

# “The Other” Trapped in a Bicultural Dilemma

## An Analysis of Celeste Ng’s *Everything I Never Told You*

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**Abstract**—In her first Novel *Everything I Never Told You*, selected as the Amazon’s NO.1 Best Book of 2014, Celeste Ng, a Chinese American woman writer of 80’s, explores a theme which distinguishes it from the rest Chinese American novels. It is about a tragedy that happened in a mixed race family, the family of a Chinese American college professor and his stay-at-home white wife in a small Ohio town in the 1970s. Taking an advantage of her bicultural identity “Chinese American—American”, Celeste Ng describes the culture clash that Chinese Americans confront in a space of cultural hybridity and reproduces a live picture, in which “the Other” are trapped in a bicultural dilemma, in this literary work.

**Keywords**—Celeste Ng; *Everything I Never Told You*; the Other; Chinese American literature; the space of cultural hybridity

### I. INTRODUCTION

Novel *Everything I Never Told You*, the first Novel of Celeste Ng, a Chinese American woman writer of 80’s, caused the extensive concern of the Chinese and foreign media when it appeared in the literary world debut. It was selected as the best seller by *New York Times* and the NO.1 Best Book of 2014 by Amazon and other famous media. It beat works of more than 99 writers including Stephen King and Haruki Murakami and became the most powerful and desirable dark horse. New York Time Book Review, America’s most influential review of media, said “Even if we know with this kind of story, we have never seen in the novel in the United States, at least, before Celeste Ng, no one has dealt with this kind of story. It tells about burden and pressure of the heterogeneous. The burden and pressure usually destroys a person rather than shapes a person”. The Amazon editors recommend that “there is no inattentive writing in this novel. What I worried about is my worship to *Everything I Never Told You* will lead to too much expectation on the book from readers. Well, this book is exactly excellent! Its penetrating and deep feeling hits your heart. Its words are precise and restraint, and its style is gentle and exquisite”. *Everything I Never Told You*, which got so much attention of the literature world, what a story it told that struck a chord with readers?

Celeste Ng, stood on the views of both Chinese and American, which is totally different from a Chinese-American, pointed out the culture conflicts of Chinese ethnic group in the

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space of cultural hybridity (Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* 112) by the literature and recreated the dilemma of “the Other” caught between the cultures. The novel told stories of a Chinese professor and a white woman’s interracial marriage and family in the 1970s in Ohio. Lydia, the second child of the family and the apple of her parents’ eyes, inherited her mother’s blue eyes and father’s black hair and bore all sustenance and hope of parents. They believed daughter Lydia must be able to achieve the dreams they couldn’t achieve. But as Lydia was found drowned in the lake MeadowWood, the surface balance of the half-blood family originally maintained was broken. Her father James was marital infidelity while her mother Marilyn was mental breakdown and wanted to find the murder. Her elder brother Ness considered that the neighbor boy Jack had something to do with Lydia’s death. Only sensitive and careful younger sister Hannah saw through everything and she was the only person to observe each inner secret calmly at home. The half-blood family described in the novel was a miniature version of mixed space between Chinese and western culture. In the cultural critical space, the minority “the other” lived in the cracks between Chinese and western culture and suffered identity anxiety, racial divide, family pressure, female liberation and the helpless choice of personal path and other problems.

### II. OUTSIDE FEELING OF THE OBJECTIVITY “THE OTHER”

In postcolonial theory, compared to the subjectivity of “Self” in the west, the non-western world beside “Self” are seen as alien “the other” (Edward W.Said, *Orientalism* 1). In this novel, for all the other white, including mother Marilyn, Lydia’s father, James, son Ness, daughter Lydia and Hanna as the Chinese are “the other” or “alien”. Even growing up in the United States with pure accent and graduated from Harvard, a professor of Chinese’s father, James has always cannot be erased difference and integrate into the white society. The Mr. Li usually don’t go to church. The couple never goes out to contact with others or treat at home. They have no dinner party or bridge (a card game) fellows, hunt friends or brothers knowing on the luncheon party (Celeste Ng, *Everything I Never Told You*, 059). They have no true friends and they feel lonely all the time without approve of white society. The son Ness and the daughter Hanna looks like their father, they have the same color, black hair and black eyes, the thin figure. These distinctive Asian features make them “stand out” in white society and don’t be cared by parents. The second

daughter looks like her mother, she has blue eyes. Hybrid characteristics made her the apple in father's eye and embody all hope to achieve his dream "integrating into the white society". At that time, it is meaningless to stress birth, accent, intelligence quotient, famous school education and illustrious career because Asian skins have already decided on their "the other" identity, even if the identity is not approved by themselves.

Yellow skin and black hair of Chinese people always make them stand out and eye-catching in the white community. They desire to integrate into the white community but always are alienated and be nonperson. The father James bears too much supercilious look from the white and hears enough whisper of "The Chinese guy, go home". "Being different" has been engraved on his forehead, shined between two eyes and affected his whole life (Celeste Ng, *Everything I Never Told You*, 059). When he was a child, once he took PE class, when he changed his cloth, his trousers were taken by the white children playing a trick. So he had to go to class with only underpants. Years later, the same thing happened on his son Ness. Ness was laughed at when playing games with the white Children in swimming pool. In the Yelling of "the Chinese guy couldn't find the Chinese", they left sulkily. Humiliation of being ridiculed and frustration of social withdrawal was the most painful blow to them. The indications are that they are "the other" living in the United States. Though the father is a professor at Harvard with illustrious identity, and teaches the history of the United States and the son, has outstanding academic results, loves America's space industry and is the quasi Harvard students, their inner is pure American, they seem to stick the Chinese label and still use the family name Li of China. The Mr. Li were eye-catcher wherever they go. A woman they met in a department store said: "I know that you are Chinese, I can see from the eye" (Celeste Ng, *Everything I Never Told You*, 003). The white Marilyn catches attention and disapprobatory sight when stay with James on the road, in the cinema, in the park and in restaurant. Lydia and Ness are the only two students studying in MeadowWood high school so they are very outstanding. Public evaluation for them is "children from half-blood family are usually hard to find their own position" (Celeste Ng, *Everything I Never Told You*, 197). As "the other", they are neither accepted by the place they grow up nor have native place t worry. They can't find a sense of belonging and derive out an outside feeling. Although the father James likes to see incredible expressions on their face when people heard he is a history professor in the United States, he is used to representing himself "I am an American" (Celeste Ng, *Everything I Never Told You*, 009). He can't get rid of the heterogeneous label-Chinese appearance. He is always the other in eyes of the white.

### III. STRUGGLE OF FEMALE "THE OTHER"

In the postcolonial feminist theory, Women are regarded as non main body "the other" in the "male-female" binary power structure. Women are marginalized in a subordinate position so they become "the other" relative to the subject of "male". And feminism, try to challenge and deconstruct the binary opposition under the traditional hierarchy of "violence". In history, women have never been to a strong subject so far,

therefore, contemporary feminist is to construct the subjectivity of women (Dai Xuehong, the other and subject: a view on the female, 30). In the novel, as a white, although the mother Marilyn is unable to experience the pain on other members of being "the other" as the object of Chinese, she has been living in the in the shadow of female "the other" and has never given up to challenge the secular point of view or to challenge their female "the other" identity. In the popular idea "girls are suitable for studying housekeeping, English and history" in the 1950s, Marilyn always likes to challenge the men "subject status" to let people sit up and take notice. When in high school, she refused to attend housekeeping class, which is arbitrary to the main trend, and went to the manual training for boys. In college, she majored in natural science such as physics and chemistry, which was very different in the ordinary people eyes. She was the only girl in the sixteen students majoring in chemistry, when conducting chemical experience, the boys always said to her with an accent of contempt "be careful, you'd better to ask us for help" (Celeste Ng, *Everything I Never Told You*, 027). Teachers often laughed her with a smile on their face, but Marilyn always got the first place to make them pay special regard. In 1958, even interracial marriages is a illegal in some rural area of Virginia, it will bring strange vision even in Boston, even her mother is strongly against, she still married James, a Chinese-American man. Although she struggled for female subjectivity all the time with a dream of being a doctor, relentlessly reality degenerate her into a housewife managing for her husband, children and house, same but unwilling. She did not want to be restricted within the family and her husband to live an insipid and numb life (Celeste Ng, *Everything I Never Told You*, 143). She thought living a full-time wife comfortable and warm but suppressed and wronged. That is not the life she wants. Female subjectivity consciousness was active in her mind all the time and never disappeared, so she ran away from home, and went to university of Toledo community continue to complete her studies and realize her dream of female doctor. However the unexpected pregnancy made her give up grand plans only lasted nine weeks. The pursuit of her life, like mist beneath the breeze and become bleak (Celeste Ng, *Everything I Never Told You*, 141). Thus proclaimed failure of Marilyn's women "the other" struggle.

### IV. DILEMMA OF "THE OTHER" BETWEEN THE CRACK OF CULTURE

"The other" was that James trying to get rid of all the life. He not only wanted to integrate into the white group but also entrusted his great hope to his children. He hoped they can integrate into the white group actively. He passed the consciousness and behavior signal of "to adapt to the environment, to fit in, to avoid being different" to the children tenaciously. Depression and inferiority of a "heterogeneous" bothered him, and he transmitted these distractions to the children and family. However, what's ironic is, what James wants to get rid of is just the eastern appearance, while what he pursues is the eastern culture-- Being gregarious, which is deeply rooted in his sub-consciousness. Oriental collectivism culture value groups, emphasis on harmonious interpersonal relationships, mutual dependence, collective harmony, low-key gregarious, avoid novelty and highlight individuality. In the

novel, what the father James pursues for life and influences children is desperately integrating into the crowd and trying to avoid the extraordinary (Celeste Ng, *Everything I Never Told You*, 042) to become a common member of American or a person without regarding different. When the man with eastern culture rooted in sub-consciousness met the girl with the western culture lied in bone, Heterogeneous attraction contributed to an interracial marriage. The white girl Marilyn growing up in a single parent family has the dream of was buried in pursuing novelty, personality independence and women's liberation buried in the western individualism culture. Her life's hope was to be different so her behaviors were maverick when she was young. She performed well in physics and chemistry, which was dominant by male. She wanted to be a female doctor with ambitions. She traitorously got rid of the life that designed by her mother: to be admitted by Harvard and find an excellent man there; manage three things: husband, children and house. She didn't want to be same with her mother, who devoted the whole life to the three while dead alone--- husband deserted her and daughter left her. The only thing didn't give up her is the food she made. Marilyn was angry about the meaningless life of her mother, she didn't want to be a housewife, she pursued to be different and realize her dream of being a female doctor. When the two different people met in the class at Harvard, they saw what they want on each other: one pursues integration while the other wants to be different. James was confessed by the white girl so he felt that the country America opened arms to him (Celeste Ng, *Everything I Never Told You*, 046). He was flattered and hoped to integrate into the white groups by the marriage with a white girl. Marilyn saw different characteristics on James and thought that the James knew what difference was (Celeste Ng, *Everything I Never Told You*, 037). Thus, the man with eastern culture rooted in sub-consciousness met the girl with the western culture lied in bone got together and made up an interracial mixed-race family, which pre-buried the crisis only happened in culture critical space. These crises are increasingly clear and smothery in the process of collision and mix of eastern and western culture. One of the most mournful things is that the second daughter Lydia finished her life at sixteen by drowning in the MeadowWood Lake in a night. Under the surface harmony in the family simmers the great cognitive and cultural differences. On one hand, Marilyn's cultural cognition of pursuing female independence and individuality pushes her to be different. On the other hand, James's eastern cultural cognition of being gregarious in his inner heart reminds him to integrate into crowd. While, things go contrary to their wishes, Marilyn got married with James was to be different and realize her dream, but the oriental men consciousness (Man should earn money to support family and the wife needn't to work, she should stay at home to look after children and do the housework) buried in bone of James hindered Marilyn to accomplish her dream of being a professional woman. Therefore, when Marilyn said she want to be a research assistant, James said that "when I become a lifelong professor, we will have enough money, tell me, you won't think of going out to work" (Celeste Ng, *Everything I Never Told You*, 078). The couple has distinctive difference in cultural cognition: Marilyn wants to do a job is not because of money, but for realizing her value. But in James' mind, his

wife looks down on him and thinks he doesn't earn enough money to live better. This divergence was solved by Marilyn's giving up. Her dream ended in failure and the man's hope dashed as well. As a white, Marilyn behaves differently. She didn't communicate with neighbors or attend any party. She didn't contact her mother because of her mother's objection for her marriage. The half-blood family has nearly no interaction with the white groups so it is impossible for them to integrate into the white people. Their own loneliness and pain got comfort from their daughter Lydia. She is the only child in the three who has blue eyes and she looks like her mother greatly, so she was the apple in father's eye and continued parents' hope. James and Marilyn entrusted their wishes on Lydia: the father hoped her to integrate into the white, make friends with them, avoid being different and become a common white girl while the mother wished she could be excellent, be different in soul and life, and do something different from those common white girls. The different expectations and endless favor from parents decided Lydia's tragic life. Living in the crack of two different cultures, Lydia loved parents deeply because she wanted to accomplish father's wish and keep her promise to mother, while the two was conflict with each other and can't be completed at the same time. One side of the crack is her father, he cares about whether Lydia is gregarious and popular, whether she has friend circle. He pays attention to her friends all the time, for example, he could drive her to shopping center to meet friends, give her money to watch films with friends and listen to her phone happily (actually, these are pretended by Lydia because she has no real friends). Every gift the father gave was related to friends and being gregarious. The Christmas gift was dating guide *How to Make Friends and Influence Others*. However, Lydia has no time to make friends actually because her mother who did not realize the dream of being a doctor now delegates all hopes to her. Her mother even uses the dinner time to learn math and do physics homework. She keeps a close watch on Lydia's study, forces her to do everything and gives her one and another book on science and biography of famous female pioneer, which stresses Lydia out of breath. From the back of Marilyn's running away, Lydia has no friends. Once she had opportunities to make friends, but to make her mother happy, she refused invitations to parties, skating and swimming from peer one and again. After losing these opportunities, no person invites her when she was in grade two. Therefore, she has no access to integrate into crowds, which implies the failure of father's hope. The other side of the crack is her mother. Marilyn spoiled Lydia by excessive enthusiasm. She conducted her great plan to realize her dream on her own wish enthusiastically. However, she didn't notice kinds of changes happened on Lydia. Lydia's study became worse, failed the physics exam and was not gregarious, begun to smoking and played around together with Jack—a wild notorious neighbors boy. She even failed novice driver's license test. With the guilty of breaking promises with parents, Lydia felt repressive and anxious. She was the center of the family even if she wouldn't like, she had the duty to unify the family and was forced to realize parent's dreams. She suppressed bitterness in her heart and became increasingly lonely. She became unsocial and was trapped in the bicultural dilemma, suffering stifling pain.

## V. THINGS CAN'T BURDEN OF "THE OTHER"

Having no outlet to release pressure, Lydia poured out anguish to her elder brother Ness, the only way to relax and the only thing that made her survive and not breakdown. Ness was the only condiment for her life and gave her reliance to insist. From kindergarten, Ness would account for a seat for her in school buses and restaurants. Because of the brother, she didn't feel lonely in the white groups or suffered coming and going alone. However, the fact that the brother was admitted by Harvard University and was going to leave home was the last straw and teetered spirit of Lydia. Finally she broke down. Lydia felt that her heart fell into the ice hole and left her away. Lydia and Ness were just as the accelerator and clutch in a car (Celeste Ng, *Everything I Never Told You*, 222), one was going up and the other was falling down (the brother was admitted by Harvard University while she was plummeted in study), one obtained and the other lost (the brother got freedom while she lost the support of brother), one was getting away and the other was trapped forever (the brother got away from the depressing crack while she was left to suffer the pain alone). When the last straw fell down, it outweighed Lydia and pushed her down to the valley of despair. So she decided to end her life by drowning in MeadowWood Lake without hesitation. Crisis in the half-blood family broke out like a volcano, tore surface harmony in the family down and broke the balance struggling to maintain. The family struggled to find causes, to mourn and to regret and tried to compromise with each other.

The truth reflected by the novel was enlightening and gave people a sense of choking pain. The causes of Lydia's tragic life were not just expectations from parents and things can't burden in life. As analyzed above, behind the truth was a series of social problems such as heterogeneous cultural differences and conflicts, racial divide, identity anxiety, family pressure, female liberation, family crisis and the personal path. *Everything I Never Told You* put the macro problems into micro family and pointed out the dilemma of the minority "the other". Tragedy was always the end of numerous small things. They fell down on the person continuously like snowflake. They seem as little as dust and didn't need to mention. However, when endless happenstance got together, they would break down him or her. In the story that without villain, in which everyone was giving love and worth sympathy, they all have compelling obligation.

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