

Imagery and Identity: Tracing the Transformation of Chinese-American Women's Literature

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ABSTRACT

Imagery plays a crucial role in shaping themes, characters, and cultural identity in literature. It holds particular significance in Chinese-American women's writing. This essay demonstrates how the evolving use of imagery in Chinese-American women's literature reflects changing identities and also serves as a political tool, offering insights into struggles for cultural empowerment and resistance to marginalization. Through a chronological analysis of works by several key authors, this paper explores how imagery functions both as a means of personal expression and a tool for cultural critique.

KEYWORDS

Chinese-American women's literature; Imagery

1 Introduction

Throughout the history of Chinese and foreign literature, the concept and theory of imagery have been predominantly applied to the appreciation and critique of poetry. However, due to imagery's characteristic of "unifying the subjective and objective," imagery theory is equally applicable to the analysis and commentary of other literary genres (Zhang, 2007). Fiction or autobiography writing, as primarily narrative literary forms, does not rely on the profusion of imagery required by poetry to convey the poet's sentiments. Nevertheless, the writer's thoughts and emotions still require certain objects to bear their weight. These objects may be natural landscapes, flora and fauna, or everyday objects from life. In modern and contemporary age, Chinese American female writers express their thoughts and reflections through distinctive imagery within their works. With the popularization of their works, imagery used in their works also has important research value in the field of literary criticism.

In recent years, Chinese-American women's works, as an important branch of Chinese literature, have received more attention from the academic community. Scholars have also gradually focused on the rich images in the works of well-known Chinese-American female writers. By studying imagery use in their writing, we gain a deeper understanding of their cultural significance and artistic value. We also gain insights into the survival experience of Chinese-Americans and Chinese-American women, a marginalized group, against the background of multicultural conflicts.

This article will explore the employment and evolution of imagery in Chinese-American female literature, focusing on the changes of images such as food, cultural symbols and personal belongings written by different generations of writers, and finally examine how these evolving images reflect the transformation of the identity of Chinese-American women. At the same time, it explores these images as resistance, empowerment and the role of cultural reconstruction tools.

2 Early Works: Imagery as a Symbol of Cultural Tradition and Survival

As a core image, food and family rituals not only carry traditional Chinese culture, but also symbolize the efforts of immigrants to protect cultural heritage in foreign countries. Food is a central symbol of cultural preservation. By tracing the cooking process of traditional dishes such as ducks and dumplings, Jade Snow Wong presents a picture of Chinese families in the United States maintaining their cultural roots with food, even in the face of the pressure of American cultural assimilation, dietary traditions still transcend physiological needs and are deeply coupled with family responsibilities and cultural identity. In its narrative, food is a means of transmitting family values across generations. The ritual of cooking and sharing meals not only strengthens family connections, but also solidifies cultural memory. For the protagonist, food has both the functions of physical nourishment and cultural foundation protection, and the family table has become a micro-field for traditional Chinese values to adjust the game in American society.

In addition, the symbolism of food extends to traditional healing scenes. In Chinese culture, food is given the value of physical and mental conditioning. Jade Snow Wong integrates this cognition into the narrative, highlighting that food goes beyond the category of diet and becomes a path to connect ancestral customs and maintain cultural continuity. In a white-dominated society, food has become a symbolic tool to resist the dissipation of Chinese culture.

To sum up, in the early literature of Chinese Americans, especially the works of writers such as Jade Snow Wong, similar images are commonly used: food and family rituals map migration, survival, cultural heritage retention and other macro

themes, which are no longer limited to the individual level, but become the cultural symbol of the group's identity in heterogeneous society. Such images are crucial to express the struggle of immigrants and cultural adherence. In the period when Chinese people were facing marginalization and racial discrimination, writers relied on food, family rituals and other Chinese culture related symbols, not only to explain the complexity of the dual cultural field shuttle establish cultural identity, but also resist the pressure of Western assimilation.

3 Changing Imagery: From Cultural Preservation to Subversion

The 1970s and 1980s witnessed the transformative awakening and maturation of Chinese American literature, constituting the second phase of its development. During this period, significant works emerged, including Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1976) and *China Men* (1980). *The Woman Warrior* mainly describes the author - Maxine Hong Kingston's own experience as a Chinese American and as a woman, and discusses how her gender and ethnicity affect the lives of Chinese American women (Kingston, 1989). By blending autobiography with old Chinese folktales and thus exposing the typical problems confronted by Chinese American women such as cultural conflicts, racial and sexual discriminations as well as the problem of interaction between Chinese-born and American-born generations, Kingston tries to dig out Chinese Americans', especially Chinese American women's values and their own identity.

In Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1976), the use of food images has undergone a major change: it is no longer a traditional "nourishment" symbol, but a more complex and even ironic table. In this memoir, food is not only necessary for survival, but also a tool of resistance - both symbolizing cultural survival and rejection of Western temptation. For example, Maxine Hong Kingston shaped the image of Fa Mulan, a Chinese mythological character, who symbolized both empowerment and oppression. In the narrative, Mulan's control of food is a metaphor for her control of her own life and destiny. In contrast to the "excess and indulgent" Western cultural abundance in Maxine's eyes, in the context of Chinese culture, the behavior of controlling food represents self-discipline and strength.

The mother "Brave Orchid" often mentions Chinese rice, comparing it with the "lack of real rice" in the American diet; the book also hints at the value of rice by immigrant families. As the core of Chinese food, rice symbolizes the memory and attachment of immigrants to their homeland culture, and is the sensory bond that connects them with the "motherland". The "lack of rice" in the American diet cleverly symbolizes the cultural misalignment of Chinese Americans in foreign countries - even in the United States; their taste-based "roots" are still firmly attached to China.

Maxine used food images to subvert the traditional understanding of "food is nourishment". For example, she compared the Chinese people's concept of healthy eating with the surplus of Western food culture (especially junk food). In her novel, *The Women Warrior*, Maxine criticized Americans' obsession with fast food, thinking that it was the embodiment of cultural commoditization: Western food containing a lot of sugar and additives is the epitome of consumerism, which is in stark contrast to the carefully cooked and healthy diet in Chinese culture. She criticized the blind consumption dominated by Western culture and compared it with the "restrained and purposeful nourishment" in traditional Chinese. Through this transformation of food image, Maxine Hong Kingston has gone beyond the simple expression of "food is nourishing" and turned it into a symbol of resisting Westernization and cultural dissolution.

From the late 1980s to the early 1990s, Chinese American literature entered its third phase—a period of flourishing. This phase of Chinese-American literature chronicles the identity-forming journey of Chinese-Americans. Characters in these works undergo a process of "transitioning from confusion about self-identity, the pressures of cultural conflict, and the loss of values to repositioning themselves, discovering their worth, and seeking cultural reawakening through communication." They journeyed from self-doubt to self-affirmation and ultimately to self-transcendence, "transforming their state of rootlessness—caught between two worlds and two cultures—into a force that bridges both worlds and cultures." (Cheng, 2003)

In *The Joy Luck Club* (Tan, 1989), Amy Tan continued the use of Maxine's complex food images and further expanded: not only using food as a tool for cultural connection, but also using it to subvert the "exoticism" in the Chinese American experience. In the whole novel, food is not only a medium to express family love and inheritance, but also symbolizes the complex relationship between the characters and their own cultural heritage and identity. A key scene in the book reflects this: Waverly, a Chinese-American girl deliberately offers a completely fictional "authentic Chinese food" menu to a group of white tourists in Chinatown. This cultural misleading behavior exposes the commoditization of Chinese culture, and also exposes the naive and curious mentality of tourists towards Chinese food culture. Amy Tan uses food as a subversive tool here to resist cultural appropriation and "cultural hunting": through fictional dishes, Weberly highlights the performance nature of cultural consumption by outsiders. This scene criticizes that mainstream culture often regards Chinese culture (especially Chinese food) as "exotic entertainment" and reduces it to a curious object, rather than truly understanding its cultural connotation. Through the clever use of food symbols, the author encourages readers to reflect on others' simplified understanding of Chinese American culture, and at the same time reaffirms the pride and complexity of the Chinese American identity.

The daughters in the novel (such as Jingmei and Weavery) grew up in an American junk food environment and often choose potato chips, soda and hamburgers instead of Chinese food cooked by their mothers. For example, Weber once ate hamburgers secretly because she thought it was "embarrassing" to eat Chinese food in front of her American boyfriend. Junk food symbolizes the daughters' integration into the mainstream culture of the United States. Their preference for junk food reflects their desire to break away from Chinese identity and integrate into American society. The conflict between junk food and Chinese home-cooked food symbolizes the gap between mother and daughter - the daughter's rejection of traditional food is essentially a rejection of the mother's cultural heritage and expression.

Another scene says: Lindo Jong will make dumplings during the festival; An-mei Hsu cooks soy sauce chicken to miss her mother's taste; the "joy luck feast" held by four mothers is full of classic Chinese food. Every dish is full of mothers' longing for their homeland. Cooking Chinese food is a way for them to preserve their cultural roots and pass on family memories. For example, Anmei's soy sauce chicken is her emotional connection with her mother, carrying the warmth and pain of childhood. Although the daughters rejected these dishes at first, they gradually realized the deep affection behind them. At the end of the novel, Jingmei cooked a Chinese meal for her mother's old friend, which symbolized her acceptance of Chinese identity and emotional reconciliation with her mother.

There are other scenes in the text: Lindo Jong making dumplings during the festival, An-mei Hsu cooking soy sauce chicken to remember her mother, and four mothers holding a "joy luck feast" with Chinese food. Dishes contain homeland attachment, and cooking Chinese food is a way to preserve culture and pass on memories. For example, An-mei Hsu's soy sauce chicken carries childhood emotions. Although the daughter's generation rejected it at first, she gradually perceived the meaning of it. At the end of the novel, Jingmei cooks Chinese food for her mother's old friend, symbolizing her acceptance of Chinese identity and realizing the emotional reconciliation between mother and daughter.

Therefore, in *The Joy Luck Club*, food is not only a daily necessity, but also a silent language for emotional communication, a carrier of cultural inheritance, and a mirror that reflects the conflict and bond between mother and daughter. It runs through the narrative of Chinese mothers and daughters born in the United States, and witnesses the intergenerational interweaving of culture and emotion.

4 New Directions: Hybrid Imagery and the Evolution of Identity

Since the turn of the 21st century, Chinese American literary creation has exhibited a trend toward de-ethnicization, alongside a growing focus on the life experiences and perspectives of marginalized Chinese American groups, such as mixed-race individuals (Cheng, 2024).

Celeste Ng has expanded the use of images and integrated the image of "mixed identity", reflecting the complex state of shuttle between the United States and Chinese culture. In *Everything I Never Told You* (Ng, 2014), Celeste Ng uses food, family cookbook, and a necklace as complex metaphors to express the theme of identity, sense of belonging and cultural consultation. For example, in the process of the Lee family's adherence to Chinese culture in the white-dominated American society, Celeste Ng cleverly implanted the image of food and family rituals, conveying the contradiction between personal desires and family expectations, which reflect the intergenerational conflict within the family - immigrant parents try to preserve cultural traditions, but children born in the United States want to break away from these traditions and define their identity.

The food image including the cookbook used by Celeste Ng in the novel has become a carrier to show the "broken identity" of the second and third generations of Chinese Americans: families try to maintain Chinese culture through eating rituals, but are often hindered by the rejection of women. This process reveals the complexity of identity construction in a multicultural society. With the help of this mixed image, Celeste Ng explores the changing and fluid nature of identity - it always seeks a balance between the two cultures.

Similarly, Rebecca Kuang's *Yellowface* (Kuang, 2023) shows the creative path of contemporary writers using images to criticize cultural appropriation and explore the authenticity of identity. Rebecca Kuang used "yellowface" as the core metaphor to expose the reality of the commercialization of Chinese identity in the Western literature and media market. The image of mask is the core of the narrative of *Yellowface*: the protagonist June achieves success in literature by stealing Athena's Chinese identity. The "mask" here is not only a concrete object, but also a symbol of the act of diluting and manipulating cultural identity to achieve personal interests. Rebecca Kuang criticizes the consumption and commercialization of non-white identities in the Western context through the subversive use of food and cultural symbols, and transforms these images into critical tools to resist the exploitation of marginal culture.

In *Yellowface*, Rebecca Kuang further expands the political criticism of images, especially highlighting the practical value of food and cultural symbols as tools of resistance. The transformation of the image in the novel reflects the dynamic changes in the subjectivity of Chinese-American women, including both the marginalized situation and the practical possibility of self-empowerment. Rebecca Kuang's use of images prompts readers to face the political nature of cultural appropriation and the reality of Western institutions exploiting non-white identities in pursuit of economic

interests. The metaphor of "mask" in the novel has profound connotations, symbolizing the contradictions and conflicts between the true identity of the protagonist and the "false identity" built for success in the literary world.

In this context, contemporary writers' use of cultural symbols transcends the personal or family level and has become an important tool for political criticism. Rebecca Kuang's works not only criticize the suppression and elimination of true discourse by cultural commoditization, but also expose the complex mechanism of the manipulation of cultural symbols such as names and identities in the global market. Through the application of images, it reveals the deep unequal structure in the literary field and the reality of exploitative exploitation of the discourse of marginal groups..

5 Conclusion

Imagery plays a key role in literature and is a powerful tool for conveying cultural identity, personal experience and social criticism. In Chinese-American women's literature, imagery is not only a narrative technique, but also a medium for the complexity of identity negotiation, immigration and cultural assimilation.

The evolution of images in Chinese-American female literature reflects the dynamic changes of issues such as identity, cultural retention and resistance. Whether modern or contemporary Chinese-American writers, they imbue their works with deeper intellectual depth and distinctiveness through the selection and use of imagery. They also use symbolic and metaphorical imagery to express their emotions and ideas. In specific, Jade Snow Wong and other early Chinese-American writers use imagery to symbolize cultural survival and family inheritance in the face of Western assimilation pressure; Maxine Hong Kingston, Amy Tan and other later writers subvert stereotypes, criticize cultural hunting, and express mixed identities with images; contemporary writers such as Celeste Ng and Rebecca Kuang further expand the theme on this basis. They show the complex experience of Chinese-Americans of the second and third generations with new images, integrate the influence of multiculturalism, and criticize the political and cultural structure with the help of unconventional images compared with their predecessor writers.

In the study of Chinese-American women's literature, the analysis of imagery use has irreplaceable value, which reveals the complex reality of identity, belonging and resistance in the multicultural world. The evolution of the use of images has significantly enriched the understanding of the intersection of diaspora, cultural hybridization and gender, race and ethnicity in literary criticism (Pu, 2023). Chinese-American female writers use images in an innovative way, not only challenging stereotypes, but also creating space for marginal discourse, transforming traditional cultural images into a powerful carrier for critical cultural appropriation and exploring the mobility of Chinese identity.

By analyzing the transformation of cultural symbols and other imagery, we can deeply understand the challenges of writers to the mainstream narrative of identity belonging, and the construction of the theoretical framework of cultural resistance and empowerment.

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