

Home and Diasporic Imagination: Incorporating Immigrant Writer Chang Shi-Kuo in (Chinese) American Literary Studies¹

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Abstract

As part of a larger project aiming to include Sinophone US literature in US literary studies, this essay focuses on the Taiwan immigrant writer Chang Shi-Kuo's work and his recurrent themes, such as the obsession with China, the anxiety over patrilineal transmission, male hysteria and racial melancholia. The thematic concerns and stylistic experimentalism in Chang's fiction intersect with those of other ethnic Chinese writers in the US, whether they write in Chinese or English. Focusing on Chang's fiction and its engagement of the diasporic imagination with the aforementioned themes, this paper examines Chang's portrayals of US and Taiwan/Chinese societies. While his characters' US experience often suggests a critique of technocracy and commercialism, and the ensuing interpersonal alienation in the US, his depiction of Taiwan seems more nuanced and sanguine. I propose to read the discrepancy between such portrayals as resulting more from diasporic nostalgia than from lived experience. Despite Chang's explicit attachment to Taiwan, he is also quite aware of his immigrant status. Observing the transition of student immigrants into US citizens, he rejects the label of "Overseas Student literature"; instead, he contends that student immigrant literature will gradually become the literature of the adopted country. Chang's affinity with US-born Chinese American writers can be observed in his Chinese protagonists' male hysteria, which hints at the dissolution of traditional Chinese gender division in North America. The inability to sustain a traditional Chinese family in North America suggests a failure to ensure a profitable future for the Chinese diaspora, which I describe as anxiety over patrilineal transmission, after the Asian American critic Sau-ling Wong. Such male hysteria not only harks back to the "obsession with China" but also points to an affinity

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between Sinophone US literature and Chinese American literature written in English by US-born Chinese American writers.

Keywords

Sinophone studies, Overseas Student literature, obsession with China, male hysteria, anxiety over patrilineal transmission, racial melancholia

As part of a larger project aiming to include Sinophone US literature in US literary studies, this essay focuses on the Taiwan immigrant writer Chang Shi-Kuo's work and his recurrent themes, such as the obsession with China, the anxiety over patrilineal transmission, male hysteria and racial melancholia. The thematic concerns and stylistic experimentalism in Chang's fiction intersect with those of many other ethnic Chinese writers in the US, whether they write in Chinese or English. In the Sinophone literary circle, Chang has already garnered much critical attention and been long regarded as a representative of so-called Overseas Student literature and the "father of Taiwan's sci-fi"; however, perhaps due to the fact that only a small portion of his work has been translated into English, Chang remains obscure in Chinese American literary studies. Except for criticism by such bilingual scholars as Sau-ling Wong, Sheng-mei Ma, Yin Xiao-huang and myself, Sinophone literature has not been on the radar of Asian American literary studies despite its overwhelming popularity among the Chinese speaking readers in both Asia and America. I have proposed elsewhere the benefits of incorporating Sinophone writing in (Chinese) American literature, such as foregrounding "the porous boundary between national literatures" and "the cross-fertilizations of various literary traditions brought in by immigrants from different countries," as well as challenging "the Anglo-centric hegemony" in the US literary canon (Huang 279). This study shows Chang's work crisscrossing national borders and academic fields and should be included not only in Chinese and Taiwan literature, but also in Chinese diasporic and US immigrant literature.

In his insightful overview of Overseas Student literature published in 1994, the Taiwan American critic Sheng-mei Ma purports to look at this body of works in the context of its Chinese diasporic, post-colonial and US minority status. Ma observes how these writers react to the hostile US environment with "nostalgia for the lost homeland and disdain for the adopted land" in their writing (451). While his assessment may apply to several Sinophone writers, including early Chang Shi-kuo, yet viewing Chang's entire body of works up to 2014, I propose that Chang's writing is more complex in its seeming allegiance to a cultural China and that his trans-Pacific engagement exhibits a critical

distance from both the Chinese³ and the US homelands. Instead of a nostalgic homeward gaze towards Taiwan or China, Chang's fictional characters harbour both Chinese diasporic and Chinese American sensibility. Indeed, Chang himself is quite aware of his immigrant status despite his strong attachment to Taiwan. Citing Irish American assimilation as an example, he identifies the gradual transition of student immigrants into Americans and rejects the label of "Overseas Student literature." Instead, he contends that student immigrant literature will gradually become the literature of the adopted country (qtd. in Yao 195-96). Many of Chang's fictional characters seem often in transit, and their immigrant status is foregrounded by the difficult adjustments they have to make in becoming American.

Chang was already a well-known writer in Taiwan before coming to the US in 1966 for his doctorate in engineering at the University of California, Berkeley. A prolific and versatile writer, he published his first novel *Reverend Pi*, in addition to several essays and short stories, while still a sophomore and double E major at National Taiwan University. He continued to write fiction and nonfiction in Chinese and publish with renowned presses in Taiwan despite having lived in the US for more than four decades and being fluent in English. Although vastly popular among his Chinese readers and considered "the father of Taiwan's science fiction," Chang remains relatively obscure in Chinese American literary studies due to his choice of language – only a very limited portion of his writing has been translated into English. He has so far published 35 books including novels, short stories, and essays; however, only some short stories, the novel *Chess King* (1986), and the science fiction series *The City Trilogy* (2003) have been translated into English. *The City Trilogy*, whose first instalment was published in 1983 and completed in 1991, was translated into English and published by Columbia UP in 2003.⁴ Chang travels frequently to Taiwan consulting and lecturing, and many of his characters also lead trans-Pacific existences. Both Taiwan and the US feature frequently in his fiction as the backdrop for his characters' mundane struggles, whether they are undocumented workers striving for the American dream or gainfully employed professionals looking for soul mates outside marriage.

Chang's portrayal of US society reveals his critique of modern technology, although he himself is a highly respected computer scientist and long regarded as the father of science fiction in Taiwan. This perhaps should not come as a surprise, since one pivotal concern of science fiction revolves around the ethics of modern technology, which may have been invented as modern convenience

³ Hereon I use Chinese to designate pan-Chinese ethnicity, such as culture and language, rather than the political entity of People's Republic of China (PRC).

⁴ A brief excerpt of *The City Trilogy* can be found at Chang's website at the University of Pittsburgh: <http://people.cs.pitt.edu/~chang/fiction/statue.html>.

but often ends up dehumanising the people it is meant to serve. In Chang's fiction, US society is inflicted with technocracy, commercialism and the interpersonal alienation accompanying industrialisation and urbanisation. Compared to the near stereotyping of the mainstream US, his portrayal of Taiwan shows a wider spectrum. Through Chang's portrayal of Taiwan and the US, the reader can observe the themes of the obsession with China, the anxiety over patrilineal transmission, interracial conflicts and changing gender dynamics among the Chinese/Taiwan immigrants in the US.

Home Away from Home

In Chang's early portrayals of US and Taiwan/Chinese societies, his characters' US experience often suggests a critique of technocracy and commercialism, and the ensuing interpersonal alienation in the US; in contrast, his depiction of Taiwan seems more nuanced and sanguine. The discrepancy between such portrayals seems to corroborate with Ma's observation of Overseas Student writers' bourgeois consciousness and diasporic nostalgia. Since it is not practical for the overseas student-turned writers to live permanently in a Taiwan/Chinese society due to political instabilities and persecutions, a fictional universe is created in North America, where ideal Chinese/Taiwan traditions are carried on by the diasporic characters.

Citing Khachig Tölölyan's characterisation of a diaspora as "a culture and a collective identity that preserves elements of the homeland's language, or religious, social and cultural practice," Eleanor Ty observes also "a rhetoric of restoration and return or an organized commitment to maintaining relations with kin communities with the homeland" (Ty 98-99). Sinophone US literature by Taiwan/Chinese immigrants exhibits such centripetal pulls towards the homeland; however, the homeland in this case may not be one single political entity, meaning People's Republic of China (PRC), but "kin communities," such as Taiwan and other regions in Asia where the Chinese population forms a critical mass. In this way, the "China" in the Chinese diasporic imagination is more aptly conceived as a cultural China, with no definitive political affiliations with political parties in China or Taiwan but keen on preserving "elements of the homeland's language, or religious, social and cultural practice" (Tölölyan 649). In Chang's case, his main characters, whether in his sci-fi or more realist novels and short stories, are almost always ethnic Chinese, and hence the Taiwan and US settings provide the backdrop for the author to delineate the Chinese diasporic experience and contemplate the future of the Chinese people. In other words, whether set in Taiwan or the US, Chang's work exhibits an underlying theme--the Chinese intellectual's "obsession with China," a term first coined by C.T. Hsia in his book on modern Chinese literature (1961) and cited frequently ever since.

At the same time, although Chang expresses strong attachment to Taiwan, he is also quite aware of his immigrant status. Citing Irish American assimilation as an example, he sees the transition of student immigrants into Americans and rejects the label of “Overseas Student literature.” Instead, he contends that student immigrant literature will gradually become the literature of the adopted country (Yao 195-96). A cursory glance at Chang’s oeuvre so far shows his ambivalent attitude towards Taiwan and the US.

In Chang’s fiction, the US is invariably viewed from the perspective of a Taiwan immigrant. It is often highly modernised and industrialised, with alienated souls residing in urban areas. In contrast, Taiwan is more multilayered; it is depicted sometimes as a rural area transitioning from agriculture to industrialisation, other times as a developing metropolis where young people indulge themselves in rock-and-roll bands and late night clubbing, still other times as a bustling metropolis where lonely souls struggle to find their *raison d’être*.

The contrast between Taiwan and the US in Chang’s fiction seems to point to the nostalgic longing of the immigrant writer, whose attachment to his home country leads him to idealise it in his writing. On the one hand, this nostalgic attachment may be racial melancholia – to apply the theories of David Eng and Anne Cheng – resulting from partial acceptance into the US society. On the other, it may signal Chang’s transnational status; although he has lived in the US for almost half a century, he sees Taiwan as home and is constantly concerned about its future. Like the student immigrant⁵ character Hsiao-yü in his short story “Earth” (“地,” first published in Chinese in 1970, the English translation published in 1976), Chang grew up in Taiwan, received his BS and then came to California in the US for his doctorate. Hsiao-yü has to leave his home country for advanced study because the graduate programmes in 1960s’ Taiwan are not good enough, but he vows to return after completing his degree and help improve the quality of higher education in his home country, just as Chang has been doing. Hsiao-yü laments the loss of earthly connection (well-grounded and connected to the natural environment) to modern industrialisation in the US, implying that his life back in Taiwan was more “rooted” and hence worthwhile (“Earth” 192). He criticises the alienation of the industrialised US in a letter to his friend, the protagonist Li Ming, who stays in Taiwan after college:

American chickens... are bred and reared under artificial light. From the time they hatch to the time they’re dispatched – a matter of two to three weeks – they never see the sun. There is no better symbolization of

⁵ I borrow the phrase from Yin, who coined the phrase to describe immigrants who first came to the US on student visas and eventually settled down as immigrants.

America's modern technological civilization than these machine-cultured chickens. What is America after all? It is an assemblage of mass-produced cars, artificially bred chickens, and some millions of miles of super highways. How can people take root in such a place? Just think. How can a life spent locked up in a car, whirling the whole day along super highways – how can such a life be rooted? To grow roots, to free yourself from the sense of estrangement and loss, you must live close to the earth. (“Earth” 192)

In “Earth,” Hsiao-yü is only a minor character, but his view occupies a significant position in the short story. His letter comes in towards the end of the story to remind Li Ming of the importance of being rooted in the land where one feels attached. Not having mentioned any incidents or feelings of racial exclusion, Hsiao-yü's letter seems to suggest that his feelings of alienation from the US and attachment to Taiwan are due to “America's modern technological civilization” rather than anything else. In this way, his critique of the US could apply to any other “modern technological civilization,” including the Taiwan homeland.

The representation of the US as a place of interpersonal alienation is reinforced in another short story, “Red Boy” (“紅孩兒”), first published in 1972.⁶ The title character Kao Ch'iang (高強) is a PhD student in physics from Taiwan. Due to his involvement in the *Baodiao* Movement⁷ – a Chinese nationalist movement protesting US and Japanese imperialism – he is not only unable to complete his doctoral degree but is also physically lost at the end of the story. Ch'iang's disappearance prompts his elder brother Kao Wei, who is also a student immigrant, to write to the FBI for help. However, replies from the FBI indicate that the US authorities are not interested in helping to search

⁶ The English translation was first published in 1981 as “Red Child,” translated by Jane Parish Yang, in the journal *Chinese Pen*, published by the Taipei Center of International PEN, 51-71. The English version cited in this essay is under the title “Red Boy,” translated by Jeannette Faurot and published in 1983.

⁷ *Baodiao* is a shorthand expression for *Baowei Diaoyutai* (“defending *Diaoyutai*”). The *Diaoyutai* Islands (known as the Pinnacle Islands in English and the Senkaku Islands in Japanese) are a group of uninhabited islands in the East China Sea, southwest of Japan and Northeast of Taiwan. The claim of sovereignty over these islands has been under dispute since the 1960s. These islands, together with Okinawa, were under US occupation after World War II. Late in 1969, the US government reached an agreement with Japan to “return” the islands to Japan according to the Treaty of San Francisco. The announcement of the scheduled return immediately provoked protests in Chinese communities in both Asia and America, which escalated into the “*Baodiao* Movement.” The *Baodiao* movement in the US was first kindled by Chinese patriotism but due to its constituency it soon took a leftist turn and was smeared by the Nationalist government in Taiwan as a movement supported by Chinese Communists. Consequently, many overseas Taiwan students who participated in the movement were blacklisted by the Nationalist Government in Taiwan and forbidden to return to their home country.

for Ch'iang, who is just another missing person. After a five month wait, Wei receives the final official reply from the FBI:

The FBI has no way of ascertaining whether your brother is dead or alive. Because of limited manpower, the Bureau is no longer able to continue investigating the case of your brother's disappearance. Please accept our apologies. ("Red Boy" 231)

The impersonal tone of the FBI letters seems universal for any kind of bureaucracy. At the same time, the fact that Ch'iang goes missing in the US may also be a veiled critique of the loss of human connection in "America's modern technological civilization," which Hsiao-yü vents against vehemently in the short story "Earth."

Obsession with Taiwan/China?

If the US proves to be a place difficult for the Taiwan immigrants to get rooted, both physically and psychologically, Taiwan in contrast seems a natural place for sentimental attachment in Chang's early works. Following the Chinese intellectual tradition, Chang and his student immigrant characters obsess over China, or rather, in the words of critic S.M. Lau, Chang has an "obsession with Taiwan." Here China signifies Chinese people and culture rather than PRC or any political entities, and in Chang's case, his China is Taiwan. In an interview, Chang explicitly announces, "For me, Taiwan is China" (Yao 189).⁸ He has much investment in Taiwan as he sees it as a more hopeful demonstration of the future for the Chinese people.

The Taiwan/Chinese obsession in "Red Boy" manifests in Chang's adoption of a Chinese archetype, the Chinese deity Nazha, nicknamed Red Boy, often associated with youthful rebellion in Chinese folk beliefs. At the same time, the story of Nazha also exemplifies the theme of exile – "*lang-tz'u wen hsiieh*" (literature of exile), one of two major themes he detects in modern Taiwan fiction (Chang, "Realism in Taiwan Fiction" 36). In his essay on modern Taiwan fiction, Chang discusses the Western archetype of the prodigal son and explains how the Chinese tradition provides a revision of that archetype with the narrative of the son in permanent exile. Like Nazha, the student activist Kao Chi'ang rebels and goes against his parents' explicit wishes and consequently is never able to have a glorious homecoming. The tension between the desire to return and the practical impossibility of coming home finds its application in many works by Chinese diasporic writers.⁹

⁸ See also his essay collection *Let the Future Wait*.

⁹ Especially those who came to the US via Taiwan, such as Nieh Hua-ling, Yu Lihua, Liu Daren and others. One exception is Chen Ruo-xi, who was blacklisted by Taiwan's government for her "return" to China and banned from repatriation – unlike the aforementioned writers, she was

Another way of interpreting the title “Red Boy” points to the communist association. Red Boy could signify that the student activist Chi’ang is unfairly “colored” as a communist, which happens quite often in Taiwan politics, for anti-communism has been persistently indoctrinated among the Taiwan population ever since Chiang Kai-shek and his Nationalist troops retreated to Taiwan.¹⁰ In fact, the *Baodiao* Movement in which Chi’ang and the other Taiwan students are so involved was initially simply a nationalist movement by overseas Taiwan/Chinese students against US and Japanese imperialism. However, some students’ sympathetic attitude to socialist/communist ideals and their concern over China’s future worried the KMT (Nationalist) administration in Taiwan, which blacklisted many Taiwan students involved in the movement and refused to let them return to Taiwan, for several years, until Taiwan lifted Martial Law in 1987. In this way, Chi’ang’s disappearance at the end of the story may not be the FBI’s doing but the CIA’s fault, or some collaboration between the CIA and the KMT in Taiwan, as a tactic for the KMT to silence any potential political dissidents. Chi’ang therefore could be seen as a political martyr, who sacrifices himself in the hope of bringing dignity to the Chinese people, despite the lack of any immediate political effects. Another possible ending for Chi’ang is to “return” to mainland China to “serve the people” or go incognito in the US to advance socialist causes. Whatever Chi’ang’s ending may be, his character exhibits a strong commitment to social and political justice, a sentiment shared with those Chinese intellectuals with an “obsession with China.”

The Nazha allusion highlights the prominence of filial piety in Chinese culture but also envisions a way to rebel against that Chinese tradition. It implies the Chinese edict of renouncing filial piety for the greater good of one’s nation (*yixiaozuozhong*, 移孝作忠). In other words, one has to rebel against one’s parents in order to fulfil one’s loyalty to one’s nation; in this case, the nation is equated with the Chinese tradition. This paradox is inherent in the myth of Nazha. In Chinese folklore, Nazha the Red Boy was an impetuous mortal and caused his parents endless grief. To avoid implicating his parents in his mischief, he “killed himself” to pay back his debts to his parents but was then given a new life by a deity. The Chinese concept of filial piety considers children as indebted to their parents for having been born and raised, and children are expected to pay back the debt by both bringing honour to the parents and

actually born and raised in Taiwan, although she shared that “obsession with China”; but Chen was able to return to Taiwan in the 2000s when the political climate there became less anti-Communist and more tolerant of political dissidence.

¹⁰ It is interesting how it also happens in the US, not only during the McCarthy era (1950s) but also these days; whenever a public figure advocates redistribution of wealth, s/he is called a socialist or communist by the conservatives, as if that is a dirty word.

taking care of them when they are old.¹¹ The revived Nazha had the miraculous power to cure the sick and the crippled. In this way, Chi'ang's cutting ties with his family is like Nazha's suicidal parting from his parent; Chi'ang's martyrdom is his way to pay back his parents, as well as his way to bring cures – in the political sense – to his people. Whether it is effective or not is another matter.

The Nazha allusion in this way points to the intricacy of filial piety and nationalist loyalty, to having one's nation constantly as one's priority. As a matter of fact, Chang himself also participated in the *Baodiao* Movement during its inception and later wrote a novel *Anger of Yesterday* (*Zuori Zhi Nu*, 昨日之怒, 1979), paying tribute to his former “comrades,” with some of whom he had parted due to political differences. In this way, “Red Boy” could also be read as Chang's attempt to commemorate the sacrifice and compassion of the student activists. Although they may have been too impulsive and naïve, their enthusiasm and altruism were rare at a time and place – the US – when capitalist pursuits seemed the norm.

Male Hysteria and Anxiety over Patrilineal Transmission

Chang's “obsession with China” continues in his short story collection *Legends of Male Chauvinist Pigs* (1988). In the two short stories mentioned above, “Earth” and “Red Boy,” despite their US setting, there is little description of the Taiwan characters' interaction with non-Chinese, which may hint at the isolation and loneliness of international students, especially those from Asia. One cannot help wondering what life would be like for the student-turned Taiwan immigrants. Gainfully employed after receiving their advanced degrees, the student-turned immigrant characters do seem better assimilated or integrated into North American societies. Five of the seven stories in the collection are set in North America (four in the US and one in Canada), and each of the five stories features a male student-turned immigrant as protagonist. Although all of the male protagonists are now well-to-do professionals, their life seems lacking owing to loss of marital bliss. They either have extramarital affairs themselves or they suspect their wives of cheating on them. These characters' male hysteria hints at the dissolution of traditional Chinese gender division in North America due to immigration as well as more enlightened gender ideology in recent decades. The inability to sustain a traditional Chinese family in North America suggests a failure to ensure a profitable future for the Chinese diaspora, which reminds us of Sau-ling Wong's interpretation of racial emasculation manifested as male characters' anxiety over “paternity, progeny, [and] extinction” in David Wong Louie's short story collection *Pangs of Love* (“Chinese/Asian American

¹¹ Erin Khue Ninh notices the economic implication of filial piety and offers brilliant examinations of the power dynamic within Asian American families in her book *Ingratitude: The Debt-Bound Daughter in Asian American Literature*.

Men in the 1990s” 181). In this way, the male hysteria not only harks back to the “obsession with China” but also points to an affinity between Sinophone US literature and Chinese American literature written in English by US-born Chinese American writers.

In the story “Wife Killing” (*Shaqi*, “殺妻”, first published in 1988), the wife of the protagonist Wu Ziqiao, an accountant, does end up having an affair with her boss. The wife’s infidelity seems to hint at the racial emasculation of Taiwan/Chinese immigrants. Due to the changes in gender dynamics in the US, Taiwan couples find themselves having to adjust to new marital relationships. Taiwan immigrant women, out of necessity or due to newly found liberty to pursue their job opportunities, are often career women who end up higher achievers than their husbands. In “Wife Killing,” for instance, Wu has a graduate degree and helped his wife get a job in his company; however, his wife, who has only a college degree, moved up faster on the corporate ladder and soon became his superior, first at work and eventually at home too. Resenting his wife’s domineering attitude, Wu began to imagine or hallucinate ways of killing his wife, which he kept in a diary. The diary later becomes crucial evidence in court to convict him as a wife killer. Whether Wu did kill his wife or not is left ambiguous at the end of the story, for while being questioned by the prosecutor in the court, Wu sees among the audience a woman wearing a veil who resembles his supposedly killed wife. The ambiguous ending suggests that the wife may have plotted revenge by using a body double scheme to set Wu up.

The reversal of traditional gender roles seems to be the main focus of “Wife Killing.” Throughout the story, Wu is overwhelmed with feelings of oppression, due to his wife’s superior attitude and her suspected affair with their boss, who happens to be Caucasian. In this triangle Taiwan ethnicity appears effeminate in opposition to European ethnicity, which points to the power differential between people of Asian and European descent. One critic thus observes, the underlying theme of “Wife Killing” is not gender conflict but the agony and repression of Chinese men in the adopted country, and their difficulties in adapting to the new culture and society. In this way, the main concern in the *Male Chauvinist Pigs* collection is the future of Chinese men, and by extension, the future of the Chinese (Chen 12).¹²

This concern over the future of the Chinese often figures as anxiety over patrilineal transmission, which is also a recurrent theme in Asian American fiction written in English. In the sci-fi short stories “Dragon Seed” (*Wang Zi Cheng Long*, “望子成龍”), “Portrait of Jenny” (*Zhenni de Huaxiang*, “珍妮的畫像”), “Gold-Threaded Garment” (*Jinliyì*, “金縷衣”), “Biography of

¹² Even though Chang self-consciously labels his male protagonists male chauvinist pigs, one can certainly question why Chang employs men rather than women to symbolise the Chinese.

a Superman” (*Chaoren Liezhuan*, “超人列傳”), the male protagonists are anxious to produce their male heirs but are often met with frustration. This similarity between Sinophone US writing and Asian American fiction written in English not only points to porous boundaries between national literatures but also suggests new insights to be gained by incorporating Sinophone literature in (Asian) American studies. I propose an interethnic comparative approach to better understand the transition and assimilation of immigrants and their writing. In addition, the juxtaposition of the Chinese diasporic and the Asian American immigrant perspectives also pays attention to the transnational quality of both US and Chinese literatures, an important aspect of any literature ever since the age of globalisation, whenever one dates it.

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