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Transnationalism in Maxine Hong Kingston's *China Men* and Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*

Xiaotao Wang^{1*}

¹ School of Foreign Languages, Shangqiu Normal University, Shangqiu, China

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Abstract

*Chinese American literature is commonly interpreted as the narrative of the living experiences of Chinese Americans. Under the past nation-state research paradigm, Chinese American literature critics both in China and America are preoccupied with the “assimilation” of immigrants and their descendants in Chinese American literature texts, they argue that Chinese culture is the barrier for the immigrants to be fully assimilated into the mainstream society. But putting Chinese American literature under the context of globalization, these arguments seem inaccurate and out of date. This article examines the transnational practices and emotional attachments in Maxine Hong Kingston's *China Men* and Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* to show that the identity in these two works are neither American nor Chinese, but transnational. Thus, Chinese American literature is not the writing of Chinese Americans' Americanness, but a celebration of their transnationalism.*

Keywords

Transnationalism, Emotional Transnationalism, Chinese American literature

1. Introduction

On the study of Chinese Americans, there are two kinds of notions, “the notion of assimilation has dominated American discourse on the ‘Chinese Question’, while the question of their loyalty has preoccupied the study of the Chinese overseas in China” (Wang, 1994, p. 185). The same situation exists in the study of Chinese American literature. Both critics in China and America are preoccupied with the assimilation of immigrants and their descendants in Chinese American literature, most scholars argue that Chinese culture is the barrier for the immigrants to be fully assimilated into the mainstream society. And in Chinese American literature, the representation of China and Chinese culture is considered as the writers' endeavor to meet the Westerners' curiosity of the East. On this point, Maxine Hong Kingston's *China Men* and Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* are no exception.

Maxine Hong Kingston's *China Men* was published in 1980, and Amy Tan's *Joy Luck Club* was published in 1989. Both works were published in the 1980s and they all won immediate success since their publication. Critics share almost the same opinion of these two works, most critics concentrate on the patriarchy, assimilation, identity and mother-daughter relationships in these novels. On *China Men*, Qing-Yun Wu (1992, p. 92) noticed the importance to the Chinese immigrants of separating themselves from Chineseness and China in order to assert their Americanness and to claim America, Nishime (1995, p. 77) argues that "she (Kingston) still celebrates a masculine ideal to counter-act the stereotypes of Asian males and to assert their Americanness". On *The Joy Luck Club*, Susan Radner (1992, p. 42) argues that the works show how Chinese cultural traditions and values become transformed and unappreciated in the United States. All these critics agree that Kingston and Tan's emphasis is on the immigrants' claim of Americanness. This kind of scholarship has its merits, but it considers identity as regional and static, which is not accurate in the context of ever-increasing transnational practices and globalization.

This article situates transnationalism within the Chinese American immigration history and examines the transnational practices and emotional attachments in Maxine Hong Kingston's *China Men* and Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* to show that the identity and cultural identification in these two works are neither American nor Chinese, but transnational. It is through transnational practices and emotions, these two authors complicate the identity, cultural identification of the Chinese immigrants and show the dynamic interaction between China and America. Thus, Chinese American literature is not the writing of Americanness but the writing of transnationalism.

2. Transnationalism as Practices

Studies on the transnational dimensions of migrants has been expanded since the 1990s. Many scholars such as Glick Schiller (1994), Michael Smith and Luis Guarnizo (1998), Alejandro Portes (2005), Steven Vertovec (2009), Tamaki (2011), ÇELİK (2014), Luis Eduardo Guarnizo (2017) and Safi (2018) have done substantial and extensive studies on transnationalism. Though their opinions differ slightly, they all share the same idea that transnationalism studies the various types of flow across national boundaries and questions nation-state as a study category.

Glick Schiller and Szanton Blanc (1994, p. 8) define transnationalism as "the processes by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement. We call these processes transnationalism to emphasize that many immigrants today build social fields that cross geographic, cultural, and political borders". Steven Vertovec (2009, p. 3) defines transnationalism as "the multiple ties and interactions linking people or institutions across the borders of nation-state", and transnationalism "describes a condition in which, despite great distances and notwithstanding of the presence of international borders, certain kinds of relationships have been globally intensified and now take place paradoxically in a planet-spanning yet common-however virtual-arena of activity". Vertovec further elaborates that transnationalism can be examined as social

morphology, as type of consciousness, as mode of cultural reproduction, as avenue of capital, as site of political engagement, and as (re)construction of “place” or locality. Simply put, as practices, transnationalism includes international remittance, political involvement of one’s home country; as a way of thinking, transnationalism can be understood as the dual identification of diaspora to their home country.

Since the 1850s, Chinese immigrants had begun their journey to America. During the period of “Gold Rush”, many Chinese went to America to search for gold, hoping to come back to China with fortune and glory. Later, many Chinese immigrants settled down in America and became naturalized citizens of America. As most critics have pointed out, these naturalized immigrants and their children are American citizens and they do possess American culture values, and in order to “claim America”, they have to separate themselves from China and Chinese culture. But they can never really cut themselves off from Chinese culture and Chinese heritage. They still sustain multiple links with their family members, relatives and their hometown in China, all these links and ties are evident in *China Men* and *The Joy Luck Club*.

Financial support is the foremost link between Chinese Americans and their homeland. In Chinese language, there is an old Chinese saying, yi jin huan xiang, which means to come back to one’s hometown in glory, which is an example to show Chinese people’s mentality and deep-rooted cultural values. First, immigration itself is a survival strategy. Before setting foot on America, many immigrants have to raise their travelling expenses, this usually takes their whole family’s work, and many have to borrow money from their clan members or friends. So, they have the obligation to pay the debts and send money back to make their family members better off. Second, in Chinese culture, people value the relationship between family members and also the obligation to contribute to one’s hometown when they are financially capable. The first-generation immigrants are educated by these traditional values and even after they migrated to America, these values are still influencing their mentality.

In *The Joy Luck Club*, all the mothers, Suyuan Woo, An-mei Hsu, Lindo Jong and Ying-ying St. Clair flee to America long time ago. All the four mothers suffer a lot in China, when they arrive in America, they try hard to forget their sorrowful past and make their next generation become “real Americans”. In the beginning of the novel, one mother says, “In America, I will have a daughter just like me. But over there, nobody will say her worth is measured by the loudness of her husband’s belch. Over there, nobody will look down on her because I will make her speak only perfect American English. And over there, she will always be too full to swallow any sorrow! She will know my meaning because I will give her this swan, a creature that became more than what was hoped for” (Tan, 1989, p. 17). Despite their determination to cut themselves off from their past and high expectation for their daughters to become real Americans, they are still attached to China financially and emotionally. Before Am-mei Hsu pays her visit to China, she had cried before she left for China, thinking she would make her brother very rich and happy (Tan, 1989, 36), with this wish she returns home and finds out that “it wasn’t just Auntie An-mei’s little brother, but also his wife’s stepbrothers and stepsisters, and a distant

cousin, and that cousin's husband and that husband's uncle", "even their village friends who were not lucky enough to have overseas Chinese relatives to show off" (Tan, 1989, p. 36). Though she is an American citizen, she concerns about her brother in China and wants to give financial support to make him happy. The financial link goes with the history of the early Chinese immigrants who went to America and sent money back to their hometown. In "The Father from China" in *China Men*, the Mother has a very hard life in America, yet she still saves money to help her family in China, "Mama pays you back, with her tomato and potato wages, the money she sends to China" (Kingston, 1981, p. 18).

Besides the explicit description of the financial links that cross the border of America and China, Kingston and Tan adopt other writing strategies to describe the implicit ties between the immigrants and their family and relatives. In *The Joy Luck Club*, the author tells the story of Suyuan Woo in an interesting way to show the transnational ties and emotional attachment of the immigrants to China. Suyuan Woo has to abandon her two babies on her way to flee from the war. In her life in America, she keeps silent about her secret. But in her heart, she misses her babies and wants to know whether they are still alive. Just before her death, she secretly makes great effort to find her lost daughters, luckily, she finds them; but unfortunately, just before she plans to come back to China to meet them, she dies. Woo's story can be interpreted metaphorically.

Since the 1850s, Chinese Americans have been long deprived of equal rights and they are largely marginalized; they cannot voice their demand for equal treatment with the whites. Their actual life experiences are recorded and reflected in literary works. In Chinese American literature, silence and secrets are everywhere, "The code of silence was imposed in Asian America as a form of oppression, at other times it can be experienced as a form of self-/communal protection" (Kim, 2006, p. 243). Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* begins with "you must not tell anyone" (Kingston, 1989, p. 3), in *The Joy Luck Club*, all the four mothers have their secret and they cannot share it with their husbands and daughters; in *China Men*, the mother in the story "The Father from China" is always silent, "You say with a few words and the silences: No stories. No past. No China" (p. 18). Even under the visible and invisible oppression, Chinese Americans still try to sustain the trans-Pacific links. Though they could not confess their past in America, and some immigrants try hard to cut off all their links with China, but they can never really cut off the links. In Kingston's *China Men*, the author uses transnational haunting to describe this relationship. In "The Making of More Americans", the protagonist Sao gets his American citizenship for his service in the U.S. Army in World War II, and he finds a wife from China, then he decides to stay in America, "the new couple, young and modern, bought a ranch house and car, wore fashionable clothes, spoken English, and seemed more American than us" (Kingston, 1981, p. 169). By any standard, this couple has realized their American dream, they have American citizenship, ranch house, and car. It is notably here that, the language they use is English. Besides as the tool for communication, language can also convey one's culture, identity and family ties, as "language plays a crucial role in the process of individual identity construction and group identity.

Language choice in a multicultural environment thus becomes an issue of identity, but it is also a response to the choices, stimuli and debates within this context with regard to everyday practices and identity construction” (Larrucea, 2015, p. 89). In the novel, both Sao and his wife can speak Chinese, but they choose English as their communication language, which is a sign of Sao’s identity and his American cultural identification.

But Sao’s mother continues to write to him ask for money, to complain about her starvation, even his other relatives also write him letters to ask for help. But Sao are not financially capable to help everyone, so “Mad Sao wished that his mother would hurry up and die, or that he had time and money enough to pay his mortgage, raise all his children, and also give his mother plenty” (p. 173). Then his mother dies, even before the letter telling his mother’s death arrives in America, his mother’s spirit appears to Sao in America. He becomes mad and talks with his mother’s spirit, at last he has no choice but to return to China with his mother’s spirit, while packing luggage, Sao says to his mother, “See, Mother? We’re on our way home now. Both of us. Yes, I’m going home too. Finally going home” (p. 176). Here, Sao, an American, regards China as his home, which is a manifestation of transnational home and emotional attachments. After their return to the village, he goes to his mother’s grave and burns the paper money, pours wine into the earth and plant the blue shrub. Then he becomes normal again, and continues his American life like nothing has happened. Loh (2018, pp. 210-211) argues that “ghosts in *The Woman Warrior* have been read as cross-cultural constructs that mediate an imagined China”, In *China Men*, ghost can also be read as the inseparable ties that binds the immigrants and China and cross-cultural constructs that mediate their imagined home.

Through the explicit description of the immigrants’ financial support to their family and hometown, and the implicit description of the transnational emotional ties, Tan and Kingston not only present the flow of people, capital and ideas between America and China which are not limited by the border, but also the immigrants’ transnational attachments with China.

3. Transnationalism as Emotional Attachments

On transnationalism studies, the focus lies in the transnationalism of the first-generation immigrants. For the first-generation immigrants, there is no doubt that they must maintain close ties with their country of origin. Taking the first group of Chinese who arrived in the United States as an example, their immigration is the result of the globalized economy, and it is also one of the survival strategies of immigrant families. Early Chinese immigrants as sojourners went to the United States alone to perform manual labor to maintain the livelihood of their family in China. Their biggest wish is to be able to accumulate enough money to make their families live a better life. After arriving in the United States, they began to work hard to help their family members and relatives enter the United States. During such process, they maintain a constant and frequent connection with their families, relatives, friends and even neighbors in China.

Compared with the transnationalism studies of first-generation immigrants, the transnational studies of

the second-generation immigrants have been ignored by the academic community. The life of second-generation immigrants does not have much direct relationship with their country of origin. Therefore, in the existing surveys and studies, there are different conclusions about the connection between second-generation immigrants and their home country. Some scholars point out that transnationalism is very important for first-generation immigrants, but less important for second-generation immigrants, “the passage from the first to the second generation leads to a weakening, and sometimes even a disappearance, of homeland connections” (Soehl, 2012, p. 779). Levitt and Glick find out that “transnational activities will not be central to the lives of most of the second generation, and those who engage in them will not do so with the same frequency and intensity as their parents” (2004, p. 1018).

But other scholars like Michael Smith hold different opinions. They state that “more than 100 years after the arrival of their forbearers, the enduring transnational linkages between the politics of the homeland and the culture of European diaspora still persist. Polish Americans, Jewish Americans, and Irish Americans still profess political identity and allegiance to their distant, and, for many, unknown homeland” (Smith & Guarnizo, 1998, p. 17). The evidences Smith points out include Jewish American’s support for Israel, and Irish immigrants celebrating St. Patrick’s Day. They pointed out that the connections could all be made indirectly, without the need to have a direct relationship with their home country, they also hint that the emotional and symbolic attachment of immigrants’ descendants to imaginary homes constitute transnationalism. Diane Wolf proposes the idea of emotional transnationalism to describe the indirect transnational engagements on the basis of emotional attachments, either to the country or origin, or to their relatives (Wolf, 2002, pp. 255-294).

The second-generation immigrants are different from their parents, they are born and grow up in America, and their identity is definitely American. But due to their ethnicity, they are not fully recognized by the mainstream society. Their parents’ attachment to China influences them and their cultural link with China is sustained. Their lost touch with China does not mean they have lost touch with all Chinese culture. Just as Chinese American writer Fran Chin argues that “Chinese America was never illiterate. Losing touch with China did not result in Chinese Americans losing touch with ‘The ballad of Mulan’. It was and still chanted by children in Chinatowns around the western hemisphere” (Chan, 1991, p. 3). Their less connection with China does not mean they have no emotional attachment with China.

In Maxine Hong Kingston’s *China Men* and Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club*, the two authors explore the issue of the first generation and second generation’s different transnationalism. The first-generation Chinese Americans are diasporas, and living in another country gives them “diasporas consciousness”, it means the diasporas develop dual or multiple identification, they are always “home away from home”, “here and there” (Vertovec, 2009, p. 6). For the first generation, most of them are laborers and sojourners, they just want to save enough money and go back to China. For the second-generation immigrants, their attachments to China is a complicated matter, which can be understood as the

emotional transnationalism. Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan, both of them noticed the emotional transnationalism of second-generation Chinese Americans and they use unique ways to explore it.

In *The Joy Luck Club*, generation gap is the most noticeable theme. Each of the four daughters has issues with their mothers. The mothers have great expectations for their daughters, they want their daughters to achieve American dream. But the daughters at first do not understand their mothers' expectation for them, and they all protest against their mothers' will. No matter Waverly Jong's abandonment of playing chess, or Jing-mei Woo's protest of playing piano, or Rose Hsu Jordan's divorce, they all seemingly prove that the second generation's Americanness and the first generation's Chineseness. But if we examine the novel's ending carefully, it seems that the author is not emphasizing the second generation's Americanness, but indicating their transnationalism. In the novel, Jing-mei Woo does not want to play piano when she is young, but her mother forces her to play. At last, she quits her piano training by having a quarrel with her mother. The mother believes in American dream and wants her daughter to be successful, but the daughter never believes that she could be anyone she wants. On her thirties' birthday, Jing-mei Woo's mother gives a piano to her as a present, but she didn't take it home. After her mother's death, she has the piano tuned and tries to play, her biggest discovery is that two tunes she used to play are very much alike. Interesting thing is the name of the two tunes, one is "Pleading Child" and the other is "Perfectly Contented". Jing-mei Woo realizes that "I realized they were two halves of the same song" (p. 144). The names of the two tunes are very much the reflection of the mother-daughter relationship and also the relationship between the mothers' Chineseness and daughters' Americanness. The child is pleading for her own independent life, but in the end the child and mother are perfectly contented with each other, which symbolizes the fully understanding between two generations.

Besides the final understanding of her mother's expectation of her, the most important thing Jing-mei Woo realizes is her attachment to China. At the end of the novel, she comes back to China to visit her two sisters, seeing her sisters, she feels that "and now I also see what part of me is Chinese. It is so obvious. It is my family. It is our blood. After all these years, it can finally be let go" (p. 288). Though they do not speak the same language, they can still share the same feeling, "And although we don't speak, I know we all see it: Together we look like our mother. Her same eyes, her same mouth, open in surprise to see, at last, her long-cherished wish" (p. 288). The likeness between the sisters is like the natural link which binds them together, their biological mother, and also their cultural mother, China. Even the second generation like Jing-mei Woo has no direct contact with China, they can still inherit Chinese culture from their parents and thus develops emotional transnationalism. The same feeling was felt by Waverly Jong. When she was young, she would clap her hand for doesn't look like Chinese, but before her went to China for her second honeymoon, "she wants to be Chinese, it is so fashionable" (Tan, 1989, p. 253).

In Maxine Hong Kingston's *China Men*, the author also tells stories about the second-generation immigrants and their transnationalism. In the story, "The Brother in Vietnam", the narrator gets in

touch with two different cultures when he is young, “usually my father took us to American movies, my mother to Chinese movies”. Her brother, who has a Chinese name, Han Bridge. The immigrants think that they are Han people from the Han Dynasty. The name is very culturally connotative as its meaning is to bridge China and America. The brother grows up as American, though his appearance still makes people think he is Chinese. In order to make him look more like an American and prove his loyalty to America, he joins the Army. During the war, when he arrives in Taiwan, “in Taiwan he was for the first time in a country of Chinese people. The childish dream was that he would find like minds, and furniture that always fit his body. Chinese Americans talk about how when they set foot on China, even just Hong Kong, their whole lives suddenly made sense; their youth had been a preparation for this visit, they say”, they realize their Americanness, they say, and “you find out what a China Man you are” (287). In this story, the author tries to elaborate that nationality cannot completely determine one’s cultural identification. Due to the cultural background and ethnicity, Chinese Americans naturally feels being connected to China. The second-generation immigrants’ attachment to China in the two works reflects the transnational links between China and America.

4. Conclusion

Chinese American literature is not only the narrative of the living experience of Chinese Americans, but also the thinking on the dynamic transnational interactions and the transnationalism they embody. The study paradigm based on nation state has to be adapted in the context of globalization. Through the description of multiple ties and interactions linking Chinese Americans and China, Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan present the transnational ties which bind the immigrants and their descendants with China. In the past, Chinese Americans are commonly interpreted as the writing of Americanness, but through the analysis of Kingston’s *China Men* and Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club*, it can be found that Chinese American literature is not the writing of Chinese Americans’ Americanness, but a celebration of the transnationalism of Chinese Americans.

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