

Translocating Identity in Sino-Indian Diasporic Literature: Kwai-Yun Li's *The Last Dragon Dance*

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Abstract

The Last Dragon Dance and Other Stories (2008) by Kwai-Yun Li is a collection of short stories that trace a triangular trajectory of geographical movement from origin in China, birth and growing up in India and then emigration to America. Kwai-Yun Li is a diasporic writer who just does not move from one country to another but also inhabits an intermediary home at some point of time in her life. This paper examines the themes of the twice-migrant Sino-South Asian diaspora and focuses on where we can situate writing that is Chinese in ethnicity, Indian in upbringing and North American in location. The stories in the collection are set among the Chinese community in Calcutta in the 1950s and 60s. In locating the stories in Calcutta, Kwai-Yun seems to displace the importance of the West and of the home country, a displacement it achieves by describing the tension, richness and complexity of Chinese life in India.

Abstract in Malay

The Last Dragon Dance and Other Stories (2008) tulisan Kwai-Yun Li ialah koleksi cerpen yang melakarkan pergerakan di tiga kawasan geografi yang melibatkan asal dari China, kelahiran dan pembesaran di India dan penghijrahan ke Amerika. Kwai-Yun Li ialah penulis genre diaspora yang bukan sahaja berpindah dari satu negara ke negara lain tetapi berkediaman di antara tempat-tempat tersebut di masa-masa tertentu dalam hidupnya. Artikel ini memeriksa tema penghijrahan dua kali diaspora Cina-Selatan Asia dan bertumpu kepada penulisan yang berjurusan etnik China, membesar di India dan berlokasi di Amerika Utara. Cerita dalam koleksi ini berlatar-belakangkan komuniti China di Calcutta dalam tahun lima-puluh dan enam-puluhan. Bila Kwai-Yun meletakkan lokasi ceritanya di Calcutta, dia menidakkan pentingnya Barat dan negara asal. Ini dicapai dengan menerangkan ketegangan, kekayaan dan keadaan kompleks kehidupan orang China di India.

Keywords

Sino-Indian, diaspora, identity, home, displacement, Calcutta

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Keywords in Malay

India-China, diaspora, identiti, kediaman, keterasingan, Calcutta

Notions of identity are important for the postcolonial subject. Nations are no longer rigid, demarcated by boundaries alone. They have become much more fluid. As Deborah Madsen and Riemenschneider note in *Diasporic Histories: Cultural Archives of Chinese Transnationalism*:

It is no longer feasible to view the globe as divisible into discrete, territorial nation-states with homogeneous populations and political sovereignty more or less exclusively controlled by representative governments. Instead, we witness both large-scale transnational flows of capital, goods and people that produce structures of power that are located outside of and in parallel with the regulatory state.... (1)

According to popular Chinese legend the first Chinese settler in Calcutta was a sailor named Acchi (Atchew) who petitioned the then Governor-General of Bengal, Warren Hastings in 1778, asking for land to set up a commercial enterprise and thereby settle in Bengal. Legend further has it that Warren Hastings allowed him to take possession of as much land as he could cover on horseback in the course of one morning's ride. Taking full advantage of this offer, Acchi acquired a large area of land at Budge Budge, near Calcutta, where he set up a sugar mill. He then brought in workers from China to work at this mill. These Chinese workers formed the first Chinese settlement in Calcutta. The growing number of Chinese in Calcutta slowly began specialising in different professions, depending on their communities: the Hakkas in shoemaking and tanning, the Cantonese in carpentry and the Hupei in dentistry and paper-flower making. Those from Shanghai gained prominence as launderers, while the Hakkas and the Cantonese branched out later into the restaurant business.

In the 1950s and 1960s, Calcutta's Chinatown (the only one in India) flourished with big Chinese restaurants, tea houses, Chinese dentists, shoemakers and other establishments. Middle-class Calcuttans seldom came into direct contact with the Chinese – their only contact with them would be as owners of restaurants and laundries and as shoemakers and stylists in beauty parlours. Even today, Tangra, Chinatown in Kolkata is famous for its Chinese restaurants.

An event of historical significance for the Chinese in Calcutta was the India-China war of 1962. The Chinese in India, many of whom had never even visited China, were treated shabbily by the Indian government; the citizenship of many of them were revoked and these Chinese men and women were forced to live as stateless subjects, others were put into camps in western India. Tales

of police brutality became part of the collective consciousness of the Chinese in India. Many of the Chinese businesses were shut down and incidents of Chinese-owned establishments attacked by violent mobs became common. This resulted in the movement of most Chinese people away from Calcutta. Due to this steady outflow, the number of people of Chinese origin in Calcutta have reduced greatly to about 5,000 from a high of about 12,000-15,000 in the 1950s and 1960s.

The Last Dragon Dance: Chinatown Stories (also published as *The Palm Leaf Fan and Other Stories* by Tsar Publications) by Chinese-Indian writer Kwai-Yun Li is a collection of short stories that trace a triangular path of movement from origin in China, birth and growing up in India and then emigration to North America. Kwai-Yun Li, therefore, is an example of a diasporic writer who just does not move from one country to another but also inhabits an intermediary home at some point of time in her life. This paper will examine the themes of the twice-migrant Chinese South Asian diaspora and will focus on where we can situate writing that is Chinese in ethnicity, Indian in upbringing and North American in location.

Kwai-Yun Li's parents emigrated to a small lane in Calcutta called Chattawalla Gali. The short stories in this collection depict the marginalised Chinese community that Kwai-Yun Li grew up in. Now settled in Canada, she tells in this collection stories that reveal her early years in India. In an interview given to *The Statesman*, Kolkata (March 2, 2008), Kwai-Yun says, "I look at it as more of an attempt to tell 'my story' and to share it with people who might be interested. The stories do come out of my own experiences, but writing is a creative exercise and it invariably transforms lived experience into something more than a mere record of events."

The stories in the collection are set among the Chinese community in Calcutta in the 1950s and 1960s. In locating the stories in Calcutta, Kwai-Yun seems to displace the importance of the West and of the home country, a displacement she achieves by describing the tension, richness and complexity of Chinese life in India. *The Last Dragon Dance: Chinatown Stories* thus definitely holds on to a Chinese-Indo identity. The short stories depict the complexity, contradictoriness and tensions in the life as well as the experience of love experienced by the Chinese protagonists who have lived in India and the West.

In these short stories Kwai-Yun vividly evokes the atmosphere of Calcutta, the sultry summers, the humidity, the flooding of Calcutta's streets during the monsoons, the crowded roads of central Calcutta, the existence side by side of wealth and squalor and poverty in the lower middleclass neighbourhoods, the insecurities of 1962 and its aftermath, among many other things. In the first story of the collection "The Palm Leaf Fan," for instance, she describes life in Calcutta thus:

The summer of 1942 was hot and dry; the monsoon was late in coming, Calcuttans chose between sleepless nights indoors, drenched in sweat, and sleepless nights on rooftops and verandas, plagued by mosquitoes and flies. (2)

The story begins with an explicit reference to the Chinese community in Calcutta – “When the Hakka Chinese migrated to Calcutta, many of them settled into the shoe-making and leather-making businesses” (1). In “Rally at the Ochterlony Monument,” Li masterfully describes the scene after a monsoon:

Two buses stood silent and submerged to the bumpers, their exhaust pipes clogged with mud and slime. Two girls in white blouses, navy ties and starched navy skirts sat on a rickshaw. The rickshaw-puller picked his way slowly through the centre of the road. The urchins splashed the rickshaw with water as it went past. The schoolgirls giggled. The rickshaw-puller cursed. (64)

The city features prominently again and again in the stories as Li describes the buildings, streets, houses of Chinatown:

As we reached closer to Chinatown, the streets narrowed. The crumbling houses, built in the late 1800s and early 1900s, had peeling and cracked concrete exteriors and worm-eaten wooden balcony railings bleached grey by the sun. (64)

The protagonist in most of the stories is often a young woman. In the title story, the narrator's mother is described thus: “She spent most of her time in the kitchen, cooking for Father and any of his friends who happened to drop by.... I don't remember her ever raising her voice. She seemed to be always looking at some place we could not see and listening to something we could not hear” (1). This description initiates the first of many accounts of the uncomplaining stoicism and quietness with which Kwai's female protagonists bear the ravages of fortune. As Jade, the heroine of the only story set partly outside Calcutta (in Canada) says, “We have managed so far. We will have to manage” (103).

Laurence J. Ma and Carolyn Cartier point out in *The Chinese Diaspora: Space, Place, Mobility, and Identity* that multiple migrations have ensured that “the Chinese mainland is no longer the sole homeland of the Chinese abroad... [this] has expanded the areal extent of the Chinese diaspora, created new paths of transnational circulation of people and capital and contributed to the diaspora's social heterogeneity” (19.) This is seen vividly in the way the Chinese in Calcutta, as depicted by Kwai Yun Li in her stories, have not just made Calcutta their home, but have carved out a hybrid Sino-Indian identity.

Avtar Brah in *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* argues that “the identity of the diasporic imagined community is far from fixed or pre-given. It is constituted within the crucible of the materiality of everyday life; in the everyday stories we tell ourselves individually or collectively” (183.) Gupta and Ferguson, for their part, point out that Benedict Anderson’s (1983) idea of “imagined communities” assume a new meaning in the context of immigrants:

[It] becomes most visible how imagined communities... come to be attached to imagined places, as displaced people cluster around remembered or imagined homelands, places, or communities in a world that seems increasingly to deny such firm territorialized anchors in their actuality.... Remembered places have often served as symbolic anchors of community for dispersed people. This has long been true of immigrants, who... use memory of place to construct imaginatively their new lived world. (10-11)

The Chinese presence in Calcutta, as Kwai Yun Li presents it and as it is actually too, is evidence of the way in which an immigrant community has recreated the country of their origin in the land that they have migrated to. Calcutta and its streets and roads form part of the familiar landscape in these stories. There are references to Kidderpore, Bentinck Road, Bow Bazar Street, New Market, Chowringhee, Park Street, Sun Yat Sen Street, Chattawalla Gully among others, roads and streets that a local would identify as being populated by the Chinese in Calcutta. In “Rally at Ochterlony Monument,” the narrator goes into details of Chinese immigration to India:

Mother had emigrated from China in the 1920s with a passport from the Nationalist government. In 1950, the Indian government recognized the Chinese Communist government as the representative of China. (66)

The condition of the Chinese, their statelessness, their existence in a state of uncertainty in the light of the events that had unfolded are vividly narrated in Li’s stories. The child narrator in the story refers to historical events and incidents that are so much a part of the psyche of the Chinese in Calcutta:

Since the Nationalist government in Taiwan did not exist for the Indian government, India issued Stateless Alien Visas for all the holders of Chinese Nationalist passports. Mother and I became stateless aliens. (66)

Even as the stories reveal the everyday locales of Chinese-South Asian identity, the importance of place is sketched out differently. Migratory identity is influenced by regional difference as much as by other more obvious determinants such as nationality, class, history, politics, biography and culture.

The Indian response to the Chinese presence is mediated through the political relationship between China and India. After the 1962 face off, “the Indian government deported sixty Chinese families from Calcutta and interned another fifty. Police came in the night and shipped the interned families to Deoli, in Rajasthan, where the Indian government had set up a concentration camp” (60-61). Life changes for the Chinese as they return to Calcutta from the concentration camps with almost nothing. Their businesses sold off, many go away to China. The ones who remain in Calcutta begin life anew.

Although the longest story in *The Last Dragon Dance*, “Jade,” is based in Canada, the other stories in the collection have Calcutta as their setting. James Clifford argues in *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* that “the centering of diasporas around an axis of origin and return overrides the specific local interactions (identifications and ruptures, both constructive and defensive) necessary for the maintenance of diasporic social forms” (269). In its focus on the local in the Indian middle space, the stories seem to displace the importance of the West and of the home country, a displacement it achieves by charting the tension, richness and intricacies of Chinese life in Calcutta. *The Last Dragon Dance* thus resolutely holds on to a Chinese-Indian identity.

Arjun Appadurai argues that migratory groups often mythologise the homeland: “Safe from the depredations of their home states, diasporic communities become doubly loyal to their nations of origin and thus ambivalent about their loyalties to [the host nation]” (413). In this case, however, what one notices is that home here is not China in spite of the fact that the Chinese in Calcutta do try to recreate China in their lifestyle. Home, here is Calcutta, India.

In *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois writes of the “double consciousness” that plagues the minds of African-Americans living in the southern United States and says, “It is a strange thing, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others.... One ever feels his twoness – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body....” (102.) This tension between identities is one that is experienced by minority communities throughout postcolonial societies all over the world. Kwai-Yun Li resembles many South Asians who, as Parminder Bhachu puts it in *Twice Born Migrants*, are “twice, thrice, and quadruple migrants” (224).

The stories reveal a hybrid identity for its Chinese characters in the way Indian food, language, relationships and Hindi cinema are intermingled in the stories. Thus the short stories suggest a Sino-Indian identity for its author and its characters. In spite of the fact that even when the Chinese who populate Li’s stories immigrate to the West they are unable to shake off the Indian identity that they had acquired till then. Kwai-Yun Li’s short stories therefore reveal the subtle intricacies of nationality.

The stories in *The Last Dragon Dance* seek to establish a sense of oneness with everything that is Indian. One area where this is achieved is in the way food and language is used. This is evident from the first paragraph of the title story. The narrator's father is "always drinking chai" with friends (1). Kwai-Yun does not use the English tea or the Chinese word for tea. Neither does she italicise "chai," showing the naturalisation of Indian words in the Sino-Indian imagination as well as the naturalisation of Indian food in the Sino-Indian diet. The mother drinks a "glass of lassi" (2). In the story "Jade," Raji, the foreman says "Juldi" and no explanation or meaning is provided.

The fragility of Chinese-Indian identity foreshadows the move to Canada, seemingly situating the West as a space for diasporic rehabilitation. As mentioned earlier, the longest story in the collection, "Jade," is set in Canada. Despite its Canadian location, India never leaves the short story, revealing its hold over the author's Chinese-Indian imagination. "Jade" consists of a series of vignettes that reveal the stifling nature of the titular protagonist's life, trapped as she is in a menial job and a third pregnancy. Much of the narrative is set in India in flashback, thereby revealing that ties with India cannot be severed despite all the hostility that might have driven many of the Chinese out of India.

Jade's life in the India section is revealed through fantasies of Bollywood. Critics have suggested that Bollywood and Hindi cinema helps create a pristine and unsullied India in the imagination of its diaspora. As Rajinder Kumar Dudrah points out in *Bollywood: Sociology Goes to the Movies*, "Bollywood represents an ideal India in the collective imagination, not the real, problematised nation but the *shared* cultural fantasy of an idealized India" (63). Jade's fantasies of Bollywood romances are a contrast with her own claustrophobic life. She has an arranged marriage with a much older man, is forced to live in a large overcrowded home with his family in Canada and endures one pregnancy after another. Bollywood is also that which roots Jade to India, though the idea of India represented by Bollywood is a highly romanticised one. The story ends with Jade and her husband finally deciding to move out of the joint family to a small apartment of their own. As Jade anticipates the birth of her third child, she tells herself, "We will manage when the child arrives. We have to manage. We have managed so far. We will have to manage" (103). The repeated use of the word "manage" seems to point at the failure of the diasporic dream of upward mobility. That Jade is expecting a child gives the story another twist. A child is usually the symbol of hope. However, both of Jade's children are born with some sort of physical defect. Peony was a c-section baby and, during the delivery, the doctor "nicked" her, leaving her with a "scarred cheek." (86). Victor has "a flat area where his right ear should be" (86-87). The disfigurement of Peony and Victor seems to imply that children born out of the traumatic experience of dual migration can be scarred.

The stories following “Jade” are all set in India. The path of migration – the move from periphery to the centre and the return – is subverted through the very structure of the stories that come back to India. It is important to note that it is the South Asian middle space, not the original Chinese “motherland” or the diasporic West, which is valorised here. The celebration of return, even if it is to the Indian middle space, may reveal how all diasporas, even those that disturb dominant paradigms, often yield normative models of migration.

It is as if *The Last Dance Dragon* comes back to India despite a journey to Canada, resolutely refusing to give up claims to an Indian identity, no matter how delicate that identity may be. A counterpoint to the mutual mistrust with which the Chinese and the Indians treat each other in “Rally at the Ochterlony Monument” is “Babu,” an account of the relationship between a young Chinese girl and a tea-stall helper who lives on the third-floor landing of her building.

The stories are not chronologically arranged, and move back and forth in memory and speak in a voice that is not cluttered by either historical or political events. Kwai-Yun’s nuanced exploration of migration, exile, feminism, democracy, secularism, nationalism, language politics and parochialism is remarkable. The stories explore family relationships and how the Chinese have adapted to life in Calcutta. In “Shamila,” for example, the narrator watches as her classmate, who does not care to do well in school, pins her hopes on getting married. In another, the characters celebrate the Chinese New Year with the dragon dance. The cultural flavour and nuances make the stories compelling reading:

Two men held the dragon head high on bamboo poles, following a third man wearing a pink, smiling mask and a red kung-fu robe, who ran ahead with a basketball-sized bamboo globe covered with red and gold cloth. Red ribbons tied to the ball fluttered as the man waved the ball under the dragon’s nose. The dragon’s head dipped and soared, following the ball, its body undulating behind it, up and down, side to side, as though riding the waves of the sea. (54)

Li’s stories explore the challenges the Chinese minority face in a place where the majority are Indian. The most powerful example of this experience is “Last Dragon Dance in Chinatown,” in which Chinese-Indians victimised by Indian authorities as a result of Chairman Mao’s Communist agenda and the Chinese excursion into Tibet are presented. The story is told from the perspective of a child, heightening the sensitivity of the subject, “One day, I found a copy of the *People’s Monthly* under a chair in the courtyard. Mom told me to throw it away, for we might get into trouble with the police. But I hid the magazine under my bed” (56-57). The story addresses divisive conflicts. The young narrator in the story fights with her friend Raindrop, whose father admires Chairman Mao. Raindrop exclaims, “Of course he is nice. He is nicer

than Chiang Kai Shek. Father said Chairman Mao is a good man.” “My brother says they are both wicked men,” I said. “Lots and lots and lots of people died because Mao and Chiang fought and fought and fought” (51). While children are trying to sort out these realities for themselves, the Indian government imprisons Maoist sympathisers, as tensions between the Maoist regime and India escalate.

Over the next few months, the Indian government deported numerous Chinese whom they suspected as Communist sympathizers. The Chinese government sent two passenger ships up the Hooghly and moored them at the International Wharf. By the end of 1956, over a thousand Chinese had left Calcutta. The following year, the Chinese New Year parade was much smaller and there was no dragon dance. (56)

The light-hearted, humorous stories are equally evocative. In the delightful story “Uncle Worry,” we meet Uncle Chien, who “worries when his eldest daughter, Pi Moi, forgets to call him. He worries that she and her husband, Mohamed, have had a falling out. He worries when Pi Moi calls...” (72). It is small touches like these that draw us more fully into the life of the Chinese communities in Calcutta.

According to Lynn Pan, “it takes one generation to lose China.” “How many,” she asks “does it take to gain America?” (288). Extending this to a South Asian context, the Sino-Indian presence suggests that although the Chinese may never “gain” India, they can never lose it either as is the fate of Jade. Significantly, when Jade’s aunt calls her from Mississauga, she tells Jade that “Ku-Ku went to Calcutta for the Chinese New Year celebration” (80). In her research on Chinese-Indians in Toronto, Oxfeld comments on being “struck by the persistence of links with the ‘home’ community in India.” The construction of India as home enables Chinese-Indians to find an Indian space for themselves in Canada (*Blood, Sweat and Mahjong* 29). If return is a central trope of diaspora, here the diasporics go home to India, not China.

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