World Journal of Education and Humanities
ISSN 2687-6760 (Print) ISSN 2687-6779 (Online)
Vol. 8 No. 4, 2026
www.scholink.org/ojs/index.php/wjeh

Original Paper

Reconciliation & Reconstruction: Redemption of Irritation in Weike Wang's Chemistry

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Received: September 28, 2026 Accepted: November 10, 2026 Online Published: November 23, 2026

doi:10.22158/wjeh.v8n4p87 URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/wjeh.v8n4p87

Abstract

With the "affective turn," the descriptions of emotions in ethnic literary works have gained increasing attention from the literary scholars, which may further shed light on the politics of emotions in the specific sociocultural contexts. Among the latest Chinese American literary works, Weike Wang's Chemistry has distinguished itself by the overwhelming embodiment of irritation of the Chinese American female protagonist, especially "irritation". According to Sianne Ngai's Irritation theory, negative as it is, irritation also possesses the diagnosis power for the subjects to achieve redemption. Thus, the present paper intends to analyze how the female protagonist gains a better understanding of her situation as well as predicament. The results indicate that the irritated Chinese American female protagonist gradually realizes that in Chinese love means I hurt for you, and understands her parents' unspoken but deep love, thus reconciling with them; on the other hand, she is aware that chemistry is not her thing, and she starts to seek her true self-identity without the burden from others' expectations.

Keywords

Chemistry, redemption of irritation, reconciliation, self-exploration

1. Introduction

The publication of *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social* in 2007 has marked one of the significant transformations to highlighting the study of emotions in broader humanity and social science instead of perceiving emotions as "a mere kind of low-level and irrational reaction of the human psyche" (Wang, 2005, p. 48). With this turn, emotions are no longer "regarded as psychological states, but as social and cultural practices" (Ahmed, 2014, p. 9). In this sense, this emotional lens places unprecedented emphasis on the inter-sectional examinations of sociocultural environment and cultural texts. Seen as

"repositories of feelings and emotions" (Cvetkovich, 2003, p. 7), literary works, particularly ethnic literary works, have long been endeavoring to depict and demonstrate the living experiences of human beings in different times and places mainly by ways of the complicated emotional status of various characters.

Just as observed by Xiaoling Wang and Qianhui Xu (2020), "the overwhelming representations of negative feelings of ethnic minorities are increasingly prominent in American ethnic literary texts" (p. 105). As a typical ethnic literary work, Weike Wang's *Chemistry* is featured by "put[ing] great emphasis on individual emotional experience" (Smith, 2015, p. 3), with a focus on the negative feelings of the Chinese American characters, particularly the female protagonist, a Chinese American Ph. D. candidate. Just as this female protagonist acknowledges in *Chemistry*, "bad tempers run in my family. It is the dominant allele, like black hair." (Wang, 2017, p. 5). Moreover, according to Ahmed (2014), these negative feelings, especially irritation or anger, has demonstrated their "stance on the world, or a way of apprehending the world" (p. 7).

This, as a matter of fact, echoes the redemptive or diagnosis power ascribed by Sianne Ngai to ugly feelings. In her construct of ugly feelings, she (2005) particularly points that "the unsuitability of these weakly intentional feelings for forceful or unambiguous action is precisely what amplifies their power to diagnosis situations" (p. 27). In this sense, she ascribes the potential positive power to these feelings for the emotional subjects to gain a better understanding of their predicaments. Therefore, as one of the ugly feelings, irritation also implies redemptive power, which "involve[s] emotions searching for appropriate objects" (Baier, 1990, p. 3). In Weike Wang's *Chemistry*, the female protagonist is observed in an enduring state of irritation. Moreover, after finally outpouring her long-repressed anger by the act of "smashing those beakers" (Wang, 2017, p. 49), she is advised to be "put on medical leave and in contact with a shrink" (Wang, 2017, p. 28). It is during this period that the irritated female protagonist begins to diagnose "situations marked by blocked or thwarted action in particular" (Ngai. 2005, p. 27) and tries to gain a better understanding of them. Thus, drawing on the diagnosis power of irritation proposed by Sianne Ngai, the present paper intends to probe into how the female protagonist in *Chemistry* responds to the sociocultural predicament confronting her.

2. Sianne Ngai's Construct of Irritation as Redemptive Power

David Konstan (2006) once claims that "one emotion that is included almost without exception in both classical and modern inventories of the passions is anger, and it may well seem to be a prime example of an innate and universal emotion" (p. 41). It is evident that on many occasions, anger is "perceived as a destructive power which needs to be oppressed, since it can give rise to violence and pose a threat to the social order" (Yuan, 2020, p. 7). Unlike its strong passion counterpart, however, "irritation" discussed in Sianne Ngai's construct of ugly feelings is a "minor, low-intensity and on-going negative affect" (Ngai, 2005, p. 174).

Furthermore, irritation is also "marked by an ambivalence that will enable them[it] to resist, on the one hand, their[its] reduction to mere expressions of class ressentiment, and on the other, their counter-valorization as therapeutic 'solutions' to the problems they[it] highlight[s] and condense[s]" (Ngai, 2005, p. 3). This means it also "involve[s] emotions searching for appropriate objects" (Baier, 1990, p. 3), which implies the potential power of this feeling to quest for something significant for the subject. This shares similarity with the diagnosis power of all ugly feelings. While it is the result of powerlessness or inadequacy, once accumulated, it will give rise to the outpouring of big passions, thus pushing the repressed subject to fight back and make changes to the situations.

In brief, while seemingly powerless, irritation is assigned the diagnose power, which enables the subject to gain a better understanding of his or her situation and hereinafter take corresponding actions. Therefore, with reference to Sianne Ngai's Irritation theory, the present paper elaborates on how the Chinese American female protagonist reconciles with her family, faces up to the challenges at her crossroads, and thus establishes true sense of her identity.

3. "I Hurt for You": Reconciliation with Parents

Fae Myenne Ng once claims that "reminiscing about the past may empower the present" (qted in Lu, 2009, p. 354). It seems not true at first for the case of the female protagonist in Weike Wang's *Chemistry*. As Jamie Fisher (2017) comments, "the past is, for this narrator, an ongoing anxiety". During the period of receiving psychological treatment, she is required to recall memories of her parents as a way to heal her trauma. But instead of recalling something happy or joyful, she "see[s] only the bad…There is so much bad" (Wang, 2017, p. 126). In her memories, as she recounts, "I don't remember ever see my parents hold hands, or hug, or kiss" (Wang, 2017, p. 34). What is deeply rooted in her memories is their constant quarreling and fighting.

There is much fighting over this, behind closed doors. That glow you see around a closed door is the property of diffraction. It is light trying to escape the room and move around an obstacle, in this case the door, my parents. I am scared sitting at the edge of my bed (Wang, 2017, p. 102).

The memories as to how she has been tortured by the emotional neglect from her parents are also revealed to the psychological consultant. Her mother once leaves her on the driveway and drives away while her father is extremely strict with her academic performance without showing enough concern for her. Faced with these terrible memories, she "believed my[her] heart to be strong, but not that strong" (Wang, 2017, p. 88). Even worse, she also attributes her parents' lack of love to some biological factors, such as genes and hormones. However, "science is not a panacea; activities such as human interactions are difficult to answer with this method" (Wang, 2017, p. 126). The psychological therapist also points out that "that cannot be entirely true" (Wang, 2017, p. 126).

According to Spelman (1989), "the emotion of anger…implies a judgement that something is bad, although we can be wrong in our judgement" (p. 266). Growing up in American society, the female protagonist is accustomed to the Americanized way of expressing love, which is much opener and more

passionate, so she feels irritated at her parents and makes a judgement that they do not love each other or her at all. But as a matter of fact, her judgement is wrong. For her parents who stick to the Chinese tradition, they prefer to "not explain any of that, to keep your[their] deepest feelings inside and then build a wall that can be seen from the moon" (Wang, 2017, p. 136). In this sense, the female protagonist comes to realize that it is not a matter of the absent love, but rather the different way of expressing love.

Her new understanding of love is inspired by the diagnosis power of irritation. Being irritated at her seemingly loveless parents, she gets to make sense of love in her parents' cultural setting. "In Chinese, there is another phrase about love. It is not used for passionate love but the love between family members. In translation, it means I hurt for you" (Wang, 2017, p. 135-136). She also remembers there was a time when her mother conveyed a similar understanding about love. "She then holds a hand to her heart and says that the Chinese keep their feelings in here and not—she points to air—out in the open" (Wang, 2017, p. 136). In this sense, love in the Chinese register has two levels of meaning. Firstly, it refers to the physical or mental sacrifice for those we love; secondly, it means the unsaid but deep affection.

Following this Chinese way of constructing love, she starts her journey to reminisce about the tracks of love in her family. She has long been holding the view that the marriage of her parents is nothing but miserable, since they frequently fight and argue with each other. But as a matter of fact, she simply sticks to the tragic side of their marriage, totally neglecting the happy side. Her mother once also tells her that "there is no good marriage without constant fighting. Fighting is how a husband and wife talk" (Wang, 2017, p. 126). But it is a pity that at that time, she thinks what her mother says is mere "to comfort me[her]" (Wang, 2017, p. 126). It is when she hears of Clara and Fritz Haber's marriage and Marie and Pierre Curie's marriage that she finally understands "it might be that all marriages lie between these two extremes" (Wang, 2017, p. 150).

Despite the fact that her parents usually argue and fight with each other, the female protagonist finally finds out that they indeed love each other. One of the possible reasons is that both of them sacrifice for each other. Her mother is raised in a wealthy family in Shanghai, and possesses a well-paid job as a pharmacist. In her grandmother's view, "daughters have more chu xi and xiao shun…Chu xi is the ability to succeed. Xiao shun is filial piety" (Wang, 2017, p. 125). But in order to support her husband's career, her mother follows him to America and "inevitably gives up both" (Wang, 2017, p. 125), even though she knows it clearly that "returning would be hard" (Wang, 2017, p. 101). After moving to America, at a young age, her mother not only needs to use "savings and her share of the family's money to pay for his tuition, our airfare, and the first year of food and rent" (Wang, 2017, p. 22), but also has to completely sacrifice her own promising career and endure the misery in learning English. Even worse, her mother also misses the funeral of her own father. As the only daughter in her family, her mother lives a pampered life with nothing to worry about. But in order to accompany her husband, she suffers a total dislocation of life and cannot fulfill her filial duty to her parents. Indeed, she hurts a

lot for her husband. Like her mother, the father of the female protagonist also hurts a lot for her mother. Different from her mother who grows up in an affluent family, her father grows up in a poor farm country and "he is the oldest of seven" (Wang, 2017, p. 14). After marrying her mother, her father decides to go abroad for Ph. D. study, even though he knows little about English. The reason why he makes that determination is simply that he wants to provide a better life for her mother, since at that time, a Ph. D. degree means much more promising and well-paid job opportunities. The life of studying in America is never easy for immigrants, particularly for those who have low English proficiency, such as her father. In this sense, in order to graduate successfully, her father spares no effort to improve his English and in the meantime finish the assigned research tasks from his supervisor. His efforts pay off eventually. He "finishes his doctorate in record time, three years, and then he gets a well-paying job" (Wang, 2017, p. 22-23). He has also gained recognition from his supervisor, who says to him—"you work the same amount as twelve full-time graduate students. If only I had twelve more like you" (Wang, 2017, p. 23). It is obvious that the driving force to motivate her father is his love for his wife. Thus, he is willing to challenge himself to accomplish what seems impossible.

In addition to their mutual sacrifice, the female protagonist also recalls the moving scenes of her parents, which indicates their unsaid but deep love. In the female protagonist's memory, her parents never stop fighting and arguing, so she thinks their marriage is a total failure. But she later realizes that underneath the seemingly miserable exterior of their marriage lies their absolute commitment to each other. Although her mother usually threatens her father by the act of running away from home, it has never occurred to her to really divorce him. And every time she drives away, she still misses him and returns home herself after several days. Thus, as the female protagonist remembers, "one time, my father accuses of her of running off to be with another man. She laughs at this. Who would I go with? She says. Who would want to be with me in the long run" (Wang, 2017, p. 126). In her mother's eyes, her father is the only man she decides to live with in her lifetime, and "whatever happens, no divorce" (Wang, 2017, p. 149). As for her father, he also cares a lot about her mother. In spite of quarreling, as the only bread owner, he has never proposed divorce or conducted unfaithful behavior. Moreover, he has never committed domestic abuse on her mother even when he is highly enraged. Furthermore, with time passing by, he still holds fast to his promise which was made when he proposed to her mother—"still a student, he is too poor to afford a ring, but, while wrapping the grass around her finger, he says that in the future, he will make her one himself" (Wang, 2017, p. 148). This promise is eventually fulfilled. Her father takes this promise exceptionally seriously. As the female protagonist witnesses,

the year before I leave for college, he makes her a ring out of iron, tungsten, molybdenum, chromium, and titanium. He calibrates the proportions himself and then melts down the elements and then molds the ring in his laboratory, to the exact size of her finger. A size three finger (Wang, 2017, p. 148).

Her father further adds the reason for choosing these materials is that "it is strong…it will bend before it will break" (Wang, 2017, p. 148). This ring definitely implies her father's deepest love for her mother, hoping that their marriage can be as strong as it.

Apart from gaining a new understanding of her parents' marriage, the female protagonist also gets to realize their deep love for her. Love, as a feeling, "does simply exist before the utterance, but becomes real as an effect, shaping different kinds of actions and orientations" (Ahmed, 2014, p. 13). She has long been complaining about their emotional neglect to her—"parents are parents, and to people who are not their children, they are people" (Wang, 2017, p. 46), but after adopting different angles, she senses the neglected parental love. In Jonice Webb and Christine Musello's (2013) words, they are "perfectly good people, loving their child, doing their best" (p. 19). They indeed care about the female protagonist, but they merely fail to figure out the proper parental way to raise her. As parents, they show their unsaid love to the female protagonist in an indirect and euphemistic way. In Chinese culture, having a home is of great significance for a family. Thus, they "buy a house. Every penny saved has bought them a two-story with a yard, a brick facade, in a nice neighborhood" (Wang, 2017, p. 139). They also do all the renovations themselves. The reason why they do this is simply to let her have a jia—"jia is the Chinese word for home" (Wang, 2017, p. 139). Her mother says, to her "it is important to your father that you have a jia" (Wang, 2017, p. 139) while her father says to her, "it is important to your mother that you have a jia" (Wang, 2017, p. 139). In this sense, both her father and mother attach great importance to offering shelter for their daughter, which indicates their deepest love for her. Indeed, they hurt for her. However, as she acknowledges, she neglects their love at that time—"so wrapped up am I in the notion of being gone that I don't notice what they are trying to do" (Wang, 2017, p. 139).

In terms of emotional neglect, her parents are just "passing on accidental, invisible, potentially damaging patterns to their daughter" (Webb & Musello, 2013, p. 19) without being aware of it. The writer Weike Wang also says that "they were not uncaring" (qtd in Gandhi, 2017). The experience of being abandoned by her mother on their driveway leaves the female protagonist in an enduring state of irritation. When she tells Eric, Eric also comments, "your mother is a terrible person. Who does that to a child" (Wang, 2017, p. 92). But sometimes, seeing is not believing. Her mother does ask her to leave the car and drive away, but she does not mean to abandon her, since the place is their own driveway and she knows clearly that her husband will come home soon. Moreover, after the female protagonist later gets to know the "theory of shock", she understands the reasons why her mother does that—"it is possible that my mother had moments of shock when raising me. How did I get here? What am I doing? A daughter, you say? You must be mistaken" (Wang, 2017, p. 92), and "if I did, how would I raise her if I cannot set for her an example?" (Wang, 2017, p. 125). Furthermore, after the death of her grandfather, her mother breaks down and decides that "she will not be coming back with us. She will be staying in China with her mother" (Wang, 2017, p. 102). But eventually, she still comes back to America where she has neither relatives nor a career. Her mother indeed hurts for her, but like many

Chinese mothers, she never speaks it out. This kind of restraint in expressing love can be partly confirmed by her mother's reaction to a moving movie *Stepmom*. As the female protagonist remembers, *my mother has watched this movie many times. She watches it alone in her bedroom, the door slightly ajar. Does she cry during the penultimate scene? She would say no, never, yet she comes out of the bedroom with a tissue over her nose and declares it allergy season again (Wang, 2017, p. 104).*

Like her mother, her father also loves her, but he usually disguises it as being strict with her study. The female protagonist once is irritated at her father by saying, "all you want me to do is study, all you want me to do is achieve. I am tired of learning everything. What use is all this knowledge when in school they are still calling you a freak" (Wang, 2017, p. 119). It is a pity that at that time, she fails to tell that "in his questions, the many times he motioned me over to teach me one of the three things, was his desire for me to be fearless" (Wang, 2017, p. 119-120). It is when she learns of her father's story from her mother that she comes to understand his "need to succeed, to be fearless" (Wang, 2017, p. 136) and to protect those he loves. As the eldest brother in his family, he

carried his youngest sister on his back to see the doctor. The doctor was many miles away. The sister was dying of consumption. He ran on dirt roads, as fast as he could. But before they could get to the doctor, the sister died. Still, he carried her to the doctors' (Wang, 2017, p. 136).

Her father never mentions this sister to the female protagonist. But this experience leaves a profound impact on his life. Feeling incapable of saving his own sister and helplessly seeing her death have long been torturing him, which accounts for his later attaching great importance to the success and to being strong. In this sense, he places great expectations on the female protagonist, hoping that she could become more successful and more fearless. Thus, more often than not, he pushes her to study harder and to have a promising future. He fails to understand that her daughter is unhappy and struggling with her doctoral study. Besides, the female protagonist also gradually has a better understanding of her father's restrained and unsaid love from other details in life. Her father has a seasonal garden. Every time he harvests vegetables, he will send them to her—"The three dozen eggplants arrive, meticulously packaged, with each eggplant wrapped in foil" (Wang, 2017, p. 97). It also reminds her of the time when he gives a winter melon to her—"it was too big to fit into my suitcase so I[she] had to carry it through security" (Wang, 2017, p. 97). Her father never says words like "I love you", "my sweetheart" to her, but he indeed loves her and expresses his love by giving what he has to her. His deepest paternal love is embedded in the eggplants and oversized winter melon. The female protagonist also recalls the details of her father's surprising reaction to her adopted pet dog. She supposes that he "will be annoyed. He has never shown an interest in animals before" (Wang, 2017, p. 136). But much to her amazement, he makes compromises with the dog again and again instead of throwing it away immediately.

He allows him on the hardwood but not on the carpet. He allows him on the carpet but not on the couch. When the dog cries at night from fear of being alone, he sleeps next to him on the floor (Wang, 2017, p. 137).

His surprising deeds are not because he loves this dog, but because this dog is what his daughter loves. In this sense, he shows excessive patience and tolerance to this dog. It is undoubted that he cares about and loves her pretty much.

As observed by Einstein, "love is the only energy in the universe that man has not learned to drive at will" (Wang, 2017, p. 143). The different ways of expressing love may cause misunderstandings among family members, as in the female protagonist's family. As the writer Weike Wang puts,

when you are an immigrant parent, 'Do I want to make my child happy?' is not a question you always ask…It's 'I need to feed her. I need to put a roof over her head. I need to make sure she has health insurance.' My point is not to vilify them (qtd in Gandhi, 2017).

Thus, after she comes back to the past again and again, she finally realizes the meanings of love in her parents' stance—"mother, father, I think I know what it means to hurt for you" (Wang, 2017, p. 142). Her parents indeed hurt for each other and for her, which is the manifestation of their love. In this sense, she gradually comes to reconcile with her parents.

4. "Chemistry Wasn't Your Thing": The Exploration of Self

William M. Reddy (2001) claims that all feelings have a "self-exploring or self-altering effect" (p. 100). In Weike Wang's *Chemistry*, inspired by the diagnosis power of irritation, the female protagonist is on the way to negotiate her self-identity. The exploration of self is also considered as "one of the most significant themes in all American ethnic and immigrant literary texts" (Lu, 2009, p. 347).

As the title "Chemistry" of this fiction suggests, this novel probes into the life of science graduates in contemporary American society. As a Ph. D. student in science, the author Weike Wang once comments on her motivation to compose a fiction of this kind—"I majored in chemistry and I sort of saw the grad students sort of fall apart…Scientists are so often falling apart. I wanted to look at that fall" (qtd in Gandhi, 2017). The falling apart of science graduates actually echoes Yongqiang Dang's (2020) view that "the crisis of self-identity is one of the prominent features of modernity" (p. 94). In the fiction, the female protagonist notices that "the dog is having an identity crisis as well" (Wang, 2017, p. 112). From the phrase "as well" it can be guessed that she is also experiencing a self-identity crisis, which is mainly reflected in her confusion about her future path—whether to return to her Ph.D. program or to choose another career. To put it another way, her identity crisis lies in the question—whether she loves science and regards science as her thing, which actually indicates that she is deconstructing her previous self-identity. In general, her exploration of self has undergone three phases—constructing false self-identity, deconstructing false one as well as re-constructing real one.

Regarding self-identity negotiation in modern society, Yongqiang Dang (2020) points out that

out of anxiety about their own existence, individuals are inclined to come to terms with the prevailing notions as a way of negotiating their self-identity… In so doing, they construct false self-identity at the expense of losing or missing their real ones (p. 94).

In the fiction, the previous self-identity of the female protagonist who chooses chemistry as her career is to some extent the result of following the "prevailing notions" in American society. The most direct driving force of her initial decision to explore the field of science is her parents. Since an early age, her father has been preparing her for science study, including numerous calculation exercises and games, for he firmly sticks to the belief that "the mastery of three things will make you fearless anywhere in the world. They are math, physics, and chemistry" (Wang, 2017, p. 79). In the meantime, her father is continuously imparting the charm of science to her—"engineers pride themselves on understanding how the world works. Imagine the core of the Earth as a heat engine, imagine the moon a perfect sphere" (Wang, 2017, p. 83). Her mother, as a former pharmacist in China, also attaches great importance to the study of science—"Who do you think you are? You are nothing to me without that degree" (Wang, 2017, p. 44). The idea of her father and mother on science is actually the projection of the stereotypes of American society on Asian Americans. Being hardworking, diligent, and good at calculations, Asian Americans are widely perceived as the most suitable candidates in STEM field. Thus, as the writer Weike Wang observes, "people who go into science are disproportionately Asian" (qtd in Taylor, 2017). In the fiction, the female protagonist also encounters the joking on this stereotype from one of her classmates in middle school whose parents are white—"When an Asian baby is born her parents hold up two signs, DOCTOR or DOCTOR, and the baby must choose" (Wang, 2017, p. 32), which further has developed many versions—"times change, so no longer DOCTOR or DOCTOR, but DOCTOR or SCIENTIST. DOCTOR or ENGINEER. DOCTOR or INVESTMENT BANKER" (Wang, 2017, p. 32). Seeing her classmate "bend over with laughter" (Wang, 2017, p. 32) because of this joke, the female protagonist is so enraged that she "want[s] to kick her" (Wang, 2017, p. 32). However, at that time, the female protagonist is too young to be aware of the profound impacts of this stereotype on the career choices of Asian Americans, including her. Despite the fact that one's ethnicity cannot be solely associated with his or her academic performance, Asian Americans are usually made to choose science as the only absolute path they can take. As for the female protagonist in this fiction, although "the emotion of anger…implies a judgement that something is bad" (Spelman, 1989, p. 266), her irritation is not strong enough to release sufficient diagnosis power so as to help her resist following this stereotype which "isn't so much of a joke as a statement" (Wang, 2017, p. 32). In this sense, she has to conform to this force and still chooses to explore science like many other Asian Americans and becomes a Ph. D. candidate in chemistry—"I don't disagree" (Wang, 2017, p. 83). And because she possesses a solid foundation of science, at the very beginning, her false self-identity is relatively stable, and there are few obstacles on her way to explore science. She is successfully admitted to a key university in America. Later, when she becomes a senior in college, she "decide[s] to go into synthetic organic chemistry" (Wang, 2017, p. 9), for she is "mesmerized by the art of it" (Wang, 2017, p. 9). But things totally change after she starts her Ph. D. study. She suffers unprecedented challenges in her research—"what's this about your chemistry?…Why isn't it going well? You put in the hours, then how is it that you get nothing?" (Wang, 2017, p. 9). She feels highly irritated about her current

situation—"about science, I think there is still magic in it but I couldn't find it" (Wang, 2017, p. 52). In this sense, she suffers an identity crisis. In the meantime, her constantly accumulated anger starts to demonstrate its redemptive power, which not only gives rise to the gradual deconstruction of her previous "false self-identity", but also enables her to further quest for her real self.

The deconstruction of her "false self-identity" requires her to re-examine her interior, as suggested by Yongqiang Dang (2020), who claims that "according to the fundamental characteristics of modern society, individuals negotiate their self-identity mainly by way of reflexively exploring their internal selves" (p. 97). In this sense, Alexandra Taylor (2017) contends that Weike Wang's "primary purpose in writing the novel was to make people think about why they're doing what they're doing, which she says is a question that everybody should ask". As in the case of the female protagonist in this fiction, instead of taking account of the external sociocultural contexts, she ought to reflect on herself within as to why she steps into the field of science. It firstly occurs to her that "it is a chicken-and-egg argument. Did I go into science because I liked it? Or because I was, at the beginning, very good at it and then began to like it" (Wang, 2017, p. 45). This reflection indicates that she begins to doubt her previous thought that "I like knowing how the world works" (Wang, 2017, p. 83), so I decide to explore science. In addition, her false self-identity about science is further deconstructed when others directly tell her the truth that "it wasn't your thing. Accept that and move on" (Wang, 2017, p. 83-84). The first one to say that is her boyfriend Eric. He points out the reason why she struggles a lot in science—"not to say that you're not a good chemist, you are, but maybe this is just not your thing" (Wang, 2017, p. 59). Hearing this, the female protagonist's reaction is that "it is the first time I am this angry with him" (Wang, 2017, p. 59). Although at that time, she denies this fact by shouting, "if I want it to be my thing, it will be my thing. I will make it my thing" (Wang, 2017, p. 59), her irritation definitely manifests its diagnosis power to reveal the fact that she goes into science is not because she really loves it. Besides, the psychological therapist also says similar words when she asks, "why did I leave science again" (Wang, 2017, p. 83), which further forces her to accept that fact. Regarding this case, Gish Jen once explains that

if you grow up in a place where you experience the same reality as others, and you start to believe that it is the very reality. As a result, you fail to realize how much of a scam it is. However, if you can listen to the opinions of others, you will know that the reality in your eyes is not absolutely true (qtd in Shi, 2009, p. 325).

Like many other Asian Americans, the female protagonist has long been internalized the perception that she is born to study science. Thus, she seldom calls to question whether she really loves science and is willing to be wholly dedicated to it. It is when others point out the crux that she is unable to delude herself any longer and has to acknowledge that what she holds fast to before may not be true. Therefore, she begins to change her previous false understanding of science in a real sense. But then again, as a matter of fact, as the female protagonist admits, "logically I think I knew but I needed to hear someone else say it first" (Wang, 2017, p. 143). The eventual collapse of her previous self-identity happens when

she "smash[es] five beakers on the ground" and shouts "beakers are cheap" "if I really wanted to make a statement, I would have opened the argon box to air" (Wang, 2017, p. 20). As Sianne Ngai (2005) points out, irritation is in a position to help emotional subjects recognize or know themselves better (p. 385). In this sense, the outpouring of her long-repressed irritation releases strong redemptive power to enable her to gain a better understanding of her self-identity. It is at this moment that she finally admits that chemistry is not her thing—"you must love chemistry unconditionally. But all I can think is how I am not up for the task" (Wang, 2017, p. 20). In this sense, her previous false self-identity about science has been completely deconstructed.

Since "our emotions orient us to the world and give us insights, even knowledge about our place in the world" (Solomon, 2006, p. 3), the redemptive power of irritation also enables her to reconstruct her true self. In the quest for her true self, as Carol P. Christ (1980) suggests, "a woman must listen to her own voice and come to terms with her own experience. She must break long-standing habits of seeking approval, of trying to please parents, lovers, husbands, friends, children, but never herself" (p. 9). However, in the case of the female protagonist, the journey to seek her real identity is never smooth. One of the biggest obstacles is the profound influence of her parents on her. Her boyfriend Eric once is highly shocked by that—"the power they have on you…I just don't get it" (Wang, 2017, p. 46). She once claims to be "an excellent sheep, the kind that can jump through hoop after hoop and not ask why" (Wang, 2017, p. 104). In this sense, even though she has to take a stress-related leave of absence and receive psychological treatment, she does not dare to let her parents know. Thus, when she decides to withdraw from her Ph. D. program, she does not tell her parents, either. Faced with the remarks from others who encourage her to "for once, stand up to them" (Wang, 2017, p. 104), she still finds it hard to do that, since "I[she] can't stand it when they are mad at me[her]. I[she] can't sleep, and once I[she] can't sleep, I[she] can't do much of anything else" (Wang, 2017, p. 45). However, as the writer Weike Wang points out,

*it's not the traditional rebel story. It's not like "I'm going to go travel to find myself" or "I am going to join a band". Because everyone I know rebels quietly… It's not "F**k you, parents. I'm just going to leave the country". It's doing really tiny things (qtd in Ganhdi, 2017).*

In spite of the unavoidable and powerful influence of her parents, guided by the redemptive power of her irritation, she uses her own quiet way to rebel and seek her real self-identity. She does not directly inform her parents of her decision to quit her Ph. D., but lies to them—"you just caught me on a bad day. I will finish the Ph. D. soon and then get a job" (Wang, 2017, p. 46). Maybe it is not correct to lie to her parents, but it is the most effective way for her to temporarily get rid of the invisible grip from her parents, so as to explore the career she loves from the bottom of her heart—"by telling the truth now, without a plan of how to proceed, you will hurt them more. What would telling them accomplish? It will only cause strife" (Wang, 2017, p. 142).

One of her important attempts to start her new career is to apply for the position as a tutor in math or science. She no longer spends all day in her chemistry laboratory, but works as an offline tutor of the

college students. This new job requires her to be "allotted one hour per student to teach them whatever it is they have come to learn. Beforehand they fill out a request form" (Wang, 2017, p. 25). In the process of teaching these students, she also quietly rebels by adopting unique teaching methods. She has been brought up by her parents who usually mechanically drill mathematical calculations into her without any encouragement and praises. However, when teaching her students, she never mechanically imparts disciplinary knowledge to them or requires them to do a lot of exercises. Rather, she tries her best to let them experience and feel the knowledge themselves. She once needs to explain color to one of her students who "can see a glimmer of things but only if she looks long and hard. She can see that the sky is somewhat blue and that the sun is somewhat yellow" (Wang, 2017, p. 40). Instead of directly telling her the concept or principles of colors, she advises her to feel the beauty of color herself.

Blue light disperses the most, hence the blue sky you see everywhere. Yellow light disperses the least, hence the yellow sun you see in one place… the color of the sky when the sun has dipped just low enough to cause red light to bend the most and then, voilà, a sunset (Wang, 2017, p. 41).

She also uses a running faucet to teach fluid dynamics to students—

put your hand here and feel it being drawn into the current. Moving fluids create low pressure, a vacuum, and suck everything around them in. See how thin the stream gets at the bottom, how skinny it is compared with the top? This is air pushing the water in (Wang, 2017, p. 67).

In so doing, the female protagonist attempts to make up for her regrets in learning science when young. She wants them to truly feel the charm of what they learn instead of memorizing the dull theoretical concepts and doing numerous boring exercises. In addition, through teaching these students, she also knows science better. It is the first time she begins to "listen to her own voice and come to terms with her own experience" (Christ, 1980, p. 9). She once asks each student to write it down "light has five properties in total. It is not just one thing; it is a spectrum… Light, for being so multifaceted, is also really, really cool" (Wang, 2017, p. 25-26). As a science student, the female protagonist usually uses scientific knowledge to explain her life, but she has long been failing to realize that the charm of science does not lie in scientific research but in helping you know the world and understand yourself better. By emphasizing the multifaceted property of light, she aims to convey to her students that life is multifaceted as well. Every individual is different and "don't kill yourself over it. There are other things out there" (Wang, 2017, p. 128). In so doing, she also achieves a brand new understanding of her previous career chemistry. "The Chinese word for chemistry is hua xue. The first character means to change, transform, melt. The second character means to learn" (Wang, 2017, p. 140). In this sense, she creates a new discourse about the chemistry of her own. For her, chemistry is no longer an academic field she needs to explore, but it means a lifestyle or a living attitude which encourages her to keep learning and keep exploring without feeling afraid of change. In general, this tutoring experience plays a key role in helping her re-construct her real self-identity—"I know the tutoring is not permanent. I know I cannot do it long-term. But I like it and am not bad at it. Maybe I can be a full-time teacher somewhere. At a school. Or a small college" (Wang, 2017, p. 142).

The quest for self in modern society is "a process full of changes and needs you to keep exploring" (Dang, 2020, p. 95). Facilitated by the redemptive power of irritation, the female protagonist has experienced "the process from confusion and doubt about her self-identity to epiphany and awaking. Eventually, she creates a discourse of her own via her personal experiences and in the meantime accomplishes the definition of her self-identity" (Lu, 2009, p. 361).

6. Conclusion

As Xiaoling Wang (2020) identifies, ugly feelings are one of the significant features in current American ethnic minorities. In this sense, the emotional lens can be naturally regarded as the useful way to interpret ethnic literary works. Since emotions are perceived as "intentional and strategic ways of coping with 'difficult' situations (Solomon, 2003, p. 126), the Chinese American female protagonist starts to put the implied redemptive power of irritation into full use. With the help of the psychological therapist, she comes to realize that she has long been neglecting the love from and between her parents which is never directly and openly expressed as she expects. In this sense, she gradually understands the intentions and expectations of her parents, which in part are the embodiments of their love. In addition, the irritation also "signals something about how we[she] want[s] to be in the world" (Alberti, 2019, p. 241). She has long been "made" to explore the science as many Asian Americans, but actually "this is just not your[her] thing" (Wang, 2017, p. 59). It has taken her quite a long time to admit this fact. Being irritated, she starts to explore what she really wants to pursue. In so doing, she is on the way to search for self-identity instead of merely being "an excellent sheep" (Wang, 2017, p. 104).

Funding

General work was supported by Social Science Project of Guangdong University of Science & Technology "Research on the 'Irritation' in Contemporary Chinese American Women's Fictions" [Grant No. GKY-2023KYQNW-13].

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