



Multicultural Literature of the USA

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ABSTRACT

The generalization of all theories about character defining, giving information about the basic base concepts and some classifications of semiology or semiology, recognizing the word as either a kind of sign and highlighting its semiotic significance in linguistics. The XX century was marked by several events of worldwide influence, namely – the World War I, the Great Depression and the World War II. These events constituted the topics which also influenced publishing in American literature. A significant part of the American multi-ethnic literature is formed by Chinese American authors describing their experience in the United States throughout the generations. The Chinese American literature originated in the 1850's when the first Chinese immigrants reached America and wanted to share their experience with other people. The early Chinese works depict American history from a point of view of immigrants to the United States, using their Chinese background for comparison with the American reality.

Keywords:

Multi-ethnic literature, immigrant's experience, fiction, poetry, drama and oral history.

The first Chinese American literature was written mainly by students and workers. They wrote autobiographical books, poems and novels which were written either in Chinese or in English. A group of Chinese immigrants wrote about their experience in business for 25 years and in 1875 they passed those books on other Chinese who would come later. Chinese students often wrote essays with a special theme such as cultural traditions and religion. For example, Wong Chin Foo wrote essays which were published in *the North American Review*, *Chautauquan*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Atlantic Monthly* and *Harper's Weekly*. In 1887 he wrote a provocative and sarcastic essay "Why Am I a Heathen?" in which he denied Christianity, even though he was educated in a Christian school. As a response to his essay, Yan Phou Lee published "Why I Am Not a Heathen" to stress the importance of believing in God.

In the XX century and with the beginning of the World War II, the Chinese American literature was mostly written in English and

concentrated on the topic of intervention of the United States to the war which was initiated by Pearl Harbour attack in 1941. World War II brought further changes to Chinese American literature and the Pro-Chinese sentiment helped to publish books like *Fifth Chinese daughters* or *Flower Drum Song*.

After the war, Chinese American authors started to write more fiction and they were included to the national literary competitions and awards such as the National Book Award. For instance, the National Book award was given to Amy Tan for her book *The Joy Luck Club* published in 1989. Even today Chinese American writers continue in writing fiction books and the topics they discuss are still linked to immigrant's experience. Those who do not write about immigration, connect their stories with China, especially historical events, or write about traditional topics such as family, relations.

Brian Leung is an American fiction writer. He is the author of books such as "*Take Me Home*", "*Mid-American Review*", "*Velocity*",

"*The Barcelona Review*", "*Gulf Coast*", "*River City*", "*Runes*", "*The Bellingham Review*", "*Hyphen*", "*Velocity*" and many others. He received the Chinese American Literary Award for fiction and the Mary McCarthy Prize in Short Fiction. Nowadays, he works as Director of Creative Writing at Purdue University.

Maxine Hong Kingston is an American Professor Emeritus at the University of California and also an American author of autobiographical fiction. Hong Kingston became successful after her first book "*The Woman warrior: 'Memoirs of a Girlhood among the Ghosts'*" published in 1976 and she was awarded the National Book Critics Circle Award for Nonfiction. "*The Fifth Book of Peace*", "*Tripmaster Monkey* or *China men*" belong also to her literary output which gained her other awards as National Book Award and the Northern California Book Award Special Award in Publishing for her most recent anthology, "*Veterans of War*", "*Veterans of Peace*" published in 2006.

Today, courses in Chinese American literature are common throughout American education. As a result, this body of writing has expanded not only in visibility, but also – more significantly in achievement. Journals such as *Bridge* in New York City, and *Amerasia*, created at the University of California at Los Angeles, were vital forces in increasing awareness of selected Chinese American writers. This interest, which intensified in the last two decades among mainstream U.S. readers and publishing houses, has brought with it renewed opportunities and, ironically, a crisis of representation. One sign of this crisis is the internal debate that swirls around efforts to define a "canon" of texts -- a list of the best or most significant writing and to agree upon a fixed curriculum. In that regard, as discussions revolve around provisionality and temporality, Chinese American literature is a particularly shifting, of contested field.

The truth is that different immigration histories of national-origin communities give rise to writings reflective of cross-generational concerns and styles. Chinese-language poems written by immigrant Chinese on the barracks walls of Angel Island (the site of immigrants'

arrivals on the U.S. West Coast) between 1910 and 1940. It has added to the archival "canon" of Chinese American literature. The stories and essays of Edith Eaton (*Mrs. Spring Fragrance*, 1910), who took the pen name of Sui Sin Far to signify her adoption of the Chinese half of her ancestry, focused on the problems facing Chinese and those of "mixed race," or as she calls them "Eurasians," in the United States of the early XX century. Carlos Bulosan's "*America Is in the Heart*" (1946) follows a Filipino immigrant as he and other migrant workers struggle for social justice and acceptance. Each is part of the

Chinese American tradition. In the period before the burst of new writing of the postwar era and even later, memoirs were the favored genre with immigrant and first-generation writers. (This is true of other ethnic literature as well.) Younghill Kang's "*The Grass Roof*" (1931), Pardee "Lowe's *Father and Glorious Descendant*" (1943), and Jade Snow Wong's "*Fifth Chinese Daughter*" (1950) satisfied a mainstream audience's curiosity about the strangers in its midst.

Writers communicated, and continue to communicate, across a range of genres including fiction, poetry, drama and oral history. The first novel published by Chinese American Diana Chang's "*The Frontiers of Love*" received respectful attention. The swift pace of literary production since then indicates that the trajectory of the Chinese American literary tradition is still in formation – imaginatively so. The range of achievement in recent years is quite impressive. After the awards garnered by Kingston's "*The Woman Warrior*", other Chinese American works found welcome readers and audiences. Cathy Song's novel "*Picture Bride*" and Garrett Hongo's collection of verse, "*The River of Heaven*", helped solidify the reputation of the Chinese American writing community in the 1980s, as did *M. Butterfly*, David Henry Hwang's startling theatrical piece, and Philip K. Gotanda's drama, "*The Wash*". As Tan emerged with "*The Joy Luck Club*" and Kingston continued her rise with "*Tripmaster Monkey*" (1989. Debut novel by Chinese American Gish Jen (*Typical American*) was warmly received. In 1999, Chinese American writer Ha Jin won the

National Book Award for *“Waiting”*, his first novel, set against the backdrop of the Cultural Revolution. In short fiction, such writers as David Wong Louie (*Pangs of Love and Other Stories*, 1991) and Lan Samantha Chang (*Hunger*, 1998) have been similarly acclaimed. This range of achievement speaks to the diversity of thematic concerns in Chinese American literature that parallels contemporary Chinese American heterogeneity.

Chinese American works are not situated in, nor do they contribute to, a cohesive and united tradition. Rather, certain cultural elements appear to be shared by authors from varying histories and origins. Similar concerns may be seen to arise from a particular East Asian world view, from patriarchal constructions of kinship and gender, and from shared experiences of struggle and isolation in the new world of the United States. And yet, no single tradition underlies the variant strategies and techniques that characterize the achievement of Chinese American literature. The fact is that heterogeneous representations – in literature as in society help to overturn the stereotype of “inscrutable” Chinese Americans. Until recently, Chinese American studies accepted a limited psychosocial notion of the stereotype. Psychologists such as Stanley Sue argued that Euro Americans historically justified their discrimination against Chinese Americans on popular prejudices that denigrated immigrants as inferior, diseased, and unwelcome. This unfortunate XIX century negative stereotype has given way in our day to a positive stereotype of the Chinese American as educated, hardworking and successful, a model minority, a depiction that is finding a growing presence in literature as well, even as it is the subject of continued debate within the community. Another theme, operating alongside race analysis, is gender analysis, with many works recounting Chinese American women’s struggles against traditional patriarchal attitudes. Maxine Hong Kingston’s *“The Woman Warrior”* is one example a complex series of narratives about growing up in a community structured along gender and race lines. As in most traditional societies, gender roles in Chinese American communities have tended to be fixed and communally scrutinized.

The tensions these strictures have caused surfaced over the past decade in such anthologies of Chinese American writing as *“Home to Stay”* (1990) and *“Our Feet Walk the Sky”* (1993). Generally, the high esteem centering on male children brought loftier economic and social expectation of sons. Daughters were expected to marry and to become part of their husbands’ households. Indeed, the dominant view throughout East Asian societies was that women were subject first to fathers, then to husbands, and then – if widowed to their sons.

Immigration to the United States, a society in which male and female roles are more fluidly and more freely defined, put traditional social values under stress. It follows that this development has affected literature. The works of the younger generation, such as Gish Jen’s *“Mona in the Promised Land”* (1996) express the confusions arising from the gap between their desires for self-reliance and individual happiness and their immigrant mothers’ expectations. But even at an earlier date, just after World War II, Jade Snow Wong and Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston, in writing about growing up female, had made similar reflections about gender bias in their families. It is true, of course, that gender roles often are presented as a function of culture. Chinese American male characters face a crisis in understanding the significance of manhood — in books such as Louie’s *“Pangs of Love”* and Gus Lee’s *“China Boy”* (1991). In love or in the family unit, therefore, Chinese Americans have had to negotiate conflicting ideals of male and female identities. Another major theme in Chinese American writing is the relationship between parents and children. This, too, has an historical and social underpinning. In years past, because of the language barriers that faced immigrant Chinese Americans, the point of view of the American-born, second-generation Chinese American sons and daughters usually prevailed in their literature. As early as 1943, Lowe’s autobiography, *“Father and Glorious Descendant”*, gave U.S. readers the character of a dominant father within a strong, cohesive ethnic community. While second-generation children often reject their parents’ social expectations,

immigrant parents are not simply flat representations of static societies.

Gish Jen – also known as Lillian Jen -- was born in New York City in 1955. Her parents, who emigrated from China, worked hard to give their children the opportunities they were denied in China. Her first novel, was a resounding success and finalist for a National Book Critics Circle award. It, and its follow up novel, "*Mona in the Promised Land*" (1996), recount the often funny and sometimes tragic story of the immigrant Chang family, tracing how they slowly adjust to the United States and are transformed by changes that eventually drive them apart. Her latest volume, "*Who's Irish?*" (1999), is a collection of eight short stories that observe not only her own Chinese American ethnic group, but other U.S. ethnic groups as well.

David Wong Louie – was born in a suburb of New York City in 1954, the son of first-generation Chinese immigrants. His short stories were being published by some of the most prominent literary journals in the United States prior to the publication of "*Pangs of Love*" and Other Stories in 1991. "*Pangs of Love*" was received with much praise, winning the Los Angeles Times First Fiction Award and the Ploughshares First Book Award. It included Louie's widely acclaimed 1989 short story, "*Displacement*," in which an immigrant cleaning woman feigns ignorance of English as she silently suffers the verbal diatribes of her employer. Louie's new novel, "*The Barbarians Are Coming*", which tells the story of a son's edgy relationship with his Chinese-American parents, is to be published in March 2000. Louie currently teaches creative writing and literature at the University of California at Los Angeles.

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