

# Historical Cultural Depiction of Overseas Chinese Female Writer

## Taking May-Lee Chai as an Example

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**Abstract**—The subject takes May-Lee Chai, a Chinese American female writer who made new voice after the 90s as the research example, and makes text explanation on her two masterpieces “My Lucky Face” and “The Girl from Purple Mountain” through the post-classical narratology analysis on the feminism theme carried in the two novels, which shaped the independent, courageous and strong female image, made female voice and constructed gender politics; in the meantime, focused on the analysis of narrative strategy, interpreted the theme, ideology and historic culture of the book.

**Keywords**—overseas Chinese female; cultural identity; gender consciousness; marginality

### I. INTRODUCTION

Overseas Chinese female writer tended to grow up under special environment. As foreign ethnic minority, overseas Chinese female shoulders double pressure: local male chauvinist concepts and foreign racial discrimination, which resulted in the dual marginality in the writing of overseas Chinese female. The reflection of these pressures and marginality are the charm and specialty of the writing of overseas Chinese female. Influenced by western cultural perspective, May-Lee Chai created new Chinese female image of pursuing freedom, courageous and with strong sense of subject consciousness that are influenced by American culture in her novel, which reflected the author's attention toward the desirable condition of Chinese development, and also was helpful to overturn the stereotyped “other” Chinese image and shaped fine and positive new international image of China.

### II. EXISTING ANXIETY

May-Lee Chai was born in the 60s, and began to make a name in the literary world in 90s. Because of the times, she took much more attention on self-survival rather than on ethnic identity. In the meantime, she grew up under multicultural policy which encouraged her to be a distinctive self and was deeply influenced by post modern ideas which made her to be suspicious towards cultural rules. Therefore, even though the writing was still on the cultural identity of self, the manner of

identity construction was different from predecessors, and thus leads to the changes in narrative technique. May-Lee Chai has the anxiety of no refugee as an individual overseas Chinese. This is a kind of collective anxiety. From anxiety to the ideal of return original hometown, to the fading of identity and to the impulse to overturn culture, it can be found that in the process of pursuing identity, the individual overseas Chinese has realized the connection of individual and culture, even exceed the culture and showed the pure nature of human. From this perspective, the new generation overseas Chinese gradually got rid of the ethnicity of ethnic group in the writing, and sublime the anxiety of margin identity into the effort of cultural reflection and the pursuing of self existence. The identity dilemma of overseas Chinese was caused by injustice political culture. However, at the end of their pursuing, they have surpassed the resistance of the binary opposition and have gone forward to cosmopolitanism and poetic transcendence. Professor Pu Ruoqian has drawn a similar conclusion on the cosmopolitanism trend of overseas Chinese identity in the research of overseas Chinese literature: “the development of American Chinese literature has gone far away from the expected field of the researchers, departed from the regular reading tendency of the ordinary reader (no matter white people or colored race), got rid of the ethnicity even more and forwarded to the process of pursuing universal cosmopolitanism.” However, in fact, overseas Chinese's resistance and exceeding over politics were out of self-protection. As the victim of cultural violence, they have a lingering fear toward political ideology, unwilling to replace neither one tyranny by another nor becoming the one to exert violence. They tried to keep far away from the control of ideology, wishing to treat culture other with honesty and kindness to acquire real pluralistic harmony. This utopian ideal was from the awareness toward realistic culture and politics. At the same time, they were eager to get rid of the culture bound and willing to complete the real overthrow toward culture through their desire and poetic feature, and went forward to utopia that unbound by culture. Cross cultural cosmopolitanism and transcending cultural poetic feature are the strategy to free people from cultural and ideology. From this perspective, they, from the margin, have made deep introspection towards human and culture.

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### III. THE PATTERN OF MANIFESTATION OF THE NOVEL

In "My Lucky Face", the author shaped the new image of Chinese woman that with subject consciousness. The novel described the awakening of an ordinary Chinese female's self-consciousness after the ideological emancipation in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Since the publication, the novel aroused the wide attention from critics. Mary Ellen Quinn, a book reviewer, said "this is a novel on new China". Siebel Steinbeck regarded "My Lucky Face" as "the first debut of sincerity and unassuming". Hany Lee further appraised the novel in "Asian Week" as "the interesting exploration into the family life of the contemporary Chinese society". The novel has an accurate mastery towards the changes of Chinese society in the beginning of reform and opening-up. It described the ordinary contemporary Chinese people in natural tone, displayed the thriving and dynamic modern China, shaped independent and positive woman image, depicted non-rigid male image and overturned the inferior China. During their marriage, Lin Jun was equivalent with her husband. The reason of the divorce was not to get rid of male pressure, but to end the loveless and depressed marriage and pursue self-happiness. When her husband quarreled with her and smashed things in the study room, Lin Jun realized how stupid she was to bear this tedious marriage by sacrificing her own happiness. Without hesitation, she went to her husband's study room and splashed a basin of water upon her husband, and proposed divorce. Lin Jun finally awakened and decided to get divorce regardless of the social environment toward divorce, her father and mother-in-law's dissuasion, and her friends' advice, and fought for her future free life. She understood that every family member wouldn't love her any more because of her divorce. However, she decided to live for herself: The silence between us occurred to me, which I knew would grow greater continuously and made me unhappy. I shall never be happy and never feel relieved. I shall never feel free. She has a strong sense of self-consciousness: active, positive and brave are the deep impression that Lin Jun left to the reader. The new Chinese female image shaped by May-Lee Chai under western cultural perspective reflected her attention towards how Chinese female realize their self emancipation and development after the reform and opening-up. Her romantic imagination would lead the reader to review the influence of western culture on China, and also was helpful to break the stereotyped and no self poor Chinese female image that prevailing in American mainstream society, reconstruct a fine and new international image of China and promote the exchanges between eastern and western culture.

### IV. IMAGE SHAPING OF THE ETHNIC GROUP

Chinese American Writers were born in America, depart from Chinese culture. They inevitably influenced or assimilated by American culture. Due to the limitation of time and space, they have different perspective and new insights when re-examine China. Human identity is a simple yet complex problem, which is usually composed by human race, nationality, gender, birth place, dead place, language, residence for the longest time, profession, class, religious belief, value and identification features like figure, age and so on. Among them, the most important are the first three items,

because features are only the external form of identity and do not equal to identity. People's identity would be hard to recognize if he was frequently moved from place to place according to his birthplace and residence, for example, born in one country, grow up in another country and resident in a third country. If his parents belong to two different nationalities, the identity of their mixed-blood children would be hard to define. If a woman was born in a world that dominated by male and grew up under cultural environment different from her race, her identity would be even more complicated when the gender was continuously be "gender-otherization" due to the established social concept and racial prejudice. This complicated identity is common among female Chinese American writers.

At present, research on May-Lee Chai's novel in domestic academic circle is rare to find, especially that there is hardly any reference book on the novel "The Girl from Purple Mountain". Therefore, the difficulty of research lies in the searching of more background introduction related to the book and the proving of the description on Chinese history and culture, with the aim to illustrate that even though the novel is biographical, the narrative conventions under socio-historical context still has narrative fiction feature. Culture hollow with no refuge is the starting point of construct new identity and brings infinite possibilities, such as staying in difficulties or return to history, ease mental trauma in spiritual homeland; or reexamining history to establish his dominant historical status; or being tolerant to achieve sublimation of philosophy of existence in religious solemn; or resorting to the myth to finish the construction of utopia world in the virtual world; or overturning culture to rectify the name of subject of desire by disclosing cultural violence. In summary, overseas Chinese presented the approach of pursuing transcendence and sublimation by their unique life experience. "The Girl from Purple Mountain" was much different with writings of earlier overseas Chinese female writers, which has made statement by clear stylistic coloring on their cherishing of emotions, assurance of self and the deep-seated appealing towards stable self-sense and cultural home of overseas Chinese under the changing heterogeneous cultural environment and the context of potential cultural conflict out of uncertainty cultural identity. In fact, the image of ethnic group became clearer in many writings of exploring cultural identity.

### V. SURVIVING EXPERIENCE OF OVERSEAS CHINESE FEMALE WRITER

This kind of identity characteristics and external surviving environment decided the cultural appeal of overseas Chinese. They have to maintain the cultural tradition on the one hand, and also have to face conflict, resolve contradictions, and balance the pros and cons to form surviving experience and ability in the mainstream society by the using of the wisdom in local culture and the advantages of heterogeneous culture creatively under such special environment. The growing of this kind of experience and ability and the constant conflict with heterogeneous culture usually would make them form extending force of the national culture and culture centripetal force in the context. From the writings of overseas Chinese writer, we can find that dual localization of hometown and

foreign land and cultural consciousness are the most distinctive features in the identity of overseas Chinese. Literature has played vital influence in the comprehension and expression of this kind of specialty undoubtedly. With the increasing of intellectual migrants, the historical sense formed by the dual cultural consciousness became even more prominent in their writings. Overseas Chinese after the middle of 20th century were intellectual migrants in the largest scale. This was a period in Chinese history without chaos caused by war, and also a period of national secession. Chinese certainly would felt the inconvenience, trouble and pain as the citizen of a divided nation when abroad. The identity crisis not only existed in the conflict of mother culture and target culture, even in hesitation toward the motherland. Losing individual root and conflicts in motherland made overseas Chinese bore heavier historical burden as the “foreigner” than any other people who lived in a foreign country. Therefore, literary works of overseas Chinese were inherited with historical sense. It was the special history and times that gave birth to these writings, and thus the writing incorporated the indispensable sense of history and times into the works of real writers. The real fields of Chinese American writers were not totally in Chinese people area; their writings have covered the entire American society. From fundamental meaning, overseas Chinese writers tended to make the entire society, especially for the white people society awakened in their consciousness through their own experience, and made deepen this deep consciousness facing social reality. Overseas Chinese female writers explored and demonstrated the rich and complicated Chinese and Chinese female lives, not only made the reader to better understand himself and his deep inner world, but also made them rediscover the self from the perspectives of examining the country and the original national concept.

## VI. CONCLUSION

May-Lee Chai would like to correct the inferior stereotyped Chinese “other” image and made America readers better understand China and Chinese people more objectively and in real, as well as to promote the exchanges of eastern and western culture. In the novel “My Lucky Face”, she said through the mouth of Lin Jun, the heroine that, “When I am with Cynthia (an American teacher), I always try to explain everything clearly, and then she would not be so arbitrary in judging us.” From these sentences, we could get the original intention of the author was to argue in favor of China, breaking the wired and funny, strange and cunning, and “de-sexualize” Chinese male image that set in American popular culture, and getting rid of the oppressed and adorable image of women with bound feet that described by many Chinese writers catering to the white readers’ pleasure. Through the description of the daily life of ordinary Chinese, she depicted a picture that reflects Chinese people and real Chinese society, becoming a window for foreign readers to learn about Chinese culture. The works of May-Lee Chai enriched the connotation of Chinese American literature greatly, expanded the boundary and gave the development direction of Chinese American literature. The cultural value and social meaning are worth of our further research.

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