

## The Célestin Prophecy: Ha Jin's "After Cowboy Chicken Came to Town," Lawrence Chua's *Gold by the Inch*, and the Limits of Exoticism

Roderick B. Overaa<sup>1</sup>  
East Tennessee State University, USA

### Abstract

Increasingly, postcolonial scholars are recognising that the discipline must move beyond the mere critique of European imperialism, and that the future lies, in part, in seeking solutions to the conflicts and injustices that remain the persistent legacy of the colonial era. A concurrent trend in literature departments has been the push to incorporate and encourage comparative methodologies. This essay brings into conversation two works of Asian American fiction that address the problematics of transnational encounter in the age of globalisation. In both Ha Jin's "After Cowboy Chicken Came to Town" and Lawrence Chua's *Gold by the Inch* the authors explore familiar postcolonial themes: Western economic and cultural hegemony, cultural imperialism, the legacy of the Euro-American colonial era – yet they do so from a very particular (and increasingly common) perspective that as yet has not been sufficiently addressed by postcolonial scholars. Reading these texts through the lens of Roger Célestin's theorisation of the limits of traditional literary exoticism in *From Cannibals to Radicals*, this essay calls for a re-evaluation, not merely of our understanding of literary exoticism, nor merely of our understanding of the transpacific as a political imaginary, but also of our long-held conceptions of national literature and comparative scholarship.

### Keywords

Exoticism, Ha Jin, Lawrence Chua, cosmopolitan literature, postcolonial, Asian American literature

### Introduction

Increasingly, postcolonial scholars are recognising that the discipline must move beyond the mere critique of European imperialism, and that the future lies, in part, in seeking solutions to the conflicts and injustices that remain the persistent legacy of the colonial era. A concurrent trend in literature

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Roderick B. Overaa holds a M.F.A. in Creative Writing and a Ph.D. in English from the University of Washington, USA. His dissertation, *Eastern Religion and the Dilemmas of the Modern*, explores the influence of Asian religion and philosophy on 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century Anglo-American writers. His creative work has appeared in such publications as *Silk Road*, *Zahir*, *Kyoto Journal* and *Hiragana Times*. He currently teaches American and British literature at East Tennessee State University.

departments has been the push to incorporate and encourage comparative methodologies. In his essay on the current state of comparative literature, Haun Saussy tells us that nowadays, “The ‘transnational’ dimension of literature and culture is universally recognized,” and that “We may all be comparatists now – and for good reason” (Saussy 3-4). This broader understanding of literature is due in part to the increased attention paid to texts whose authors write across borders, taking the cross-cultural or transnational encounter as their subject and complicating or challenging our assumptions about what has heretofore been called “national literature.” This essay brings into conversation two works of Asian American fiction that address the problematics of transnational encounter in the age of globalisation. In both Ha Jin’s “After Cowboy Chicken Came to Town” and Lawrence Chua’s *Gold by the Inch* the authors explore familiar postcolonial themes: Western economic and cultural hegemony, cultural imperialism, the legacy of the Euro-American colonial era – yet they do so from a very particular (and increasingly common) perspective that as yet has not been sufficiently explored by postcolonial scholars. Reading these texts with Roger Célestin’s theorisation of the limits of traditional literary exoticism in *From Cannibals to Radicals* foremost in mind, I will demonstrate that a broader conception of what it means to do comparative work offers useful tools for postcolonial scholars working with diasporic literatures written in English. The transnational turn in literary studies demands a comparative framework that is not only capable of explicating the complexities inherent in the cross-cultural encounter of the twenty-first century, but which is concurrently politically viable in a globalised (as opposed to intranational) context. This essay thus calls for a re-evaluation, not merely of our understanding of literary exoticism, nor merely of our understanding of the transpacific as a political imaginary, but also of our long-held conceptions of national literature and comparative scholarship.

### **Comparative Methodology and National Literature**

Especially since the late eighteenth century, literature has been closely associated with the nation-state. In the nineteenth century, American authors such as Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman worked actively toward the creation of a “national literature” that could be distinguished from the literature of Europe (and, in particular, England), a discursive move that to varying degrees and in various ways became increasingly common in both established and emerging nation-states around the world.<sup>2</sup> In the early twentieth century, European and American modernists sought to reclaim literature from its *de facto* associations with nationalism, imperialism and the colonial enterprise – only to see their

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<sup>2</sup> I am not suggesting that the concept of “national literature” begins with the American Transcendentalists; the example is provided as a well-known and generally accepted instance of the phenomenon. Similarly, the outline that follows should be taken as broadly descriptive rather than definitive with respect to modernism and contemporary literature.

works canonised and set on library shelves next to the works of the predecessors from whom they had wished to distance themselves. In recent decades, the modernists have been widely and roundly criticised for their attempts to salvage secular humanism and for their emphasis on the universality of human experience. In today's intellectual climate, wherein all metanarratives are suspect as conduits of nationalist rhetoric, any literary nod toward universalism is suspect. Thus the idea that literature and the nation-state are irrevocably linked, one in service of the other, has become even more deeply entrenched over the past century – even as writers have continuously challenged this assumption in their work.

Given the ascendancy of Hegelian models of nation-state formation over the last century, it's not difficult to understand the rationale behind this assumption. Gregory Jusdanis tells us that "Literature was the first art to be mass-produced and put in the service of nationalism," because literature "enables individuals to experience a heightened sense of solidarity, and eventually national unity, before, as well as after, the achievement of territorial and political integration" (163, 161). Of course, this phenomenon is still very much evident today. In her essay on the possibility of creating a national identity through literature in Nigeria, Joanna Sullivan writes: "In their broadest definition, national literatures demonstrate what is unique and special about one nation to its own citizens and concomitantly to the outside world" (74). The problem in Nigeria, she asserts, is that of how to find or create this unity from diversity in a country with over two hundred ethnic groups, each with its own language and customs. Such examples bring sharply into focus the artificial, constructed nature of national identities theorised by scholars such as Benedict Anderson and Etienne Balibar by drawing attention to the potential roles of language and literature in creating and perpetuating a national mythos.<sup>3</sup>

The recent transnational turn in literature studies forces us to reconsider our understanding of national literature, including its function in the age of globalisation. Increasingly, critics are recognising that literature is – and has always been – a matrix of cultural exchanges, borrowings, appropriations and contestations that transcends political boundaries. A moment's reflection makes it obvious that an English, Jamaican, or Japanese writer cannot so much as allude to Plato, Rumi, or the *Bhagavad Gita* in a work of literature without ushering in a host of culturally specific assumptive, interpretive and temporal issues that complicate the very idea of a self-contained national literature. Further issues arise when a given work of literature is read outside the context of its national origin (whether in its original language or in translation), thereby opening itself to reinterpretation, appropriation and contestation.

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<sup>3</sup> See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (New York: Verso, 1991) and Etienne Balibar, "The Nation Form: History and Ideology," *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities*, Eds. Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein (New York: Verso, 1991): 86-105.

These critical problems have been the subject of much debate over the past two decades, the general thrust of which has been a push toward a broader, more cosmopolitan conception of literature. For instance, the 1993 Bernheimer Report to the American Comparative Literature Association (ACLA), with its somewhat hazy “recommendation to broaden the field of inquiry,” generated a flurry of responses that, while differing on specific points, generally advocate greater attention to non-Euro-American literatures and awareness of the potential ideological pitfalls inherent in processes of Western cultural production (Bernheimer 43).<sup>4</sup> In *The World Republic of Letters*, Pascale Casanova posits a “literature-world,” a literary universe relatively independent of the everyday world and its political divisions, whose boundaries and operational laws are not reducible to those of ordinary political space” (xii). Similarly, the elliptical model proposed by David Damrosch in his attempt to rehabilitate Goethe’s *Weltliteratur* in *What is World Literature?* is grounded in the concept of a cultural “double refraction” that occurs between the “source and host cultures” (283). In her reappraisal of the field of comparative literature and its potentialities, Gayatri Spivak observes that “the sources of literary agency have expanded beyond the old European national literatures,” an assessment that, while optimistic in outlook, poses significant challenges to literature departments whose primary task remains the deconstruction of nationalist discourse and its effects (Spivak 6). The common denominators in these studies are a push toward broader inclusivity in the study of literature, an emphasis on comparative methodology and a move away from the study of national literatures as self-contained phenomena.

To the extent to which they offer writers around the world greater literary agency and acknowledge the rich diversity of cultures and literary traditions, these are welcome developments. I would argue, however, that this enthusiastic rush to embrace underrepresented, non-western, or third-world literatures obscures a more fundamental issue that, though largely overlooked by comparatists hoping to salvage and refit their discipline, has become increasingly urgent. Today it is not so much which literatures are being compared that is in need of adjustment; it is the very category of comparison itself. In rushing from starboard to port, the comparatists have succeeded only in tilting the ship in the opposite direction. Simply paying greater attention to a wider variety of national literatures is not enough; the categories are shifting; the very notion of a national literature (whether established, incipient, or developing) is increasingly suspect.

These assertions can be brought into sharper focus by considering the case of diasporic literature – such as that of the Asian Diaspora. In his study of

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<sup>4</sup> For a well-rounded introduction to these issues, see *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism*, Ed. Charles Bernheimer (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1995).

exotic literature, *From Cannibals to Radicals*, Roger Célestin envisions what he calls “the limits of exoticism,” a scenario in which “the confrontation of the Same with the Other at Home, with the exotic in the Center, would result in an intensified awareness of difference. A new exoticism would make its appearance: a paradoxical exoticism without travel, without temporal or geographical distance, without representation, since the exotic would be here and now” (221-22). In this model, the diasporic subject, writing from yet in tension with the centre of Western cultural production, negotiates a discursive space for his or her voice that blurs formerly clear-cut distinctions between Self and Other, familiar and exotic, Home and Outside, centre and periphery:

exoticism becomes, in my view, the means for certain writers to negotiate (discursive) position and (subjective ) space vis-à-vis this culture and vis-à-vis the exotic simultaneously. I propose to consider exoticism not in its traditional usage – a lyrical celebration of things tropical or Oriental... – but, instead, as the means for the subject of a powerful, dominant culture to *counter* that culture in the very process of *returning* to it. (3, Célestin’s emphasis)

According to Célestin, the limits of exoticism are reached when the authors of such counterdiscourses are no longer the Flauberts, Maughams or Huxleys returning to Europe or America from exotic excursions abroad, but rather the Achebes, Naipauls and Kincaids – writers whose work seeks to open up a liminal discursive space between the homeland and the adopted nation, a space that shatters the dichotomous models of traditional exoticism and in which “difference itself must be located along different boundaries” than those of the nation-state (223).<sup>5</sup> It is with this formulation in mind that I turn to the analyses of my fictional examples.

### **Ha Jin, Social Satire and the Migrant Writer**

When a writer of the Asian Diaspora first decides to take up pen or keyboard, he or she is immediately confronted with a number of complex decisions: What language shall I write in, that of my homeland, or that of my adopted nation? For whom will I write, those “back home” or for those here, closer, perhaps, to the centre of Western cultural production? Is a Western genre such as the novel or short story best suited to my creative, intellectual and economic goals? Are any of these goals in conflict?

These are questions upon which Chinese-American writer Ha Jin (born Jīn Xuěfēi) has deliberated throughout his literary career – at times with a

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<sup>5</sup> As should become clear in what follows, the kind of comparative work that I am advocating in this essay also yields productive new ways of reading “traditional” works of exoticism such as those written by the first three authors mentioned above.

troubled conscience. As a writer caught in the interstices between old and new homelands, Jin is acutely aware of the ambiguities inherent in the authorial position he inhabits. In his recent book, *The Writer as Migrant*, Jin explores these ambiguities with critical depth and insightful personal reflection. A Chinese national, Jin was on scholarship in the U.S. when the 1989 Tiananmen Square incident in Beijing prompted him to seek American citizenship. At the outset of his literary career in the U.S., he says, “I viewed myself as a Chinese writer who would write in English on behalf of the downtrodden Chinese. I was unaware of the complexity and infeasibility of the position I had adopted, especially for a person in my situation” (*Writer* 3-4). Soon, Jin reports, he began having serious “doubts about my claim as a spokesman for the downtrodden Chinese. Gradually, I came to see the silliness of that ambition” (27). Over the years, Jin also began to feel out of touch with contemporary China, eventually deciding that he could no longer write in good faith about a homeland that in just over a decade had transformed itself into a place with which he was no longer familiar. Aptly citing an episode from Homer’s *Odyssey*, Jin reflects that “the truth of the relationship between oneself and one’s native land after a long absence from it [is that] one cannot return to the same place as the same person” (66). “In retrospect,” he writes, “I can see that my decision to leave contemporary China in my writing is a way to negate the role of the spokesperson I used to envision for myself. I must learn to stand alone, as a writer” (28). What is fascinating about Jin’s account in *The Writer as Migrant* is that it depicts the author’s attempts to negotiate a liminal space between the old and new homelands, to make a conscious transition from self-appointed “tribal spokesperson” to an authorial position that is essentially “rootless and entirely mobile,” a position that blurs the distinctions between Home and Outside, Centre and Periphery, Self and Other (4, 22). It is the narrative of a writer fulfilling Célestin’s prophecy of “the limits of exoticism... the exotic in the Center” (Célestin 221).

The ambiguities that Jin wrestles with in *The Writer as Migrant* are conspicuously evident in his award-winning short story “After Cowboy Chicken Came to Town.”<sup>6</sup> When the story first appeared in *Triquarterly* in 2001, Jin had been writing poetry and fiction about China, in English, for a decade, with increasing critical success. The story describes the tensions that arise when an American fried chicken restaurant called “Cowboy Chicken” opens in the fictional town of Muji City. As Jin’s characters wrestle with the socio-economic impact of capitalist expansion into Mainland China, they are forced to negotiate their identities in terms of the nationalist rhetoric that the American company has deployed in order to exploit and discipline the local labour force – a rhetoric

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<sup>6</sup> The story was selected for the *Best American Short Stories 2001* anthology, and also appeared in Jin’s collection of short stories, *The Bridegroom* the same year.

that, even as it repositions national belonging, grounding it in socio-economic ideology – simultaneously perpetuates racialised contexts. Jin’s text is particularly useful for foregrounding the issues with which this essay is concerned. First, it deals specifically and explicitly with the issues of identity that arise from transnational encounter in the postcolonial era. Second, the story depicts a shifting conception of the transpacific imaginary, emphasising the need to re-examine our assumptions about national literatures in the twenty-first century. Finally, although the text ostensibly appears to be a straightforward critique of cultural imperialism and Western cultural hegemony in the postcolonial tradition, the particular ways in which Jin appropriates and redeploys the genres of exoticism and satire raise significant questions about his ambiguous authorial position and intended audience that complicate the text considerably – to the point where such a “straight” reading becomes hopelessly problematic.

Jin’s treatment of national identity in “After Cowboy Chicken Came to Town” relies upon a set of simple oppositional binaries (East/West, Self/Other, communist/capitalist) familiar to readers of the Euro-American exotic fiction of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. At first, the new employees of Cowboy Chicken are encouraged to conform to the unfamiliar capitalist policies of the company, checking their own deeply-rooted communist and Confucian values at the door when they come to work.<sup>7</sup> “We must learn from the Americans,” a city official declares at the ribbon-cutting ceremony for the new restaurant (189). When a customer demands a refund for a meal he deems sub-par, the American owner of the franchise, Mr. Shapiro, tells his employees that they “ought to follow the American way of doing business – you must try to satisfy your customers,” citing the well-worn American dictum, “The customer is always right” (185). When the employees discover that the Chinese manager Peter Jiao secretly burns leftover chicken each evening instead of donating it to the poor or letting the employees take it home, Peter attempts to assuage their anger by saying, “This is the American way of doing business” (217). To better fit into their new work environment and increase their opportunities for advancement, the employees attempt to assimilate into the capitalist culture of their company. The protagonist Hongwen and his co-workers begin “learning English more diligently” (212). Chinese manager Peihai Jiao changes his name to Peter, perms his hair to make it curly, wears Western business attire, and uses his wages to build a three-story “Victorian” house with marble fireplaces (188, 211). Peter’s flawless English, “Americanized” image, and Western-style home testify to his attempt to approximate the American middle-class norms he became familiar with while at an American university.

<sup>7</sup> My intention here is not to conflate communism (a political ideology with undeniable Western origins) with Confucian thought, but rather to emphasise the profound influence these systems of thought have had on Jin’s characters in the story.

His transformation produces complex, conflicting emotions in the other workers, who at once admire and envy his achievements. “To tell the truth,” says Hongwen, “I liked Peter better than Peihai. I often wondered what in America had made him change so much – in just six years from an awkward boy to a capable, confident man” (188). In these scenes, American business practices and corporate culture have been given privileged status, while the Chinese employees are placed in the unenviable position of having to adopt or adapt to them.

Conflict arises when the company’s policies and the actions of management clash with the values of the Chinese employees. For instance, when Hongwen is fined and threatened with termination for giving too many chicken breasts to a customer he knows personally, in violation of company policy, he grows resentful and cannot understand why Mr. Shapiro “always appeared good-hearted and considerate to customers, but was cruel to us, his employees” (186). Similarly, Hongwen and the others are quick to condemn Peter when his actions betray their traditional cultural values. After the employees find out about Peter’s expensive mansion, Hongwen observes: “I noticed that my fellow workers often looked suspiciously at Peter, as though he were a hybrid creature. Their eyes showed envy and anger” (212). When they discover Peter burning leftover chicken in a vacant lot instead of donating it to the poor, their resentment prompts Jinglin to call him “a capitalist’s henchman” (217). Upon learning that Peter’s salary is twenty times their own and that he “received an American salary, being paid in dollars instead of yuan,” the workers hold a secret meeting where Baisha grumbles, “Now I know what exploitation feels like” (219).

These conflicts compel the employees of Cowboy Chicken to adopt a dialectic of “Chinese” and “Other,” a nationalist discourse within which they must situate their own identities. When an irate customer calls Hongwen and his co-workers “American dogs,” Hongwen is surprised and shaken: “He was referring to us, the Chinese employed by Cowboy Chicken” (185). Hongwen notes that the local street vendors “would spit on the ground and curse without looking at us, ‘Foreign lackeys!’” (189). Because they work for an American corporation, the employees of Cowboy Chicken are perceived by their fellow Chinese as having “sold out,” and their identity as “Chinese” is called into question. Similarly, when another customer claims to have found a fly in his chicken and the workers try to talk him out of suing the company, the man calls them “foreign dogs” and pleads, “Brothers, why help the foreign devils?” (209-10). However, by this point in the story, the workers have learned to employ the same rhetoric, accusing the customer of acting in a capitalist manner: “This was the first time I ever heard a Chinese say he would sue somebody for money,” Hongwen reflects (207). Feilan responds to the man’s threat by saying, “Shameless! You’re not Chinese” (208). Similarly, when the employees confront



Peter for burning leftover chicken, Baisha chides, “Peter Jiao, remember you’re a Chinese. There are people here who don’t have enough corn flour to eat while you burn chicken every night. You’ve forgotten who your ancestors are” (216-17). The message implicit in these various reproaches is that to be Chinese, one must act Chinese, and the statements themselves are intended to function as a kind of social policing. Yet in these scenes, Jin’s characters are actively negotiating their national “Chinese” identities by juxtaposing their norms, values and attitudes against those of their American employer. This is essentially an inversion of one of the principal themes of Euro-American exoticism, that of the Western individual who negotiates or affirms his identity through the process of going “over there” and returning “home.” In Jin’s story, conversely, it is the incursion of alien ideas imposed from without that catalyses the characters’ reflections upon self and national identity, through a process of economic coercion. Ironically, the characters that assert their “Chineseness” in Jin’s story in their acts of resistance against Cowboy Chicken only succeed in reifying their marginalised status, adopting the very discourses that Cowboy Chicken is using to exploit them – for as Hongwen notes, Cowboy Chicken “used Chinese produce and labor and made money out of Chinese customers, then shipped its profits back to the U.S.” (187).<sup>8</sup> Clearly, Jin’s “Chinese/Other” binary is modelled upon the Western discourses (exoticism among them) of the colonial era – with the notable distinction that for his largely American readership, the categories of “Us” and “Them” have been flipped to give the story its satirical element and its postcolonial dimension.

Jin’s choice of satire as the vehicle for his various critiques of American cultural and ideological hegemony, however, is highly problematic. First, by representing the racialised tensions in the narrative as simple dichotomies, the text conveniently elides the actual cultural and ethnic diversity extant in present-day China.<sup>9</sup> Thus the story’s central postcolonial critique derives its very intelligibility from an obfuscation or denial of the very concept of diversity it ostensibly attempts to validate.

Second, the circularity of the narrative’s plot – dictated by Jin’s use of the genre of satire – raises important questions with regard to audience. Stephen Greenblatt writes of the “demonic spiral or circle” as being central to the genre of satire, “for satire concerns itself with the endless, meaningless cycles of existence, with futility and hopelessness, with the inability to act, with the

<sup>8</sup> It would of course be erroneous and misleading to characterise Chinese nationalism reductively as a reaction to Western neo-imperialism; I merely wish to demonstrate how the Western discourse of Otherness operates in Jin’s story – that is, with often satirical and ironical overtones that emphasise the particular double-bind in which the characters find themselves.

<sup>9</sup> Today the PRC officially recognises 56 ethnic groups living within its borders. See “Names of Nationalities of China in Romanization with Codes,” China Internet Information Center, <<http://mz.china.com.cn/?action-viewnews-itemid-4643>>.

sinister wheel of fortune” (114). Indeed, Jin’s characters find themselves caught up in just such a cycle, and like the early social satires of Aldous Huxley, the story ends with a sense of circularity and the bitter impossibility of transcending the particular demonic circles inherent in their socio-cultural milieu. Fired from their jobs over management’s misinterpretation of an ambiguous note in which they threaten “to strike at Cowboy Chicken,” the employees are forced to recognise that all of their efforts to claim and exercise some form of agency in their plight have come to naught – even as they insist that “the struggle was still going on.... This was just the beginning” (223, 225). Unlike the early modern satires of Dryden, Pope and Swift, however, the transnational context of Jin’s story imparts a complexity to the text that must be interrogated. For while the action takes place in China and the characters trapped in a demonic spiral are Chinese, the story itself was published for a predominantly American (or at least English-speaking) audience. A further passage from Greenblatt foregrounds the critical problem: “it may be that by heightening our awareness of the demonic circles in which we ourselves are trapped, the satirist gives us the power to break out of those circles and to recover a life with true direction, meaning and humanity” (117). The obvious question that arises with respect to Jin’s narrative, then, is who is the “us,” who is the “we ourselves”? For if Jin were writing primarily for the “downtrodden Chinese” he speaks of in *The Writer as Migrant*, then why the decision to write in English, of which in the case of the diasporic writer he observes, “the ultimate betrayal is to choose to write in another language”? (*Writer* 31). Or of the decisions to use the short story and satire genres as well as exotic tropes appropriated from the Western literary tradition? On the other hand, if we accept that Jin is writing primarily for an American audience, then what are we to make of his calculated inversions of traditional exoticism and satire, in which the roles of Self and Other are reversed and the demonic spiral in which the characters are trapped is no longer specific to one culture but global in scope? Even the savvy reader who dismisses questions of authorial intent on this point must account for a number of complex critical questions to which the text opens itself. For while there are critiques of cultural and economic imperialism here, they are so neatly packaged for consumption by American audiences that it indeed becomes unclear whether the story functions primarily as a cry uttered by proxy for Jin’s voiceless, “downtrodden Chinese,” or as a distinctly American critique of neoliberal discourse. To the extent that the story accomplishes both, it forces us to re-examine our assumptions about the canonical categories of Asian American, diasporic and postcolonial literature.

These issues can be resolved by reading the story through the lens of Célestin’s new exoticism. Célestin’s theorisation of the exotic in the centre enables us to read “After Cowboy Chicken Came to Town” as a text in which Jin is negotiating a discursive space for his own voice that lies somewhere “in-

between” his native homeland (China) and his adopted country (the U. S.). The author puts it this way:

By definition, the word ‘homeland’ has two meanings – one meaning refers to one’s native land, and the other to the land where one’s home is at present. In the past, the two meanings were easy to reconcile because ‘home’ also signified ‘origin’ and the past and the present were inseparable. In our time, however, the two meanings tend to form a dichotomy. Thus, we hear the expressions “my new homeland,” “my second homeland,” “my newly adopted homeland,” or “homeland security”.... In other words, homeland is no longer a place that exists in one’s past but a place also relevant to one’s present and future. (*Writer* 65)

Jin’s recognition – that the concept of “homeland” presents profound challenges for the diasporic writer – is exemplified by the short story, a text that, as I have shown, documents one writer’s attempt to wrestle with these very issues.

### **Chua and the New Cosmopolitanism**

In his 1998 novel *Gold by the Inch*, Lawrence Chua uses tropes drawn from the Euro-American genres of the exotic and cosmopolitan novel to explore issues of identity in transnational and postcolonial contexts. In Chua’s text we find the familiar journey from the West to the East on a quest for self-definition; the novel’s protagonist exudes an aura of cosmopolitan confidence that at times borders on the supercilious; upon Chua’s Malaysian beaches we find the requisite palms; and in his Thai nightclubs the gin pahits of Somerset Maugham have been refigured as vodka tonics and lines of cocaine. However, whereas Jin’s short story relies upon a familiar, binary model of national identity that emphasises opposition, Chua’s exploration of identity and belonging in *Gold by the Inch* challenges not only the legitimacy, but the very possibility of such rigid dichotomies in the age of globalisation. If antagonism is the overarching term in Jin’s narrative, in Chua’s novel it is complicity.

In the novel an Asian American man of mixed ethnicity, compelled by a “thirst for origins,” returns to Southeast Asia in an attempt to create for himself a narrative of ethnic heritage in which to ground his identity (70). Frustrated and degraded by his recent love affair with a rich, white American man, Chua’s unnamed protagonist prowls the gay nightclubs and brothels of Bangkok, naïvely convincing himself that he has found a more natural, equitable and unpoliticised form of love with Thong, a young Thai prostitute. Armed with the blue passport and disparity in wealth that make his sex tour possible, the protagonist imagines himself as a sort of new cosmopolitan, “transgressing roles, crossing borders,” inventing with Thong “a relationship that is still formless... a friendship outside laws, rules, and habits” (21, 106).

Chua's narrative is in part concerned with the legacy of European colonialism in Southeast Asia, especially its role in constructing the identities of both the colonial and the postcolonial subject. While visiting Malaysia, Chua's protagonist describes how Europeans of the colonial era wrested economic control from the local merchant class by "exploiting the rifts of difference and discontent" (101). "The Europeans," he continues, "after destroying the trading classes, accused the natives of having no interest in commerce and exchange. The natives were indolent and lazy, born criminals. The only recourse for the native was to follow the European example" (102). According to Chua, the Europeans employed such racialised discourse not only to define themselves, but their colonial subjects as well:

Only by making the native inhuman did the British Resident become human. Only by participating in the inhumanity of the workday will the native earn her humanity. Labor allows her to know herself, to know subjugation and alienation. Without labor, the native is just an unprofitable element in the fabric of the empire, incapable of developing the colonies' resources. (97)

Those familiar with Edward Said's *Orientalism*, in which the author argues that the Orient, "almost a European invention... has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience," will undoubtedly recognise a familiar narrative in these passages (Said 1-2).

However, Chua's novel also demonstrates that such constructions of difference are not merely discarded relics of a shameful colonial past. The protagonist's cousin, Martina, bases her sense of identity and self-worth on her role as a productive participant in the global economy, even as she recognises that she is being exploited by the Western corporation that employs her in the Free Trade Zone north of Penang. "You know," she says of her job as a microchip builder, "I don't love this job, but that paycheck makes me feel more human" (98). By working in the Free Trade Zone, Martina manages to escape abject poverty, yet she understands implicitly that her non-white status forever marks her as cheap, disposable labour. Indeed, the narrator notes that the Free Trade Zone factories are filled with "women who are learning what it means to be treated like a thing" (97). Similarly, the protagonist's childhood memory of an orangutan at the zoo "mimicking" the behaviour of the humans outside the cage prompts him to state that "I would always feel a weird kinship pass between the two of us" (122). The sense of connection he describes evokes the type of captivity narrative that Rey Chow describes in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, expanding upon John Berger's work on public zoos: "All sites of enforced marginalization," Chow writes, "have something in common with zoos" (96). It is worth noting, however, that while Chow's study focuses strictly on hegemonic social structures in "North American society" and

“mainstream Western culture” (107), Chua’s novel emphasises how the same discourses operate in transnational contexts.

This standardised hierarchy of difference creates conflicting feelings in Chua’s characters. On one hand (as in Jin’s story), the possibility of upward economic and social mobility encourages the adoption and internalisation of a middle-class value system imported from the West. The protagonist notes that “In some northern villages, up to 70 percent of girls over the age of eleven work in the sex industry to support their families. A government minister says it’s because modernity had deteriorated traditional values. The parents of these children, he says, want to buy cars, TVs, refrigerators” (18-9). In this passage, the moral complexity of the situation is emphasised by the ironic distance inherent in the narrator’s point of view. While Chua’s narrator affects a strictly objective, reportorial tone, his description of the parents’ motive makes the disturbing statistic seem at once more lurid, yet somehow more comprehensible. He may not like it, but he understands it. Less shocking but equally illustrative is the enforced use of English the protagonist’s father maintained during his childhood: “At Ba’s dinner table it was forbidden to speak anything but English.... Ba said it was the key to everything in the world. Ba wanted us to master English because he thought there was a future there” (136). Whether or not his father has tacitly or unwittingly accepted the rhetoric of assimilation, his reasons for encouraging his children in this regard are understandable given the brute reality of the family’s immigrant status. These attempts to approximate Western culture in Chua’s novel are driven by, if not economic necessity, at least a desire to have access to and participate in a middle-class lifestyle.

On the other hand, Chua’s characters often internalise their difference, which creates feelings of inferiority, frustration and resentment. Too dark to achieve a true sense of belonging in the U.S. yet too pale to “pass” in Malaysia, the protagonist muses, “Your skin is your uniform.... Skin that betrays difference. Foreignness. Contagion. A pause. Usually a pause. Where are you from? The suspicion always cuts like a knife. Where do you want me to be from? The same question on both sides of the tropic” (121). This feeling of eternal displacement and the insecurity it creates causes the narrator to “lie under the sun, hoping it will bake the answer into my skin. Bake my belonging” (121). The narrator’s father, after losing several jobs, ultimately elects to “drop out,” abandoning his family and taking up a reclusive life in Hawaii. Martina and her factory co-workers conduct subversive acts of local resistance, such as etching “bad words” onto the microchips they produce (93).

Indeed, the hegemonic authority of Western racial stereotypes in the novel’s trans-Pacific milieu is neatly characterised by the narrator early on: “*The image lasts all the way across?*” (6, italics are Chua’s). Partying with other Thais in Bangkok he remarks, “I have done this before. In other cities, other nights. So

often I can repeat each gesture without owning any of them” (28). Although he is an American citizen, the narrator performs his “Thai identity” in accordance with the social context, and his cosmopolitan background allows him to be acutely conscious of this performance. For him and his displaced family even the Thai language “has hardened into a well-rehearsed parody, a near-desperate cry to append ourselves to a place that no longer exists” (26). When Martina tells him that the microchip “factory is possessed” and that a number of her female co-workers have gone into “shock and convulsions,” the narrator likens their condition to a nineteenth-century colonial phenomenon, “a psychopathological disorder common among the Malay subjects of the colony called *latab*... in which subjects were unable to realize their own identity. Often, the person suffering from *latab* could only imitate the actions of others” (91-92). Psychologically destabilised by a work environment that constantly forces them to renegotiate their identities, these factory workers resort to enacting a culturally specific form of spirit possession, whereby the imitations they perform mark them as stereotypically non-white, i.e., pagan, or primitive. This scene provides an evocative metaphor for the plight of the postcolonial subject, a plight in which an authentic cultural identity is impossible to construct because the only available models are the stereotypes perpetuated by the West.

It is worth reiterating that the various examples under consideration here illustrate how these racialised discourses operate primarily outside European or American borders, in places where the advent of capitalist practice has obliged non-Western people to renegotiate their identities against a “Western” – though increasingly global – standard. In Chua’s words, “Place has ceased to be of importance now that power no longer lives at a fixed address” (24). Imagining the microchips his cousin produces in Malaysia’s Free Trade Zone, etched with the words “MADE IN USA,” Chua’s protagonist remarks, “But that’s the whole planet these days” (78). “The border,” he observes, “is an apparition... a strategic fiction to break the world down into concepts, spaces, limitations” (96). If national borders and citizenship are *de facto* the principal or most significant determinants of identity in the globalised world of transnational capital, the novel asks repeatedly, must it always be thus?

Herein lies the principal difference between Chua’s narrative and that of Ha Jin. For while Jin’s short story merely recycles the familiar geographical and racial dichotomies of exotic literature in service of new kind of “transnational” social satire, Chua’s novel ultimately rejects these binary models as too simplistic. First, *Gold by the Inch* inverts the geographical logic of the exotic novel, which, as Célestin informs us, must “*contain both the voyage out and the return*” to the centre of Western cultural production (3, Célestin’s italics). Arriving in Malaysia, Chua’s narrator muses, “Is this dirt or soil you’re supposed to kiss when you step down from the plane? Always the return. Going back. The scenes are the same.... When you go home.... Nothing is the same.

Nothing is the way you remember it” (45-46). For the narrator, the trip to Southeast Asia (the “homeland” of his childhood) in search of an authentic identity is itself a return – though a problematic one. Second, whereas the racialised tensions in Jin’s narrative are represented as simple dichotomies (Chinese/American, East/West, socialist/capitalist, etc.), Chua’s novel forces us to address issues of multiethnic and multinational identity, where traditional lines of demarcation begin to blur. Chua’s protagonist notes that because of the complexities associated with his parentage, citizenship, immigrant status and cultural background, “I couldn’t easily be called Thai or Chinese or Malaysian or American” (56). His ambiguous subject position, caught between two hemispheres and four cultures, complicates the traditional plot structure of the exotic novel, for while the protagonist recognises that his agency is a function of his American citizenship and economic privilege, he also recognises that he belongs, ultimately, to neither East nor West, neither Asia nor America: “I am here at the end of a pilgrimage, knowing even as I bend my knees to the earth that there is nothing left to claim. There is no prepackage of identity or ethnic heritage left to possess” (135). Thus by flipping the directional trajectory of the exotic novel and then denying his protagonist the stable, authentic identity he seeks, Chua’s text erodes the problematic binary distinctions upon which the genre is based.

Because he doesn’t truly belong anywhere, the narrator imagines, he belongs everywhere, and thus has the agency to form relationships with others free from the oppressive economic and ideological power structures of the nation-state. This mindset evokes the hybridity theory of scholars like R. Radhakrishnan: “With hybridity, anything is possible for the simple reason that hybridity is about making meaning without the repression of a pre-existing normativity or teleology” (Radhakrishnan, par. 1). Chua’s narrator is so consistently insistent in this regard that it is tempting to read the novel as advocating a kind of homeless transiency, a form of cosmopolitan cultural hybridity that transcends political borders and ideologies. Ultimately, however, the novel exposes the sheer naiveté of such notions. For while the narrator wants to believe in the possibility of an authentic relationship between himself and his prostitute/lover, he comes to recognise that, in fact, he has only ended up reifying the economic power structures that have facilitated his actual exploitation of the young man. “This is just a vacation for you, isn’t it?” Thong challenges, prompting the narrator to reflect in the second-person, “In the end, you are just an American darker than the rest, doing things in Thailand you can never do at home. This makes you invincible” (201). Here Chua’s protagonist recognises that his relative economic independence and status as an American citizen are what enable him to indulge his cosmopolitan fantasy, for as he has noted earlier in the text, “When you used to live here... your prospects were limited. Now they’re endless” (17). The image of the narrator “Stranded with a

blue passport in a sea of expendability” thus takes on a striking – if cynical – poignancy (178). Ultimately, the protagonist’s vision of a kind of supranational transiency/hybridity proves susceptible to the principal critique of all cosmopolitanism, in that it is only available to an elite class of the economically privileged.<sup>10</sup> The novel concludes with the narrator’s recognition that “The more you know him [Thong] the uglier you become.... You will build your love on a lie. A lie so beautiful even you will forget it’s pure fiction” (205). Thus the novel’s fundamental premise – that desire is inextricably enmeshed with the logics of commerce – complicates (rather than affirms) theoretical models of hybridity.

Furthermore, Chua’s novel problematises a common conception in postcolonial theory that the postcolonial subject can only ever be a passive object, buffeted about by the prevailing currents of power. For instance, the protagonist’s sexual domination of a European tourist at the novel’s midpoint raises important questions about the relationships between power and desire, domination and submission. In this episode the narrator describes a “conflict of belief. The conflict, essentially, is whether to accumulate or subsist. Whether to own the flesh you are touching or simply to pass through and over it, leaving it intact and alive” (119). The exhilarating sense of power and agency the narrator feels in this scene is undeniable, though it is undercut at the end of the chapter by the “two 50-ringgit notes” the man leaves for him on the nightstand (120). However, the significance of this exchange lies not in the pecuniary transaction (which the narrator finds superfluous and mildly insulting), but rather in the complicity of both parties. Indeed, the narrator finds himself implicated in this “web of violence” by a deeply personal desire that, ironically, has become irredeemably commodified (117). This is the novel’s central paradox, typified in the narrator’s earlier “wish to die a hundred times this way, the object of someone else’s history” (81). In *Gold by the Inch*, desire does not operate in the unidirectional manner typical of many academic postcolonial narratives, but is rather a universal phenomenon in which there always remains the potential for agency. Thus Chua’s novel complicates certain postcolonial perspectives in a constructive – perhaps even hopeful – manner.

## Conclusion

Published two years apart, Ha Jin’s “After Cowboy Chicken Came to Town” and Lawrence Chua’s *Gold by the Inch* are works of Asian American fiction that borrow from the Euro-American genre of exoticism in order to explore complex issues of identity in the era of globalisation and transnational capital. Both texts exemplify Célestin’s theorisation of “the limits of exoticism,” in

<sup>10</sup> In this regard, Robert Spencer’s recent study is a promising attempt to redefine and rehabilitate cosmopolitanism in a postcolonial context. See Robert Spencer, *Cosmopolitan Criticism and Postcolonial Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).



which certain writers use the genre to negotiate a liminal discursive space that exists between cultures, between old and new homelands, between the familiar and the exotic (221). These superficial similarities are in and of themselves worth the type of comparative study that I have conducted here.

Yet by reading these texts together, a couple of equally significant conclusions may be drawn. First, the above analyses suggest that comparative work – even that performed within the discipline of comparative literature – need not be constrained by national borders (where the texts under consideration were written or produced), or by what language texts were written in. Our conception of what it means to do comparative work is changing. In his assessment of the field of comparative literature in 2006, Marshall Brown suggested that “the task for the comparison of the coming decade is to counter misguided globalisms and hegemonic canons with localisms of all sorts” (“Multum in Parvo” 256). “You don’t have to travel far from your doorstep to find the Other,” Dr. Brown suggested three years later (Personal interview). Increasingly, authors like Jin and Chua are writing across borders, exploring the transnational encounter from alternative, liminal, or multiple perspectives, broadening and challenging our assumptions about the nature and function of national literatures. The methodology of comparative literature seems well suited to the task of accounting for and responding to a growing body of fiction, poetry and film that seeks to transcend the various national imaginaries from which it emerges.

The second (and perhaps more provocative) point I would like to offer is that the very different conceptions of the transpacific milieu that Jin and Chua present emphasise that the transpacific is an ever-shifting political imaginary formed by the accords, contestations, acquiescences and dissensions of a multiplicity of voices that transcend historical, generic and political boundaries.<sup>11</sup> In his short story Jin employs the familiar binary conceptual structures of exoticism, but inverts the perspective, giving his predominantly American audience a sharply satirical look at the tensions and conflicts perpetuated by such discourse. The transpacific of “After Cowboy Chicken Came to Town” is one of oversimplified oppositions between polarised factions, in which the characters’ adoption of nationalist rhetoric as a form of resistance only affirms their status as cheap, disposable labour – thus perpetuating capital’s endless cycle of expansion and assimilation. By contrast, Chua’s novel dismisses the very possibility of conceiving the transpacific in such narrow, diametric terms. While *Gold by the Inch* is ultimately rather cynical in its appraisal of American cultural and economic hegemony, Chua’s characters – unlike Jin’s – do display the capacity for agency (both in the form of active

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<sup>11</sup> For a broader discussion of this aspect of transpacific studies, see Yunte Huang, *Transpacific Imaginations: History, Literature, Counterpoetics* (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard UP, 2008).

resistance and complicity). When read in dialogue with one another, these texts present two very different readings of the politics surrounding globalisation, inviting readers to consider two possibilities: 1) Jin's demonic spiral, in which individuals are hopelessly caught up by economic and ideological forces far beyond their ability to control or resist; or 2) the potential for agency and positive change that Chua's novel suggests may still be possible. As postcolonial scholars, we cannot afford to be satisfied with the former example.

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