

On the constructing of the Chinese image in *China Man*

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Abstract: *China Man* is one of the most important works of Maxine Hong Kingston, who is a Chinese-American writer. Kingston adapts many old Chinese myths, stories and Chinese folk tales into the whole book, which are based on Kingston's own family experiences. Through revealing the ancestors' miserable experiences at the beginning of the 20th century, the author reconstructs the image of the Chinese people, which furthermore states that the Chinese-American are the deserved masters of the continent. In a word, the whole book reflects the Chinese-Americans' bewilderment in the process of searching for cultural identity and gender identity, and the painful and helpless inward world originating from it.

Keywords: Maxine Hong Kingston; *China Man*; Chinese-American history; cultural identity

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I. A brief introduction to Maxine Hong Kingston and her works.

Maxine Hong Kingston is one of the most representative women writers at the end of the 20th century. Her second work- *China Man* guarantees her high statue in American literary history. Most of her works reflect the losing of identity and gender of the American citizens, which are the main causes of the pain and agony of American people's inner heart.

China Man describes the rough and painful experiences of the Chinese-American masculinity during the middle of the 19th century to the late of the 20th century, which speaks highly of the Chinese people's huge contribution to the American building history. It reconstructs the history of the Chinese American ancestors and it has carried out a series of meaningful experiments to probe into the cultural identity of the Chinese-American workers.

What makes many critics, who view Kingston as "the feminism writers", surprised is that *China Man* has not centered on the Chinese American women. Instead, it turns out to put more emphasis on the Chinese American men. Also, this work can be viewed as an autobiography of Kingston's family, as all the story is developed around her grandfather, her father, her son and so on. There are all together seven parts in the book, every part has a core character, and every story starts from a fairy story or a folk story. (Saakvitne 1998: 278)

In the post-modern study of the cultural theory, the identity has become of the most attractive sectors. The English words "identity" has contained two meanings—the "individuality" and "peculiarity", which indicates that from the semantics level, the essence that the "identity" pursues for is to answer the question "who am I". This is an important social and psychological problem. The main stream of the American culture pushes the Chinese American into a state of "voiceless", which means the Chinese American's expressiveness is in an awkward situation. On one hand, the government has promised the Chinese people the equality they can enjoy, on the other hand, the discrimination still exists. All of this has caused the Chinese people's inability to form the unique consciousness themselves, not to say build their own identity based on the Chinese traditional culture. As a result, the cultural identity becomes the main problem that the Chinese American writers have to deal with. While Kingston's writing highlights the self-identity of the Chinese people, which aims to build a new identity for the Chinese American.

II. Traumatic Experiences and Identity Construction

It has been a hundred years since the first Chinese immigrants have stepped onto the American land. They live and work on this unfamiliar land, and write their own myth. As anyone else on this planet, they face their own identity trouble, which will become more complex in the following years. Although we live under the same culture, our identity is composed of different levels and situations, which contain the country, the region, the belief, the language and the gender. For the Chinese American people, who have lived under two totally different cultures, how should they build they own ethnic identity?

On this issue, we must pay attention to one point—numerous Chinese American live on the American land, who may have achieved the United States nationality, spoken English, or even changed their own belief.

But will they really get the sense of belonging during their pursuing? The conflicts of the two cultures put forward the cultural identity for themselves—that is to say, how?

The issue of identity is an important and unavoidable question, as it is an inner and unconscious behavioral demand for anyone. The individual has to make an attempt to achieve the psychological security, and also has to maintain, guarantee and consolidate the identity to strengthen this feeling, which has significant function for one's character's stability and psychological health.

As we have mentioned above, if one's identity can't be fixed, he/she will have unhealthy mental state and be lack in mental security. In the fourth chapter of this book, the author writes about "the other American's story", who appear to have the Chinese roots at the same time. In the story given by Kingston, no matter what their status in America is, no matter how their situation is, no matter what kind of choices they will give between the Chinese traditional cultural roots and the American cultural surroundings, they will never give a definite and beneficial choice. They lose their spiritual garden, what's worse, they get confused in their cultural identity. As a result, their ghost will wander lonely after their death. (Alavil 2011: 90)

III. *China Man and its constructing of Chinese image*

The author reveals the pain and helplessness caused by the uncertain identity of the Chinese American, who are in a dilemma between two different cultures. The change of Tangao's identity predicates that the Chinese-Americans will face the same trouble as she has faced. Same as Tangao, what the difficulties that the Chinese-Americans have to face are all because of the change of identity, the transformation of the culture. The second chapter of the book is a very good example.

According to most of the postcolonial theorists' opinion, the narration can make up for the historical record, which may summon or motivate the image of the native culture. That is to say, in the historical structure, the narration will fill up the structural limitation of the history. For a destroyed nation, an old story, even full of which is image, can still play the role of making up for the past. For a Chinese-American writer, the emphasis of narration is not on the skills or writing techniques, but on the expressing of the minority's willing. Then, why do so many Chinese-Americans suffer from the identity destruction?

Before studying the identity construction, we must clarify certain concepts. The "Identity" refers to the interpretation and construction of a person's experience and social status under the cultural context. "Social identity" refers to a person's social group membership, which has a very important significance on the emotional and values for this member. (Marchand 2003: 81) "Identity construction refers to a series of process concerning about the constant correction for the self- definition and self-construction process". (Tajfel 1982:24)

Firstly, the individual is trying to gain or maintain a positive social approval. To a large extent, when the individual is not satisfied with the whole social identity, the individual will try to escape from the group that he belongs to, or takes an effort to make the group which he is in become better.

By constructing and approving the social identity, people can not only improve one's self-esteem, but can also reduce the feeling of uncertainty or improve the feeling of the cognitive security, which will meet personal needs and the satisfaction. What's more, the constructing of identity can eliminate the fear of death, and help to find the meaning of existence.

From the styles of language concerning about the identity construction, the concrete forms of identity construction can be divided into several types: the dialogue, narration and speech, the media discourse and political discourse, such as the European Union female speaking woman, who is also an interviewer for the EU officials. From the types of the identity which has been constructed, it can be divided into the gender identity, ethnic identity and transnational identities, social identity, cultural identity and personal identity, etc. In addition, the collective identities and individual identities are the relative words. Sometimes, different types of identity may be overlapping or confronting. Sometimes, certain kind of people will have multiple identities. (Karen 1998: 279)

To some extent, the Asian-American immigrants are a very typical example of the people who have suffered from identity crisis. When the Chinese-American come into a new society and penetrate into a new environment which will have a great influence on their soul and body, local people show great discrimination and bias towards them and try every means to squeeze them out from many fields. As the new comers of the society, the Asian-Chinese definitely hold a very complex emotion. The Chinese forefathers' traumatic experience transmits to their offspring, who also has their own traumatic memories and shares the trauma history with their forefathers at the same time. Suffering from the discrimination of traumatic memories, the Chinese-Americans find it almost impossible to melt into the white world. They always feel that they are stuck and can not move, not only in their own houses but also in the whole Chinatown. "This kind of trauma will leave the everlasting mark on the Asian-American's heart" (Burnand 2013: 385). At the same time, such miserable traumatic and painful experiences give the Chinese-American a chance to rethink about their life and dream, especially about their identity. Who am I? Why am I here? Where are my family members? Is it really worthwhile to live in this remote area? All these questions gradually make the Chinese-American doubt about

their choice which later becomes the root of their identity crisis. Then, what are the detailed causes of the identity crisis, and how does it gradually form in the process of the Chinese-Americans' living environment?

For one thing, they are the successors of the Great Chinese culture, and they are the equipped with the heavy burden of their early ancestor. For another, they are the new immigrants of the American continent, and from certain extent, they are the hosts as well as the hostesses, and they have to make change to their origin ways of living so that they can really melt into the American society. We can see that these two contradictory ways make the immigrants feel greatly anxious and depressed. The only measure they can take to handle this situation is to reconstruct their identity and try to achieve the balance between guaranteeing the Chinese old culture and heritage, and accept the new trends and ways of living as the American. That clearly shows us the whole process of how, under the traumatic experience, does the identity crisis transform into the identity construction.

Concerning on the identity construction theory, Stuart Hall is up to the stage. Since the late 1980s, he has been concentrating on the study of the identity construction theory. He puts forward the idea that "the identification is changing all the time, which is also the unification among the differences" (Alavil 2011: 412). Through the study of the concept of identity, Stuart Hall has also combined it with the racism in British society. He points out that the identity of ethnic minorities is the historical and cultural identity, which is also a kind of imagined self-regression.

Secondly, the Stuart Hall views the identity from the perspective of Freud's psychoanalysis and political cultural identity concept, and combines it with the concept of modernity and post-modernity. He puts forward that the complexity of identification is a kind of difference in unity. From the point of view of some psychoanalysis, "Identity is, in fact, from the outset, a paradox". The concept of identity is not kept all the same in process of the historical development. In fact, the development of identity has won the national significance in pre-modern and modern times, and has become a meaningful "self", which is set in a lot of collective and true self within the body. The identity construction has melted into the whole social process and historical development of the nation, which keeps the nation steady, fixed and prosperous.

In the modern days, many discriminations and misunderstandings have been in existence for a long time in our history and society, which have caused a large number of traumas to the victims. Finding a way to escape from the influence brought by the trauma is a hot issue for these people.

There are many reasons causing the imbalance in the inner heart of the immigrants, especially for the Chinese Americans, among which two might be main reasons are the Chinese Exclusion Acts and the laws against the interracial marriage.

Take the Chinese-American literature's development as a good example, in the process of the identity construction, the Chinese-American literature is taken by the Chinese-American writers as a response to their special identity as the disadvantaged minorities. The American mainstream society takes the measure of the "gender discrimination" towards the Chinese-Americans, which furthermore wipes out the Chinese culture out of the American civilization and excludes the Chinese citizens away from the mainland from both the mental level and the physical level.

"Since the beginning of 1848, the golden rush in the United States has attracted a large numbers of Chinese young men to U.S.A., and makes them (they) look for new opportunities to get richer and live more comfortably" ((Karen 1998: 279)

However, the seeking-wealth dream finally turned into a crash. Most Chinese young men could only be the miners, the farmers, and the fishermen at that time. In 1862, the United States congress signed the first Chinese immigrants restraints, and later on, a series of Chinese exclusion act has pushed the Chinese to the edges of society.

From then on, the Chinese people are prevented from entering the U.S for 61 years, and it was not until 1943, with the contract of the "Laws of Cancelling Chinese Exclusion Act", did the Chinese young people get the opportunity to move to the U.S. More than half century's rejection has done great damage to the Chinese community, especially to the group of Chinese men. What's worse, the wound has not been healed with the pay for the bill. The ratio between male and female reached 27 to 1 at that time. With such a high gender ratio, the healthy and normal Asian family has no possibility to live healthily as it was impossible for them to find a spouse for the bachelor at that time.

The relentless national law not only separates the Asian immigrants from their spouses and their potential marriage mate, but also bans them from marrying European women. As Elaine from Burkley points out that, "Living in a world without the woman, no sexual life and no children, the Asian men are isolated from the 'adults' own communities, and were laughed at as the permanent boyhood".(Sztompka 2010:449)

In Kinston's *China Man*, the author uses many narrative styles to reappear Chinese-American's miserable experiences, which highlights the Chinese ancestors' image. For those who are under different cultural background and share different dreams, the Chinese American's ancestors come to the United States like other native Americans. They have made deserved contributions for the construction of the United States, and they

deserve to share the same rights and status as the other Americans. Kingston writes about the Chinese laborers' poor life. When the government begins to expel the Chinese laborers, many massacres take place in several parts in the United States. They can't help to put forward a question: "While they use their fresh and blood to build the new America, why they can't have the ability to raise an American descendant? Actually, they have been forgotten by the history.

In *China Man*, Kingston speaks highly of the Chinese-American's exploitation of the Western United States and Hawaii. At the same time, Kingston shows her perplex for her brother and father's identity destruction. Under Kingston's writing, the America-Chinese are the real fighters and pioneers.

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