Journal of Literature and Art Studies, December 2017, Vol. 7, No. 12, 1561-1566
doi: 10.17265/2159-5836/2017.12.008

A Multicultural Interpretation of Jade Snow Wong's *Fifth Chinese Daughter*

JIANG Qian-yu
Kunming University of Science and Technology, Kunming, Yunnan, China

Jade Snow Wong was one of the most famous literary writers to recount the complexity of cross-cultural experiences as Americans became sympathetic toward Chinese at the historic juncture of WWII. Her autobiography, *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, once represented early immigrants' assimilationist position, yet it was lately reread for the strength of her Chinese heritage in a multicultural American society. To interpret the cultural value of Chinese existence in America, this article analyzes the historic contexts of her story, and argues that her life experiences provide insights into fresh meanings of multiculturalism for various ethnic groups, as well as into the particular importance of Chinese American culture in connecting separate worlds within the world of America.

Keywords: Chinese American, Jade Snow Wong, *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, multiculturalism

Introduction

Among early Chinese American literary writers who broke the silence of Chinese history in America, Jade Snow Wong, the fifth daughter born in a Chinese immigrant family in San Francisco in 1922, won the recognition of the mainstream society for her educational and cultural achievements. Her first autobiography, *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, received the Commonwealth Club's Medal for Non-fiction in 1951, and her success story culminated in her diplomatic mission of speaking to Asian-Pacific audiences for the State Department in 1953. Her truthful account of an ordinary girl's struggles for independent life did enhance the understanding of ethnic minorities' joint efforts in search of a multicultural America.

Jade Snow Wong witnessed the bettering relationships between the US and China during WWII, and sought for a new way to carve a Chinese niche in American society. The racial discrimination that she withstood since girlhood not only revealed the inferior position of the Chinese in white America, but put the dominant Anglo-Saxon culture's denial of fundamental aspects of Chinese high culture in the foreground. In *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, Jade Snow Wong presented a lucid picture of Chinatown in the American world under restrictions of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882; meanwhile, she recounted the process of her learning Chinese customs, success in school education, as well as her independent contribution to American society. Above all, *Fifth Chinese Daughter* recorded experiences of a second generation Chinese immigrant girl coming of age in San Francisco's Chinatown, who found her place as a writer and ceramist in American culture and society at the turn of 20th century.

JIANG Qian-yu, Ph.D., lecturer, Department of Graduate English Education, Faculty of Foreign Languages and Culture, Kunming University of Science and Technology, China; main research fields: American Culture and Society, Women's Study, English Linguistics and Literature.

From a broader, multicultural perspective, Jade Snow Wong's assimilationist position toward mainstream society, her public role as cultural ambassador of American government, and her personal record of American history until WWII illustrates the complicated relationships between ethnic culture and American history. Investigating her cultural position in the ground-breaking work of Chinese American literature will not only reveal the nature of Chinese American history, but will also cast light on social meanings of American multiculturalism in relation to indigenous history before Columbus' discovery of America.

Interpreting Chinese American History From *Fifth Chinese Daughter*

American historical scholarship had been dominated by mainstream records, though Chinese also found ways to join the public interpretation of American culture at the end of WWII. Americans invariably believe that their history began in 1492, when Columbus discovered the New World; yet for the diverse ethnic groups who immigrated to America from lands and cultures all over the world, the American experience started with displaced cultural traditions, disconnected family relationships, and contract labor. These ethnic minorities can seldom feel the ecstasy of setting foot on a blessed land, nor will they readily accept the exotic description or commodified advertisement of their native culture. For example, Asian-Pacific Islander Americans in Hawaii conceived the cultural place as history, because native life had seemed self-sufficient, static, and timeless, before James Cook's arrival in 1778 enacted history of bartered iron on realms of places named by native chiefs (Lim & Ling, 1992, p. 222). This equivalence of dynamic culture with tangible geography actually obliterated Hawaiian native experiences to establish a Eurocentric version of history. Consequently, the geographical place serves as the only common ground for diverse ethnic groups to recognize native Hawaiian culture, which revives the local concept of multiculturalism in the 20th century.

However, this definition of history as geographical place can hardly evoke Chinese Americans' identification of their own history, because no Chinese can afford to forgo their cultural traditions recorded in the chronological history. Although customs and manners inherited from a different continent thousands of years ago permeate all aspects of Chinese life in America, cultural records can do little to change the asymmetrical power relations between the US and China, since America shared advantages with Western powers when signing the 1844 Wanghsia Treaty. Shortly after the Chinese immigrants' arrival in the midst of California's Gold Rush, American government implemented the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882 to restrict Chinese immigrants' right to naturalization, or participation in the mainstream society. It was not until 1943 that the exclusion law was rescinded, and that American Oriental discourse changed the public suppression of Chinese culture to recognize the common humanity of an alien race, because China and America became WWII Allies. Once Chinese immigrants found their private voice in the public domain, numerous writers enjoyed the opportunity to glorify Chinese civilization, and to redeem Chinese humanity from their American life without political rights (Lim & Ling, 1992, p. 322). Therefore, Chinese American history is characterized by political relationships between the two countries, which define all cultural interpretations of Chinese American works.

In other words, the Chinese remained publicly silent and politically dead until historic changes of relationships between China and America surfaced in different interpretations of American Oriental discourse. Because of China's powerlessness at the beginning of the 19th century, rampant caricature images of the Chinese in American literature and popular culture provided literary justifications for the institutionalization of the Chinese Exclusion Act. Sax Rohmer's thirteen Fu Manchu novels linked "Chinese" with "evil" in American

literature; he created the epitome of a stereotypical, asexual, and intelligent villain, who mastered Western knowledge and science with no physical or moral essence, in order to achieve the power to overthrow the white race. Earl Derr Biggers profited immeasurably from Hollywood's versions of his Charlie Chan novels, which perpetuated a pudgy symbol of Chinese sagacity and kindliness. The humor of incongruity for an overweight Chinese to undertake the unexpected position of a police inspector, together with his humorous speech, combining pidgin with pseudo-Confusion aphorisms, characterized the staple of American humor of immigrants' struggles with English (Kim, 1982, p. 18). Underneath comical images of the power-hungry Chinese despot, asexual detective, or sensuous dragon lady, these American literary works imposed a racially inferior identity upon Chinese immigrants, by implying that Chinese behavior patterns are racially inherited, that race is more significant than culture, and that Chinese can never be completely educated, or civilized. Had it not been for the historic change of relationships between the two countries, assimilating efforts of early Chinese immigrants would have resulted in their living death in the New World.

While embodying the assimilationist stance of Chinese immigrants to cope with the lop-sided national relationships, Jade Snow Wong's pioneering work on her life-story initiated a literary tradition of constructing Chinese American history and culture, which continued late into the 20th century for various styles of interpreting Chinese experiences in America. In the 1940s Chinese were exempted from exclusion, because China joined WWII Allies, and were portrayed as a "model minority," who could be assimilated into American life, as long as they would reject any offensive aspects of their racial or cultural background, and would never speak for themselves seriously, or protest against inequality (Kim, 1982, p. 18). Unlike other contemporaries, such as the famous Chinese cultural envoy Lin Yutang, who willingly conformed to stereotypical images and identities of the Chinese, Wong managed to find her place as a special American. Wong absorbed American mainstream culture of independence and individualism, and supplemented those empty images with her truthful life experiences by presenting attractive pictures of Chinatown. Instead of falling into the stereotypical images of the Chinese as unassimilable aliens or a model minority, Wong spoke up against racial prejudices, claimed the cultural strength of Chinese customs, and honored the Chinatown community with her individual achievements. Wong's depiction of the Chinatown society embedded in close family associations and customs set the stage for future Chinese writers to enact their plays.

At the turning point of Chinese history in America, Jade Snow Wong successfully completed her formal education, and composed *Fifth Chinese Daughter* just in time to reveal social impacts of Americans' changing attitudes toward Chinese immigrants in the 1940s. Growing up during the period of Sino-Japanese War and WWII, Jade Snow Wong described the historic changes in the Chinatown society of sojourners and bachelors. The first generation of immigrants, such as Wong's father and the awkward bachelor Uncle Kwok, were longing to return to China after earning a few thousand dollars in match factories or clothes factories. The Wong family still maintained sojourners' customs of living temporarily in America for more opportunities, and of collecting bones of dead relatives from American ground for permanent burial back home, when they could leave for China to realize optimum achievement someday. However, the Wong sisters were bombed out of their home in Canton by Sino-Japanese War, and returned to San Francisco to increase their opportunities of freedom in American society (Wong, 2002, p. 112). Regardless of traditional family disciplines forbidding daughters go out at night, the Wong sisters' father permitted them to help Chinatown residents with shipment of medical bandages to Chinese front until 9 PM, out of his support for the fair cause of Anti-Japanese War.

The war changed Americans' former friends into enemies, and the uprooted Chinese gained opportunities to integrate into American society, which led to ramifications of Chinatown life and family traditions.

Interpreting Multicultural Experiences From *Fifth Chinese Daughter*

Among numerous voices to assert ethnic cultural heritages in the 20th century, *Fifth Chinese Daughter* leaves room for interpreting cultural life of Chinese immigrants in America from the perspective of an individual woman. The autobiographic style presented in third person singular remains seminal for recuperating a wholesome existence of Chinese in America, since it provides an objective distance for Americans to evaluate Chinese culture represented by visible customs and experiences, instead of ancient texts or mythologies. As ethnic Americans' experiences expanded with further social movements in the 1960s, the autobiographical literature, which reflected displaced cultural traditions and disconnected family structures, developed into combinations of various fiction and non-fiction forms to mirror multiple facets of Chinese American culture. Many Americans commended Jade Snow Wong as an outstanding example of a "model minority," whereas her fellow literary writers a generation later criticized Wong as a tourist guide submissive to stereotypical images of Chinese cooking and exotic objects. Jade Snow Wong's educational and artistic success was eulogized as a hard-working model for African Americans, Native Americans, or other minority groups to follow. Meanwhile, critics condemned her assimilationist position in appealing to Americans with exotic, less important aspects of Chinese culture, thereby complying with the white suppression of the Chinese language and subjective position. Nevertheless, analysis of the historic contexts of Chinese exclusion reveals that Jade Snow Wong's bid for American acceptance by sacrificing fundamental Chinese values partly results from Americans' neglect of native land culture, such as native American and Hawaiian culture.

Interpreting Jade Snow Wong's strategies of integrating the neglected Chinese culture into American multicultural society does afford opportunities for other ethnic minorities originiated from similar land cultures to blend in under the heat of the melting pot. Jade Snow Wong grew up in a segregated Chinatown, where Chinese New Year's Lion Dance was performed alongside Western jungle thrillers, and Confucius family teachings mixed up with Christian Sunday schools; yet Wong was keenly aware of her low position as a daughter at home, and as a Chinese in American society. When Wong's father prioritized older brother's education over her college fees, she felt bitter, uncomfortable, and decided to earn extra money by working independently. In the 1930s, cooking and housework was the only employment available to her outside Chinatown, and boisterous, young political figures in the living room of the Jeffersons merely regarded her as "another kitchen fixture" (Wong, 2002, p. 106). Confronted with mockery and racial prejudice from her high school classmate Richard, a strange-looking Caucasian boy, she silently resolved to assert her human nature from Chinese culture, and to eliminate ignorance by reading English books avariciously. At the graduation ceremony from junior college, she effectively repudiated all "Richards" with her salutatorian speech, upholding fair play, self-expression, and independent thinking for conscientious Chinese youths. Obviously, Jade Snow Wong's struggle with family teachings and her strategy to offer favorable dishes to Americans are necessary for her growth from patriarchal traditions in the secluded world of Chinatown.

In addition, interpreting Jade Snow Wong's educational and work experiences in America does distinguish Chinese values among advocates of multiculturalism from other ethnic minorities since the 1960s. Wong's objective depiction of her daily life as both a participant and spectator at the factory-home, Chinese school, American colleges and society not only clarifies her position as a special American, but provides clues to

explore various American cultural identities as well. Although Wong's school education contributed to her individual growth into a socialized American, she could only explain literal meanings of Chinese ideographs and create a family culture mixed with American ways of life. However, Chinese heritage passed down from ancient time can hardly be reduced to particular dietary habits, though individual rights have eliminated connotative meanings of order, ethnics, and filial piety in Chinese families. Wong first felt shocked and uncomfortable at American ways, but more intimate communication with Americans convinced her of everyone's individual right to freedom. Downplaying any conflict or disagreement with her family, Wong delineates her parents' approval of American ways, when her father appreciated her handicraft work at Mills, and when her prize of christening a Liberty Ship honored her family in Chinatown. Wong's book emphasizes the cultural strength of Chinese food and family, but her explication of cooking methods differentiates from native Hawaiian's appreciation of food of the land, for old memories from a land across the sea keeps haunting her even after her family relationships are altered. Unlike Asian-Pacific Islander Americans, such as Japanese or Vietnamese Americans, who sought for empowerment, or redemptive power, by recalling and associating their idyllic past with the homely place, Jade Snow Wong implies that the puzzle of Chinese history can hardly be solved by alimentary images or agricultural products (Lim & Ling, 1992, p. 281). Rather than identifying with the geographical place, Chinese Americans are destined to endow multiculturalism with historic significance.

All in all, Jade Snow Wong's autobiographic story manifests that women play essential roles in building community networks, and in relating to respective meanings of multiculturalism for various ethnic minorities, such as Native Americans or African Americans. When multiculturalism appeared in the 1980s to refer to changes in race relations, political traditions, and ethnic cultural life, the ambiguous meaning of this term translated into cultural and racial dilemmas in American education and politics (Gordon & Newfield, 1996, p. 2). Native Americans have enjoyed natural land rights since time immemorial, but they can hardly establish their own cultural life to find a place in American society today, due to racist educational policies and historic injustices impinged upon their tribes (La Belle & Ward, 1996, p. 22). In spite of the passage of the Civil Rights Act and the enforcement of Affirmative Action in the late 20th century, African Americans still insisted on partaking in the pluralistic culture separately, without serious interests in their own culture, because of the absence of common intellectual or social experience (Bloom, 1987, p. 93). By comparison, Jade Snow Wong evidenced the increasing friendships from Caucasians to adjust to different cultures, after the historic change of race relations in WWII. Her acquaintance with Dr. Reinhardt, who "loves humanity and has a lifelong interest in the Oriental people," enables her to enroll at Mills College, where girls are perpetually curious about delightful aspects of her Chinese background. Furthermore, Jade Snow Wong's educational and work experiences yield more results than those of African Americans, because her acceptance of American values beyond individualism befits her family and Chinatown folks, which reconciles a separatist confrontation between her home culture and the dominant Western culture. Like other American women, she gained access to man's work world as a secretary in shipyards; yet she made more out of the employment opportunity by silencing racial prejudices with academic achievements, and by honoring Chinatown with her prize-winning essay on absenteeism. Therefore, Wong proves that a woman's education is related to moral uplift in her people, and an individual woman's work is not always at odds with the overall status of her family and community.

Conclusion

A multicultural interpretation of Jade Snow Wong's *Fifth Chinese Daughter* exemplifies the significance of Chinese literature in depicting changing cultural attitudes, and proposes possible means to harmonize race relations by encouraging them to carry on their own cultural attributes in American historic contexts. While her contemporaries resort to the unpracticed ancestral high culture to glorify Chinese civilization, Wong embodies the unique blend of American individualism with less pivotal aspects of Chinese civilization, so that she could participate in American society with concrete strengths of her Chinese heritage. The distinction between her Chinese self and American reality ultimately results from the white supremacist culture, isolated from native historical contexts. Although her assimilationist position is hardly laudable in view of today's multiculturalism, the weird combinations of Confucian decorum and Christian ideals derived from Chinese disciplines and American education have shaped her subject position in America. Her success story blazes upon a trail for other ethnic minorities to follow, as her literal explication of Chinese calligraphy, ideographs and philosophy proves more understandable for Americans to recognize values of their shared humanity among disconnected spheres in the multicultural society.

Jade Snow Wong was lucky to win the approval of white readers as Americans' attitudes toward Chinese changed from indifference to curious interest, and to receive a four-months' grant from the State Department for her diplomatic tour in Asia, because of the bettering Sino-American relationships toward the end of WWII. Yet her determination to go on with university education while holding on to positive aspects of her Chinese heritage, and her effort to weave family relationships by helping with parents' housework, and by bringing pride to them with her achievements as a dutiful daughter, do add Chinese strengths to American individualism and multiculturalism. Like other ethnic writers, Jade Snow Wong developed American understanding of Chinese humanity with her alternative voice to replace stereotypical images of Fu Manchu or Charlie Chan. Nevertheless, besides academic achievements, her work as servants, cooks or a secretary at a critical historic moment within and outside Chinatown has not only distinguished Chinese culture from geographical place, but has contributed to the well-being of her family, community, and common American experiences. When the multicultural mirror of American society reflects distinctive characteristics of each minority culture, there should be more work that women could undertake to change societies for the better than mere exigencies of drafting them into war industries.

References

Bloom, A. (1987). *The closing of the American mind: How higher education has failed democracy and impoverished the souls of today's students*. New York: Penguin Books, Simon and Schuster, Inc.

Gordon, A. F., &Newfield, C. (Eds.). (1996). *Mapping multiculturalism*. Minneapolis: the University of Minnesota Press.

Kim, E. (1982). A*sian American literature: An introduction to the writings and their social context.* Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

La Belle, T. J., & Ward, C. R. (1996). *Ethnic studies and multiculturalism.* New York: State University of New York Press.

Lim, S. G., & Ling, A. (1992). *Reading the literatures of Asian America*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Wong, J. S. (2002). *Fifth Chinese daughter*. Seattle and London: University of Washington Press.