish in the contemporary setting. In this regard, Pai Hsien-yung's examination and selection during the process of looking for one's identity and discovering the essence of classics amidst cultural conflicts have a high reference value.

Keywords: Traditional Cultural Concept · Pai Hsien-yung · Identity · Overseas Chinese literature · Traditional Cultural Innovation

1 Introduction

As a representative writer of overseas Chinese, from the perspective of his life experience, Pai Hsien-yung's creative career since the publication of his debut novel *Grandma Jin* in *Literature* magazine in 1958 can be roughly divided into three stages: the first stage is his early works in Taiwan, such as *Grandma Jin*, *Black Rainbow*, and *Lonely Seventeen*, all of which reflect the influence of Western modernist fiction on Pai Hsien-yung. The second stage began in 1963 when his mother died and he went to the United States to study and ended in 1987 when Bai returned to China after a thirty-nine-year absence. As he later recalled, "I had been away from China for a long time, and my nostalgia for the culture of my own country had grown deeper, which is why I started *The New Yorker* and later *The Taipei people*. "[1] The third stage is from Pai Hsien-yung's return

to China to the present. In this stage, Bai's works are relatively few, except for the two short stories *Danny Boy* and *Tea for Two* in *The New Yorker*, and the youth version of *The Peony Pavilion*, in which he further traces the core of traditional culture.

Traditional Chinese culture, in contrast, is an institutionalized system that is common to the Chinese people, based on Confucianism and encompassing a variety of other ideological and cultural contents. Chinese traditional culture has a long and profound history, but in the modern context of increasingly close cultural exchanges, it is increasingly important to discover the core of the tradition and reconstruct it so that it can be reborn. In this process of renunciation, it is not only necessary to purify traditional culture, but also to examine it with a transcendent vision and to reshape it with global and modern means. While "The first thing that a modern intellectual must show when building his own cultural system is his traditional cultural view."^[2] From this perspective, the traditional cultural conceptions of overseas Chinese, who have been nourished by traditional culture and have experienced the European and American winds and rains, are meaningful to draw on. Pai Hsien-yung, who has been immersed in poetry and music since he was a child, has the same profound understanding as the "strangers" when they set foot alone in a foreign land, and they share the same characteristics of identity dilemma and cultural concept transmutation in the face of cultural impact. Therefore, as the "first generation of Chinese American writers"^[3] and the "fourth generation of modern literature"^[4], Pai Hsien-yung's nostalgia reflects not only his personal poetic pursuit, but also represents the common mentality of a generation or even several generations of overseas Chinese. Therefore, the change in his traditional cultural conception is typical and has high research value.

"Identity is an important concept in Western cultural studies, particularly favored by the New Left, feminism, and postcolonialism. Its basic meaning refers to the identification of an individual with a particular social culture."^[5] The issue of Pai Hsien-yung's identity and the drastic transmutation in his traditional cultural conception only gradually came to the fore after he left his homeland, so it is particularly important to study his creation from the second stage. The studies that have been conducted in academic circles mainly focus on the independent works of *Taipei People* or *New Yorkers*, such as Ms. Ouyang Zi's *Swallows in front of Wang Xie's Hall: An Analysis and Exploration of "Taipei People"*^[6] and Liu Jun's *From Nationalism to Cosmopolitanism: On Pai Hsien-yung's New Yorkers*^[7]; or they conduct comparative studies between the two, such as Liu Jun's or a comparative study between the two, such as Liu Jun's *From "Pure Nostalgia" to "Kinetic Nostalgia" - On Nostalgia, Urbanism and Identity Construction in Taipei People and New Yorker*^[8]; or a comparative study between the two, such as Yuan Liangjun's *From the First Two Stages of Pai Hsien-yung's Creation*^[4]. In these studies, culture clash and identity are two major themes that cannot be ignored, and this paper attempts to combine them, not by limiting the clash between Chinese and Western cultures, but by exploring the differences in Pai Hsien-yung's cultural concepts and the transmutation process from the perspective of identity construction. In other words, from a chronological perspective, we explore the characteristics of Pai Hsien-yung's characters and the content of the main themes in his second and third-stage creations, thus reflecting his identity construction in different periods and exploring the process of his traditional cultural conceptions. From the personal contradiction of identity to the

subsequent reinvention of traditional culture, Pai Hsien-yung's examination and choice in the process of finding identity in the midst of cultural conflicts and discovering the classical core are believed to be of equal value in today's globalized world.

2 Article Analysis

2.1 New Yorker

2.1.1 Two Types of "New Yorkers" Spanning Two Centuries

New Yorker contains six short stories written by Pai Hsien-yung from the 1960s to the beginning of the 21st century, a long period of time that cannot be generalized. According to the time and subject matter of these six novels, the creation of New Yorker can be divided into three stages: first, "The Story of Banished Immortal" and "The Complaint of Banished Immortal", which were written in 1965 and 1969 respectively; second, Ashes and Nocturne, which were published in the 1970s and 1980s; and then Danny Boy and Tea for Two, which were written at the beginning of the 20th century after Bai's return to China in 1987. The next is Danny Boy and Tea for Two written by Pai Hsien-yung after his return to China in 1987. The term "New Yorker" happens to be the phonetic translation of the famous American magazine New Yorker, but the original meaning of the word is "New Yorker," so I wonder if Pai Hsien-yung intended to use this name. The main characters he portrays in The New Yorker can be summarized by the words "A guest in New York" and "New Yorker", the first two stages are about "A guest in New York" and the last one is about "New Yorker". The first two stages are about "A guest in New York", and the second stage is about "New Yorkers". The term "A guest in New York", as the name implies, refers to those who live in New York, while "New Yorkers" goes further and refers to those who have integrated into the open and tolerant society and heterogeneous culture of New York. The six novels written by Pai Hsien-yung all contain a reflection of himself, and the works written during these three periods also show his own changing cultural concepts and the gradual construction of his identity.

2.1.2 Being Alone in a Foreign Country as a Foreign Guest: The Survival Dilemma of "Strangers"

The "other" is an important concept in Western literature, which refers to anything other than the concept of "self" and is essential to the definition of the self and the construction of identity. On the other hand, the Other also implies alienation, exploitation, power domination, and status inequality, and is an important tool in the study of overseas Chinese literature [9].

After the loss of his mother in 1963, Pai Hsien-yung went to the United States to study. With the death of his relatives and his wandering alone, Bai's plight was just like that of the two "Banished Immortal" in his novel. Coming from Shanghai (China) to New York, from being the sons of nobles to becoming courtesans or drowning themselves in the Venice River, they were not only the geographical and ethnic others, but also the linguistic and cultural others. For Pai Hsien-yung at that time, his journey from Taipei to New York was banishment and disgraced in Wonderland. Faced with the impact of Western cultural hegemony, he showed a strong sense of disparity and resistance.

The word "Banished Immortal" is very intriguing, and people always think of Li Bai, a poet in Chinese history who was proud of his talent. The name of the main character in "The Banished Immortal" is "Li Tong", which means red and has a symbolic meaning. In the novel, Li Tong is a very unruly, arrogant and stubborn person who likes to wear red cheongsam and is the "Queen of May" in the eyes of everyone. In the face of huge changes in her family, she dances like crazy, changes male partners, and disobeys advice when betting on horse races..... These actions are all expressions of Li Tong's rebellion when she leaves the embrace of her mother's culture and is subjected to the fierce impact of Western culture in every aspect. At the end of the novel, she ends up like a "female Li Bai", sinking into the Venice River and ending her life. However, Li Bai's death is a dream to capture the moon in the water; although it is a mirrored dream, his death is full of romantic obscurity; compared to Li Tong's death, it is more of a dazzling death that fades away silently. Although Huang Fengyi is not as rebellious as Li Tong, her death is also tragic. Behind her seemingly glamorous life in America, she has no choice but to sell her body in order to support her mother and survive.

It can be said that the encounter between the two Banished Immortals is a true reflection of Pai Hsien-yung's heart when he first came to America. The alienation and separation of his identity as a "guest in New York" and the impact of foreign cultures, the performance and choices of the "strangers" in the face of the clash of Chinese and Western cultures are the externalization of Bai's crisis of cultural identity. He once said in *When I Look Back*, "Many foreign students, once they go abroad, are subjected to the impact of foreign culture, and a so-called identity crisis arises. They have to reassess their own values and beliefs." [1] This requires the separated "Banished Immortal" to reconstruct their own identities and to have the courage to face the dilemma of survival by clinging to their spiritual homes. Li Tong's transition to several men and Huang Fengyi's degradation to a "Mongolian princess" are also metaphors for their encounters with the male other, implying that Eastern culture is the weaker side and has become the other of the powerful Western culture. Li Tong, who fights to the death, and Huang Fengyi, who is "conquered," also reveal Bai's cultural concept of this period: resistance to Western cultural hegemony, but helplessness and sadness of cultural inferiority in the face of Chinese cultural oppression.

2.1.3 The Paradox of the "Marginal Man" Who Should Know that He is a Guest in the Dream

Nocturne and *Ashes* were published in the 1970s and 1980s, at the beginning of the reform and opening up after the Cultural Revolution. Compared to the *Banished Immortal*, Pai Hsien-yung's two works at this stage reveal a strong political awareness. In these two novels, the identity of the protagonists is different from that of the two novels, as they have changed from newly arrived students to "New Yorkers" who have lived in the United States for many years. They are no longer suffering from the loneliness of not fitting in and being expelled, and they are free from the great alienation of being a "stranger". However, although they are far from their mother culture, they are still deeply influenced by it and cannot fully identify with Western culture.

In *Nocturne*, Wu Zhenduo and Lv Fang are among a group of international students who, due to their varied post-graduation decisions, experienced quite diverse outcomes.

Lv Fang, who made the seemingly "right" choice to return to China to join the construction, was tormented by political struggles and had a lousy fate; Wu Zhenduo, who seemed to have a successful career abroad, always missed Lv Fang, who once played Chopin passionately and "never really loved Peggy". His marriage was also full of misfortunes. Wu discovered his enthusiasm had died when he met up with his old friend in New York after 25 years. Despite his inability to forget Lv Fang and his father's wish, a Chinese love he can't let go of, listening to Lv Fang's apparent simplicity of speech awakens his memories of the past. The reality is very different from the lofty talk he once had; time has passed, things have changed, the cold is all he feels, and everything appears to be an absurd paradox. His heart is still attached to China, yearning to return to his maternal culture, despite the fact that he has progressively adapted to life in New York. His heart, however, is rife with contradictions.

Ashes have a longer span of time than Nocturne and are a better indictment of the times. Although "Although I exist, I feel afraid when looking back to the past", nearly half a century of deep suffering is concentrated in a few lines of sighing; everything is "in vain...", how can an individual deal with himself in the face of the rise and fall of history. Through Qi Sheng's ears, the two characters, the eldest and the cousin, who originally had different stances, are both exiled to foreign countries after the struggle between the two parties, and their encounters are tragic and absurd. The most ironic thing is at the end of the novel, where Cousin Uncle digs up a grave, which deviates from the traditional Chinese culture of "returning to one's roots and being buried in the ground". The oldest uncle also begs "me" to take care of his funeral and scatter his ashes into the sea. The two old men fought for the "revolution" all their lives, but in their old age, they could not get a good ending after all. The ashes symbolize not only the displacement of three people, but also the destruction of traditional Chinese culture, showing Pai Hsien-yung's strong complaint against the times and culture, and his deep concern and regret traditional culture.

Compared to his first arrival in the United States, Pai Hsien-yung's identity dilemma remained at this stage, but he became more integrated into Western culture. But after being stimulated by Western culture, opening the window of his creative mind, and borrowing more foreign works, he "calmed down and suddenly looked back and found that the tradition he had almost left behind contained so many treasures! So, they sucked on the milk of tradition with hunger and thirst." In *Ashes*, even the displaced and betrayed uncle wants to scatter his ashes into the sea and float back to China or Taiwan, but his cousin has become discouraged and only wants to find a "clean" place in New York. He only wants to find a "clean" place in New York. Pai Hsien-yung has gotten rid of the dilemma of being a "stranger" but has fallen into a new embarrassing situation of being a "marginal man". In his body, traditional culture and Western culture are mixed and contradictory, and he is unable to master or turn to either side. The "New Yorkers" have taken root in a foreign country, but they are also eager to return to their hometown. From this, we can see that Pai Hsien-yung's view of traditional culture at this stage is eager to return, but full of deploring the traditional culture destroyed by the Cultural Revolution, thus presenting a contradictory characteristic.

2.1.4 Mercy Across Gender, Nation, and Race: The Redemption of “New Yorkers”

Danny Boy and Tea for Two were written in 2001 and 2003 respectively, after Pai Hsien-yung returned to China in 1987 after a gap of nearly forty years. The main characters in these two novels have changed from "A guest in New York" who are students and immigrants to a group of people from various countries and nationalities, and homosexuality is their common label. They are no longer transients, but "New Yorkers" in the true sense of the word.

Behind the image of the exemplary teacher who is loved by his students, the main character of Danny Boy is lonely and unacceptable to society. He is bound by the net of worldly morality and professional ethics, and his carnal desire is accidentally released in this conflict between the flesh and the spirit, and he has to go far away from home. Moral liberation brought about physical indulgence, and he contracted AIDS as a result. After his illness, he accidentally met his "Danny Boy" and in the process of taking care of Danny, he accomplished the nirvana of "saving others——saving himself ". In the great love of religion, he has been able to quell the struggle between the flesh and the spirit, and has achieved spiritual upliftment.

In Tea for Two, there are more characters and more complex identities: "I" and Tony are Chinese, David is Jewish, Andi is mixed with Chinese and American, Pearl Lily is a Taishan girl and a Texan, Jinno grew up in Italy, and Fei is Filipino. They are no longer troubled by racial and ethnic issues, and the clash between Chinese and Western cultures has been completely dissolved. It is clear from "Tairy land" and the decorations of David and Tony's home that the East and West are not dichotomous but are now intertwined. The topics covered in the novel are no longer limited to gender and race, but present a global theme that transcends ethnicity, country and culture.

According to the post-modern decentered identity theory, the construction of identity becomes a kind of relativism and is fractured by Derrida's deconstruction of the Différance view [10], identity is a decentering process in which old identities are constantly split and new ones are constantly formed. In the two stages mentioned above, Pai Hsien-yung, as a "New Yorker," is torn by the clash between Chinese and Western cultures and is caught in the dilemma of identity. Based in the bustling city of New York, he was "at a loss as to where to go". In his works of this period, however, Bai's identity has transcended the dichotomy of his time and has constructed a new cultural identity, a hybrid, relative and global identity. This is Pai Hsien-yung's construction of identity-based on an open and tolerant mindset in an era of globalization and increasing cultural exchanges.

It is worth noting that the "journey to the roots" and religious liberation of David and Tony in Tea for Two cannot be regarded as a retracing of Bai's origin of life. Combined with Bai's return to China after thirty-nine years in 1987, I believe that Bai's global perspective beyond his national position also implies a conversion to traditional culture. In 1987, after nearly forty years of absence from China, Bai also backed to Shanghai to lecture at Fudan University. In 1987, Pai Hsien-yung also went to Shanghai to lecture at Fudan University after nearly forty years of absence from China. Their search for roots in the novel is also a return to Pai Hsien-yung. At the end of the novel, "I" is ready to write a letter to explain what happened to me in recent years, and the letter left by David and Tony mentions that they "love this city" and that although Shanghai is dirty

and poor, they "have a primitive feeling for it. ". The first-person narrative implies Pai Hsien-yung's shadow. Through such a "travel to the roots," he completely releases his traumatic historical recollections and completes his return to traditional culture. And within the realm of traditional culture, he initiates the search for the beginning of life and even the significance of being.

2.2 A Poetic Habitat Under the Traditional Sky: Youthful Version of the Peony Pavilion

Dr. GONG gang once proposed the concept of "philosophical nostalgia" and advocated that the realm of nostalgia should be divided into three levels: first, the most emotional and straightforward regional nostalgia arising from being far away from the homeland in space; second, the nostalgia for the cultural homeland arising from being separated for too long; and third, the philosophical nostalgia that rises to the search for the essence of existence and the metaphysical destination [11].

In the three stages of The New Yorker's creation, Bai's pre-1987 works always carry a temporal and spatial distinction between the present and the past, as well as a lingering traditional cultural meaning, which can be regarded as a manifestation of regional and cultural nostalgia. The third stage, which began after his return to China, symbolizes a further sublimation of Pai Hsien-yung's nostalgia. The religious rebirth of "saving others—saving himself " in *Danny Boy* is a search for his soul and spiritual resting place. When creating *Tea for Two*, Pai Hsien-yung combined his cultural nostalgia, which had to some extent been relieved, with philosophical nostalgia, and began a new search, and the creation of the youth version of *The Peony Pavilion* is his answer.

The *Peony Pavilion* is one of the great peaks of classical Chinese culture. "It is a combination of music, dance, and literature. After more than 400 years, it has been refined and perfected to the point of becoming one of the most refined and perfect forms of Chinese performing arts." [12] But a perfect art, if not appreciated by young audiences, will gradually lose its vitality, and eventually lose touch with the mainstream of the times. Therefore, Pai Hsien-yung's youthful version of *The Peony Pavilion* aims to explore the modern meaning of the traditional text and recall the lost beauty of traditional culture. The youthful story is interpreted by young actors and actresses, presenting the theme of "the greatest love" that can appeal to the young generation, while preserving the essence of the singing and the original script. This has resulted in a "new aesthetic of Kunqu" [13] that blends tradition with modernity and tradition with tradition.

In his early years, Bai watched Yu Zhenfei and Mei Lanfang sing *A Dream in the Garden*, which became the inspiration for the novel *A Dream in the Garden*; and in 1987, when he returned to China to study, he caught a performance by the Shanghai Kun Opera Troupe. After seeing the performance, Pai Hsien-yung exclaimed, "I saw how Kunqu, the most exquisite and elegant traditional Chinese opera art, could be reborn and shine on stage after the catastrophe of the Cultural Revolution. It is surprising that after the devastation of the Cultural Revolution, traditional opera art was reborn and shone brightly on stage. I felt that I had experienced a re-baptism of the mother culture and a re-conversion of the national spiritual civilization. The flourishing age of the Tang Dynasty, the rise and fall of the Tianbao, was all in front of me at once." [14] For him,

Kunqu, a poetic and beautiful symbol of classical aesthetics, has become his trust to rediscover the core of traditional culture.

Pai Hsien-yung has extracted the theme of youthful love from the original fifty-five pieces of Tang Xianzu's *The Peony Pavilion* through repeated screening and selection. With the part of "love in dreams", "love between human beings and ghosts" and "love between people", The theme of youthful love is extracted from life and death. What the youth version of *The Peony Pavilion* shows is a kind of transcendent love, which transcends class, dreams and reality, life and death, and times. This is Pai Hsien-yung's attempt to answer the ultimate question of identity by combining traditional culture with the ethereal "Soul Mountain". The ultimate question of identity is also the original question: "Who am I?" and "Where do I go?" Pai Hsien-yung, a self-proclaimed "Kunqu volunteer," returns to his mother's embrace and devotes himself to the creation of a youth version of *The Peony Pavilion*, which means that he speaks not only from the standpoint of a Chinese, but also from the standpoint of a modern person. He tries to extract the inner core of traditional culture and reconstruct it, so that the ancient can reappear in all its glory. Pai Hsien-yung once said, "Kunqu is an aesthetic art, and the pursuit of beauty is my starting point and my destination, and I want to revive the classical beauty of China and awaken the romance and longing in the hearts of the audience with beauty." [15] Beneath the classical veneer of Kunqu is a genuine pursuit of "inner beauty", which is precisely Pai Hsien-yung's philosophic nostalgia and his search for the true nature of life and the destination of the soul.

After returning to his maternal culture, Pai Hsien-yung established a diverse and global identity and began his search for the meaning of his existence and the purpose of his life; the youth version of *Peony Pavilion* represents his "renaissance" [16] of traditional culture. In addition to reviving the classics, the purpose of this revival is to generate new works that surpass the traditions. In this way, Pai Hsien-yung's conception of traditional culture has begun to explore and innovate the core of the classics following his conversion, as well as to explore the modern charm of ancient traditional culture in a modern and youthful manner with an attitude of inheritance, in order to restore its light. This is a type of roots-seeking, retroactive, and transcendent inquiry.

3 Conclusion

Based on the existing foundation of Pai Hsien-yung's research, this paper explores the changes in Pai Hsien-yung's traditional cultural concepts during the second and third stages of his creation from the perspective of identity construction, redefining the differences in the traditional cultural conceptions of Pai Hsien-yung by creating four stages and revealing their transmutation process: when he first came to the United States, he had a strong sense of nationalism and resistance to Western cultural hegemony, but he was frustrated by the weakness and inferiority of Eastern culture; in the second stage, Pai Hsien-yung is torn by the mother culture and the foreign culture, caught in the dilemma of longing to return to the mother body but contradictory and tangled; in the third stage, in the worldly vision that dissolves the dilemma of identity, his implicit conversion to tradition is implied; in the creation of the youth version of *The Peony Pavilion*, Pai Hsien-yung seems to have fully grasped his nostalgia. It seems that Pai

Hsien-yung has fully grasped his nostalgia and further traced the classical core under the sky of traditional culture, allowing the ultimate beauty to regain its youth.

Looking back at the transmutation process of Pai Hsien-yung's traditional cultural outlook, it is characterized by "contradiction-return-innovation," which represents the common mentality of many overseas Chinese in the midst of Chinese and Western cultural conflicts. In the face of global cultural exchanges in the twenty-first century, Pai Hsien-yung's examination and choice of how to construct his own personal cultural outlook and values in the process of searching for an identity in the midst of cultural conflicts and discovering the classical core have profound implications for reference. In today's globalization and informatization, in the face of overwhelming fragmented information and rapidly changing communication technologies, a modern and innovative perspective and a grasp of the inner core of culture are indispensable to bringing traditional culture to life in this era. Therefore, Pai Hsien-yung's "Contradiction-Return-Innovation" process of cultural transmutation, especially the cultural attitude and cultural self-awareness reflected in the latter stage of Kunqu innovation, has its own value that cannot be ignored.

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