

## Re-Imagined Homes: Transnational Asian American Writing in Annie Wang's *The People's Republic of Desire*

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### Abstract

This essay proposes that Annie Wang's *The People's Republic of Desire* (2006) offers a new home-identity alignment for Asian American subjectivity in the transnational space of the Pacific Rim, an alternative to the predominant cultural nationalist model for home-identity configuration defined within the US nation-state boundaries. It argues that contemporary cosmopolitan life brought about by global capital has created a more flexible, border-defying cultural imaginary across the Pacific for Asian American writing and the making of Asian American identity outside the nation-state, yet its fluidity, by dissolving the traditional bond between home and identity, also signifies Asian Americans' continuous displacement and dividedness between national and transnational imperatives.

### Keywords

Asian American, home and identity, transnationality, cultural nationalism, global capital, cosmopolitanism

Shawn Wong opens the second chapter of his *Homebase* (1979) with a scene at the conjunction where the US landmass meets the Pacific Ocean:

They had worked all day on the railroad, but at night they built the great iron engine that brought them to the sea's edge, pointed them home, the way west. They climbed down from the engine, faces black with soot, disguised, to dive into the ocean and swim home, but the moonlight hit the waves and made the surf like bones, white in their faces. Their swimming was useless, their strokes made in a desert of broken bones, of bone hitting bone, hollow noises to men who believed in home and hollow noises to men whose black faces held in their souls. (24)

A poetic rendition of early Chinese American experience, Wong's novel is emblematic of Asian America's cultural nationalist struggle for self-affirmation

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and claim of America during the Civil Rights era. This political and cultural agenda is best captured by the novel's concrete thematic concern for rootedness and home despite racial exclusion and alienation. In this particular scene, the author imagines an intense moment in the Chinese labourers' historic construction of the transcontinental railroad. The "sea's edge" becomes a central locale to illustrate the dislocation of self from nation and home for early Chinese immigrants. As the railroad reaches California's shoreline, fulfilling the US national project as a nation-state through its westward movement, industrial mobility and territorial expansion in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it simultaneously marks the closing of the national boundaries, excluding the Chinese labourers from participating in American national life. Caught between US racial exclusion and the Pacific as a geographic and racial barrier, the Chinese immigrant workers are doubly denied both immigration and settlement in the new nation and a return to their native land, leaving only a sea of broken bones to testify to the costly human sacrifices of Asian American immigration.

In Wong's narrative, home is an encompassing literary trope, a locale where forces of race and nation exert their full power in the formation of ethnic identity. Yet the unattainability of home and identity for Asian Americans described in the scene above has experienced significant changes as America has redefined and renegotiated its national self-identity and racial policies in the recent historical process of late capitalism and globalisation. Wong's passage visualises a sort of a primal scene of the Asian/American divide and the dualistic status of the Asian American psyche at the sea's edge along America's west coast in an earlier time. On the other hand, according to David Palumbo-Liu, as a result of increasing global capital and technological flows, human migrations and intercultural transactions between East and West in the age of postmodernity and late capitalism, the emergence of the Pacific Rim discourse since the 1970s has made possible a "transnational imaginary" (337) for us to reimagine the above scene through a new topographic mode. In this view, the sea's edge is no longer a marker of the rigidly guarded borders of the nation-state but the beginning of an oceanic world that blurs national boundaries and links the landmasses of America and Asia to form an intricately interconnected new temporal-spatiality.

The recent rise of the Asian Pacific as an especially noticeable region of globalism, marked most recently by mainland China's economic ascendancy onto the world stage and the United States' refocused strategic interests and investments in Asia, has ushered in a new cultural location for Asian American subjectivity and consequently a significant change of focus in Asian American literary studies, or what can be called a shift from "roots" to "routes," to

borrow from Paul Gilroy's remapping of a Black Atlantic.<sup>2</sup> Concomitant with this new Asian Pacific mobility previously unavailable for Chinese Americans is the emergence of contemporary transnational Chinese American writings populated by diasporic, migratory and transnational characters whose lives are shaped by a transient space and time across the Pacific, often located in and between the cosmopolitan centres of China and America.

Characterised by fluidity, hybridity and heterogeneity, this new cultural terrain signifies the increasing erosion of national boundaries and a loosening of the traditional notion of home defined by territoriality, familial, communal, national, racial and cultural, in the making of subjectivities. At the same time, it is in this transnational space, to which Arjun Appadurai would refer as a "delocalized *transnation*" (172), that the nation-state continues to maintain its hold on subjectivity through its far-reaching national and global tentacles – financial enterprises, sociopolitical institutions and mass cultural media. In this new arena for Chinese American transnational subjectivities, the notion of home is constantly transformed through the vicissitudes in the Sino-US relationship as the two countries continue to develop complex transpacific connections of conflict and collaboration and mutually define each country's particular historically constructed national discourses and narratives.

If the concept of home conventionally implies national boundaries and borders, signifying both an "origin from" and a "return to" a singular nation-state and anchoring or confining the body by a predetermined national space, the transnational notion disrupts this naturalised connection between home and identity and subsequently the significance of home in individual identity formation. With origin and destination suspended or made flexible and ambiguous, how is the Chinese American subject formed in this transnational space? How is "Chineseness" connected with "Americanness" in this new identity formation? What happens to the previously naturalised bond between home and identity? How does one perceive home as a mobile yet unstable location of identification in the complex relations between transnational and national imperatives? What does the transnational mean to Asian American writing? To answer these interrelated questions, this essay will examine Annie Wang's *The People's Republic of Desire* as a new site of Asian American writing, subject formation and home configuration in the context of this newly emerged transnational moment.

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<sup>2</sup> For several major critical discussions and projects on this shift in Asian American literary studies since the mid-1990s, see Lowe, Palumbo-Liu, Chuh and Shimakawa, Eng and Lim et al. While it is beyond the scope of this essay to examine the width and depth of this still unfolding shift from cultural nationalism to globalisation, transnationalism and Pacific Rim discourses, it needs to be noted that the shift has prompted some critics to reassess the legacy of Asian American cultural nationalism. See, most noticeably, Arif Dirlik.

The transnational, needless to say, is largely an antithesis of the national and the nation-state, with which home is often conceptually aligned. Given Asian Americans' historical struggle over acceptance and inclusion within the US national space, one may argue that the transnational only further complicates this pursuit for home and settlement. In an important way, however, the emergence of the transnational urges us to reconsider the long-standing issue of how Asian and American are connected with each other. In his examination of diaspora and queerness in Asian American studies, David Eng poses a meaningful question: "Where, at all, is Asian America? Can Asian America finally be located, designated, or pinned down?" (31). Problematising the alignment of home and nation-state in which "home becomes the site of validation – the privileged location for the benefits of citizenship" (32), Eng challenges in particular Asian American cultural nationalism for its privileging the domestic and the heterosexual at the expense of the feminine and the homosexual (33-35). He points out further by revisiting the debate over the hyphen between Asian and American that "[t]he frequency with which the repressed hyphen returns to mark the term *Asian(-)American* with utter randomness clearly suggests that Asian American claims to the domestic space of the nation-state as home and as citizen-subjects are far from resolved" (36). Eng's inquiry well exposes the fragile and unstable alignment of home with the nation-state for Asian America. To expand his argument in a different context, we may well suggest that the transnational reopens the hyphen debate in a new direction, in which home is unhinged further from its alignment with the nation-state. Annie Wang's novel, as I will discuss in the following, stands for a new kind of Asian American writing deeply entwined with global capital as a driving force in transnational cultural production. Consequently, it also offers a new configuration of home, nation-state and identity in which the relationship between Asian and American is redefined as mercurial and flexible. This newly found fluidity presents a more malleable terrain for the cultural imagination between Asia and America and a more flexible configuration of ethnic and national identity. Accompanying this fluidity, however, is a perpetual displacement and dispersal of home and self.

### **Multi-textuality and Global Cultural Capital**

Published by HarperCollins in 2006, *The People's Republic of Desire* is Wang's second English novel, and it has been subjected to different critical and cultural lenses since its appearance in the English-speaking world. On its back cover, for instance, the novel is marketed by the publisher as "a cross between *Sex and the City* and *The Joy Luck Club*," an analogy that anchors the novel within the purview of American literature. Noting this analogy from the publisher, Wenche Ommundsen argues that the novel is clearly intended for "young chick lit readers" (335) and that Wang's work belongs to Chick Lit, an emerging

global postfeminist cultural genre. She also points out that this new literary form from China “signals the demise of diaspora literature as we have known it, and the beginning of a more truly transnational and transcultural literary era, in which China is no longer the (often imaginary) homeland relegated to a distant, even mythic past but a real and compelling presence” (334-35). While the publisher’s commercial positioning of the novel highlights its national affiliation with the US mainstream and ethnic literary markets, Ommundsen’s evaluation stresses the novel’s transnational and global appeals and its China-based context of cultural politics and cultural production.

Indeed, the novel’s ambiguous relationship with national and transnational affiliations opens itself up for diverse critical interpretations. What invites such diverse critical interests can be further explained by the novel’s history prior to its HarperCollins English version. The novel was written in English as a newspaper column in the Hong Kong-based *South China Morning Post*, under the same English title. As a series of loosely connected social vignettes for the newspaper’s “Life and City” section, it ran for nearly three years (2001-2004) and enjoyed much popularity both regionally and globally. Its first Chinese version, written earlier than the newspaper columns and entitled *俗不可耐* (*subukennai*), namely, unbearably tacky or shallow, was published by a major Shanghai-based publisher in mainland China in 2001, which was followed by another Chinese version published in Hong Kong in 2002 under the name *欲望俱乐部* (*yuwang julebu*), or “Club Desire.” The Hong Kong version restores those parts censored in the mainland version. This brief listing of the novel’s rather complex publication history demonstrates the novel’s transnationality as a literary product that crosses over linguistic differences and national/regional boundaries. More significantly, the novel’s generic and linguistic transformation through naming and renaming underscores its dexterous navigation among national and international literary markets to anticipate and meet regional readership needs as well as the author’s savvy negotiations between her own intention and the novel’s global reception at multiple locations. The naming of the novel’s mainland China version, for instance, accentuates the social critical lens the novel offers through its satirical and parodic tone,<sup>3</sup> while its English title suggests an intention to provide a sort of China reportage for a Western/American reading public and its long-standing fascination with its Eastern counterpart by a linguistic play with China’s official national name. At the same time, its Hong Kong title appears to stress its cosmopolitan appeal to a reading public in the international metropolis.

<sup>3</sup> Wang’s naming of this Chinese version seems to address and correct a misreading of her newspaper columns. In an interview, she expresses her dismay at her Chinese readers’ taking her writing “as a fashion bible,” missing entirely the intended satire in her depiction of the Chinese yuppie characters’ frenzy over top brands and a luxury lifestyle. See “Red Hot China.”

More importantly, the novel's titular differences indicate a more substantial difference between its Chinese and English versions. The mainland China version is significantly shorter than the HarperCollins version, and as an early form of the novel, it is narrated through a third-person voice, thus creating a distinctive critical distance between the conventional omnipresent narrator and Niuniu, the female protagonist, and her peers. This critical distance, however, is collapsed in the HarperCollins version where the narrator and Niuniu, the protagonist, become one, and the novel's length is increased from some twenty episodes to over one hundred episodes. Moreover, in this later version, a number of episodes are added or expanded to describe Niuniu's migratory journey between China and the US as well as her personal love story, which is only tangentially developed in the early Chinese form. Also added is a section entitled "Popular Phrases" at the end of certain episodes to serve as a mini-dictionary, a selected linguistic guide for English-speaking readers about trendy buzzwords or colloquial expressions in China's cosmopolitan life. The novel's evolution from its Chinese form to its English rendition is not simply a matter of narrative growth; rather, it reveals the author's strategic positioning of the novel at different global locations of cultural reception. If the Chinese version foregrounds the story of an emerging cosmopolitan life in China, the same story, as I will elaborate later, is transformed in the English version into a much more personable narrative about Niuniu's transnational experiences across the Pacific, a more "American" story by design.

While the novel's differently localised versions draw out its different shades of meaning and multifaceted appeals, its transnational circuit of publication as a cultural product ties it unequivocally to the flow of global cultural capital. As Belinda Kong aptly explains in her reading of the author's writing career in conjunction with Chinese diasporic women's writing, "... it would be accurate to say that Wang is not simply a critical observer and sometimes satirist of capitalist China but also an exceedingly market-savvy diaspora writer... [and] as a bilingual author writing for both Chinese and Western audiences, she is highly mindful of and quite pragmatic about capitalizing on literary vogues in both China and the West. This means more than a general awareness or casual acceptance of market pressures on literary production" (ch. 3). Seen as such, the novel's chameleon-like navigation through linguistic, national, and cultural boundaries via its multiple textual forms is exemplary of how transnational writing is implicated in the process of late capitalism's partnership with and control over global cultural production.

Yet riding on the seemingly free flow of global capital does not guarantee the novel's successful escape from the cultural and racial imperatives of the nation-state. In a significant way, the subjugation of Wang's novel to global political and economic forces reminds us again of the cultural politics which has been well rehearsed in Asian American literary criticism since the momentous

debate between the feminist camp and the nationalist camp over Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*. Summarily speaking, Asian American writing has long been shaped by US domestic racial politics, and as a result, it cannot be read naively in isolation from an author's ethnic positioning and a work's reception in the mainstream literary market. This racial imperative imposed on Asian American writing has been reproduced time and again, and its impact has also been evidenced repeatedly in the production and reception of cultural works from Asia, from the films of the fifth generation Chinese movie makers, such as Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige, to autobiographies on Mao-era political traumas by recent Chinese diaspora writers, and to the trendy novels for global (sexual) consumerism by the so-called Chinese "beauty writers" (美女作家). Given this, even though Wang's novel claims multiple locations as its textual homes through its impressive geopolitical ambidexterity, its textual fluidity enabled by global capital still is a process of negotiation with the East-West cultural logic, particularly the US racial imperative, that has been haunting Asian American literature.

### **Transnational Homemaking and Transnational Identity**

The novel's multi-textual form prefigures the ways in which home and identity are creatively configured in the transnational space, and in Appadurai's vocabulary, this creativeness takes imagination. In his influential *Modernity at Large*, Appadurai champions "the work of *the imagination* as a constitutive feature of modern subjectivity" (3). Foregrounding media and migration as two interrelated major factors in the process of modernity and globalisation, he extends Benedict Anderson's view of print media in early capitalism as key to modern imaginations of nationalism and nation-state building and re-invokes the power of imagination as crucial to the emergence of the transnational. Electronic media, as he points out, "offer new resources and new disciplines for the construction of imagined selves and imagined worlds" and are "resources for experiments with self-making in all sorts of societies, for all sorts of persons" (3). More importantly, the work of imagination, as it becomes part and parcel of quotidian life, is especially significant for migrants worldwide to form lives and identities and to gain agency through mass media beyond national space (4-7). Appadurai's conceptual approach to transnational spheres of identity formation finds its resonance in the strategies Wang's protagonist Niuniu deploys to imagine her life between America and China. Early in the novel, Niuniu moves from an apartment in Beijing's highly insulated diplomatic district to a courtyard in a *hutong* area near the Drum Tower, claiming that she does not return to China "to live in a fishbowl" and that living in the diplomatic compound "makes [her] feel like a foreigner in Beijing" (37). The well preserved traditional quadrangle, on the other hand, will allow her to stay connected with ancient China, "... a different time in Chinese history – a time that [she] yearn[s]

for but, sadly, may soon be gone” (37). To substantiate this imagined connection with ancient China, she furnishes the house with traditionally styled furniture and decorative items (for instance, vases made in Ming and Qing styles) from a local antique market and receives a birdcage, snuff bottles and incense burners from her grandparents as housewarming presents. These replicas of antiquity, however, are interestingly juxtaposed with other decorative measures. Niuniu paints the house so that it “looks Mediterranean from the outside” (39), and for the interior, she brings in bright-coloured drapery of pink and green, a combination of colours favoured in traditional folk culture, and hanging brocade “from minority tribes” (39). To accentuate her desire to re-root herself in the Chinese soil through homemaking, the protagonist claims emphatically that her new courtyard now enables her to “stand on the earth” (39).

Niuniu's efforts to create a new home, as it is thus styled and decorated, cannot be simply perceived as motivated by an old-fashioned nostalgia after a returnee's long absence from ancestral home/land. Rather, it is the protagonist's conscious self-refashioning of an identity in the emerging transnational locale between China and America. Such refashioning, in terms of Appadurai's culturalism, is made possible by the “imagination as a social practice” (31) in global cultural exchanges and the formation of transnational identities through a reworking of culturally loaded symbols and images. By keeping a contrasting balance between its “Mediterranean” exterior and its traditional Chinese interior, Niuniu's house seems to speak of an intended fusion of her Western and Chinese affiliations. Yet a closer look reveals that such a fusion may not be as unproblematic as the narrative seems to suggest. The protagonist's relocation from the foreigners' quarters to the traditional Chinese residential area apparently signifies her desire for a reunion with her Chineseness, a re-claiming of an original cultural location and identity. However, she is also keenly aware that this Chineseness has been dramatically transformed, and that “[t]he new China can be a bland, frivolous, and even scary place, with its endless cinderblock-shaped skyscrapers and immense shopping malls” (39). She takes pleasure in the fact that her new house will allow her to return to “an ancient place, when my Chinese ancestors still possessed the confidence and nobility that seems to have been lost in the Chinese people of today” (39-40). Here, Niuniu's turn to a Chinese nativist vision of China's glorious past and cultural power appears to be triggered by a disorientation brought about by China's present transformation into a homogeneous global space of Westernisation and her subsequent discontent with contemporary China.

This reimagined version of traditional China as an act of individual resistance to the sweeping Western homogenising forces, however, appears to have reenacted a cultural legacy of producing and maintaining difference and dominance in Western colonialist hegemony. Niuniu's collection of parts of the



material life of traditional China, from the eight-seater dining table to the birdcage and snuff bottles, becomes an inevitable reminder of how these material objects are also readily constitutive of the cultural imaginary of Orientalism. The “heavy opium bed” (39) that CC, her housemate, who is also a returnee, brings into their shared new residence, together with Niuniu’s brocade from “ethnic minority tribes,” suggests more explicitly this connection with an Orientalist cultural logic of difference. Thus, Niuniu’s resistance to Western modernity through re-Sinicisation becomes, ironically, complicit with Western neocolonialism itself, even though her intention is to return to ancient China for national and cultural pride. Despite Appadurai’s celebratory note on imagination as integral to subjectivity of modernity for displaced individuals and groups in the global condition, Niuniu’s imaginative homemaking appears to have encountered its limit in that the material objects she evokes for some imagined authentic Chineseness have long been written, among other things, as signs of Oriental decadence and archaic fixation in the historical arena of East-West cultural politics. Niuniu, however, is not unaware of this Orientalist trap in global cultural productions of China vis-à-vis the West. Elsewhere in the novel, for instance, she deftly mocks Hollywood-style orientalism through her friend Lulu’s voice when a Hollywood agent suggests that Lulu include prostitution and foot-binding for a cinematic adaptation of her debut novel, which itself is a commodified version of her melodramatic love story for commercial publication (361-62). Yet Niuniu’s awareness of and resistance to the colonialist logic of Orientalism does not prevent her from playfully using an alias such as “China Doll” for her online participation in a heated chatroom debate with participants from the global Chinese communities over the SARS epidemic and its national and global consequences (355).

Niuniu’s paradoxical flirtation with Orientalism thus offers an alternative version to the old colonialist mode of cultural representation. In her recent study of contemporary Chinese diasporic cultural representations, Olivia Khoo introduces the notion of the “Chinese exotic” as a new theoretical pathway to examine diasporic Chinese femininity in diverse global conditions. Redefining exoticism, a notion constitutive of traditional Western Orientalism, she effectively argues that the Chinese exotic as a result of diasporic Chinese modernity “is no longer merely an object and pure projection of Orientalist fantasy. Rather, it frames the nascent subjectivities constructed through transnational discourses where agency is struggled over within regimes of competing modernities” (8). Engaging Linda Hutcheon’s conceptualisation of ex-centricity as intrinsic to postmodernist culture, Khoo illuminates further that the Chinese exotic “as an ‘ex-centric’ formation,” emerging from the contemporary global flows, disrupts the centre-periphery modality in traditional East-West oppositions as well as mainland China’s dominant centrism in its relationship with diasporic Chinese communities globally (9-10). Seen from this

perspective, Niuniu's recycling of Orientalist exoticism is not an effort to bring back the dead but rather a conscious cultural act as she navigates through the intricate web of transnational symbols to create home and identity in a world of transience and change. In her revoking these old signs and re-signifying them for self-interest, she neither invites Orientalist voyeurism nor offers Asian exhibitionism. If Orientalist exoticism, particularly Asian women as exotic objects, depends largely on geographic distance, cultural mystification and a structure of Eurocentric male dominance, the current global flows and temporal-spatial compressions seem to have effectively disrupted and destabilised these cornerstones at the foundation of colonialist cultural imagination.

It is in a manner similar to her homemaking in the old *hutong* area of Beijing, the recently turned new cosmopolitan hot spot of capitalist globalisation, that Niuniu fashions a transnational identity. In the novel's first episode entitled "A Fake Foreign Devil," the female protagonist introduces herself in a third-person voice. More interestingly, this self-introduction about the twenty-something American-born returnee who now works as a journalist for the fictional "World News Agency" in Beijing is written in the form of a *dang'an*, a personal file established for political and administrative purposes in the Chinese governmental systems, an assemblage of information collected over a citizen's life time about his or her personal data, education, family background, marriage status, political affiliations, criminal records and employment history and performance. A parody of this long-standing political and managerial discourse of the nation-state, the protagonist's rendition of it offers a personalised account of not only her personal data, family background, education experience and other contents usually found in a *dang'an*, but also trivia of her life style (such as smoking and drinking habits) and sensitive private matters regarding her sexual history, love affairs and subsequent mental health conditions (3-4). This personalised rewriting of the state discourse by the protagonist herself is not as much a satirical criticism of the state authority over individual citizens as a postmodern playful claim for social space and identity for what the protagonist refers to as the *xin xin renlei*, the "new" new generation (2), in Beijing and other Chinese metropolitan centres, the latest breed of "human species" of which she claims membership. For Niuniu, the exterior identifiable markers of this new generation are just as meaningful as what is included in a *dang'an*. Alongside her personal file, Niuniu offers the following self-portrait:

Her hair is short, like a boy's, and spiked up with gel, sometimes dyed red, sometimes purple. Her hands are covered with all kinds of unusual white-gold rings, with little feet, apples, skeletons, snakes, and so on. Black nails, dark brown lipstick, baggy trousers, a colorful Swiss Army watch, yellow

Nokia mobile phone, palm pilot, IBM notebook, JanSport backpack, and a Louis Vuitton purse, which always holds two condoms – not for herself, but in case one of her girlfriends needs one urgently. (2-3)

Here, self-identity finds its expression through a fashion statement, freed from the old political and ideological forces of the state and made possible through cosmetics, designer handbags and electronic gadgets of global commodification. Just like her flirtation with the Orientalist discourse, Niuniu's glib re-designation of the Chinese authoritative discourse of citizenship and ideological maintenance, together with this self-image of a fashion show, aptly describes the new transnational cultural space, where, as Masao Miyoshi observes, commodities manufactured and distributed by multinational and transnational companies are "identified only with the brand names, not the countries of origin," and "... the country of origin is itself becoming more and more meaningless" (740). Niuniu concludes this self-introduction by declaring triumphantly, "From my *dangan*, you can see why people call me a cosmopolitan woman. I love the word 'cosmopolitan' as much as the drink" (4).

Thus, Niuniu cultivates a new alignment between home and identity through her cosmopolitan lifestyle as she dexterously dislodges the old mode of home as a naturalised extension of the nation-state, and consequently, home gains new meaning in keeping with the changing landscape of transnational identity formation. Niuniu's courtyard residence, therefore, is more than a shelter and an escape from her bustling social and professional life in the outside world, it is another locale of her social and cultural life. It is here, for instance, that she organises meetings to socialise with members of the Jeremy Irons fan club, a group she has initiated over the Internet. In fact, the traditional notion of home and homeland is replaced by a dazzling social mobility in Wang's narrative, a mobility materialised through endless cosmopolitan settings, which, according to Niuniu's list for her journalist job, include "art exhibitions, fashion shows, cocktail parties, masquerade balls, political conventions, press receptions, and charity events" (37), in addition to the high-end private clubs, fancy restaurants, popular entertainment venues, trendy spas and hip dance halls she frequents as part of her social life. In one instance, Niuniu and her girlfriends complete a one-day kaleidoscopic trip from Beijing to Shanghai to Shenzhen, enjoying luxurious parties and socializing with China's nouveau riche along the way. With the concept of home, especially its implications of one's cultural and national affiliations, being redefined by this new transnational landscape, Niuniu seems to have gained all the opportunities and benefits this new social and cultural terrain can offer her for self-development and self-empowerment.

Niuniu's newly gained agency upon her return to China allows her to be a double agent of transnationalism. As a reporter working for an English world

news agency, she contributes directly to the global mediascape, what Appadurai considers as crucial for globalisation, by observing and reporting contemporary China's rapid transformations, and it is expected that her bicultural background, perceived as an asset to the news agency, will enable her to combine her Western journalist training and her cultural insider knowledge for more balanced reportage (59). Many of the 101 episodes in the novel include the protagonist's observations and comments, often satirical, about the human dramas and social malaises brought about by China's capitalism and globalisation, from unrestrained frenzy over wealth and fame to unleashed libidinal pursuit of sex and power. Yet these journalistic comments are frequently undermined by the protagonist's role as an active participant and producer of China's cosmopolitanism. Not only does Niuniu take immense pleasure in enjoying the privileged life offered by the cosmopolitan scene in China's megacities, but she is also enthusiastically involved in its production through her social connections. More than once in the novel, she expresses her admiration for Wei Mei, her biological mother, who has made herself into a "social butterfly" (3) in Beijing's international circle and a mover and shaker of US-China cultural and economic connections through her three international marriages, despite her humble beginnings and lack of higher education. Both of Niuniu's female confidantes, Beibei and Lulu, are in the entertainment and fashion business, the former being the president of Chichi Entertainment Company, an agency promoting young pop stars, and the latter the editor of a women's fashion magazine. With these Westernised young professionals and other female overseas Chinese returnees like herself, Niuniu forms her social circles and organises cultural events: an online forum on the Eastern and Western ideals of beauty, a survey about Chinese consumer views of Western fashion and brands, or a "Little Women's Club" for both self-promotion and charity work. Commenting on her double role in this new transnational setting of China, Ommundsen points out: "Niuniu's attitude towards the urban jungle she reports on is ambiguous. On the one hand she is part of it, enjoying the glamour and intrigues, aware of her own 'market value' as a fashionable, Western-educated professional. But she is also an outsider, a tourist or 'fake foreign devil' observing her homeland with both fascination and horror" (336). Indeed, the outsider/insider divide constitutes the novel's underlying theme of displacement despite the protagonist's celebratory narration of an empowering transnational identity and agency in the new cultural cosmopolis she claims as home.

### **Asian America as Unrequited Love**

As much as fluidity is embraced in the discourse of multiculturalism and globalisation as a positive alternative to fixity in identity formation, the concept also entails instability and ambiguity, and if stretched to the extreme, it can

quickly lose its validity and value. While global fluidity signifies a retreat of the nation-state's binding power over its transnational subjects, it also brings individual nation-states in even closer proximity. Contemporary mainland China's encounter with globalisation has seen an unprecedented interpenetration of Asia and America, often a conflict-ridden intermingling to which Niuniu's narrative bears close witness. In this sense, the continuously evolving transnational space across the Pacific also becomes a contested site where U.S. and Chinese nationalist discourses find a new arena for competition and conflict. Niuniu's transnational identity generated in the global cultural imaginary, as we have seen, requires her constant negotiations, as playful or effortless as they may seem, with the forces of the nation-state, from the Western colonialist legacy of Orientalism to China's authoritarian system of the *dang'an*. In this sense, the transnational space in Niuniu's cultural imagination is by no means completely free from the demands of the nation-state. Alongside Niuniu's laudatory, even carnivalesque acclaim of her cosmopolitan life is a deep-seated anxiety over home and a divided identity.

This anxiety can be easily detected in the author's preface as a primary concern of the novel. In her own account of the novel's origin, Wang portrays herself as a "story collector" who is fascinated by China's sweeping changes after having lived in the Bay Area for years and having "grown accustomed to talking about multiculturalism, spiritual paths, faith, identity, and the notion of belonging" (x). In contrast, China's dramatic transformations are characterised by a relentless pursuit for wealth and power, an "unspeakably crazy and illogical" time (xi) markedly embodied by the new urban yuppies' insatiable desire for glory, sex, success and material gains. For the author, these changes, while beyond comprehension, are welcome signs of progress for Chinese civilisation, an opportunity for China to unburden itself of its own history and cultural baggage. In her own words, "The Chinese once carried so much cultural baggage. We used to laugh with teary eyes, obsessed with the memories of humiliation and sorrow, wrenched to the gut with love and hate. We acted with impulsive nationalism and with the shame of defeat. We waited with painful anxiety, overcome by uncontrollable fervor" (xi). Reiterating a popular sentiment in modern Chinese nationalist discourse, particularly the One Hundred Years of Humiliation, as a historical backdrop in contrast to the changes in China's contemporary turn to capitalism and globalisation, the author is hopeful that her homeland will find its way with "a little fast food frivolity, a little Starbucks shallowness, a little Hong Kong-style materialism, a little ignorance and indifference of history" (xi). Perceiving these changes as a liberating moment for the Chinese nation and Chinese individuals, the author declares that she wants to be "free-falling with a China that is no longer *homely*" (xii; emphasis added).

Although the author accepts a China estranged from its tradition in favour of its new look of global cosmopolitanism – “I thought to myself, forget about identifying and belonging. It has never been that important, anyway. The word ‘home’ needs to be redefined” (xi) – she also describes her fear of a China that has become unhomely for a returnee like her, a Chinese American or American Chinese, through two concrete moments. On one occasion, she is with a group of her Western-educated girlfriends, and over drinks and loud music at a bar in Hong Kong’s Lan Kwai Fong, they find out that, “unable to define the notions of home and roots” (xi), they have only one another for temporary company and comfort. On the following day, visiting a poor fishing village in Hong Kong with other foreign tourists, she questions again her own place in her homeland: “Am I like a foreign tourist who is searching for exoticism in my home country or is the whole world becoming Westernized?” (xii).

Wang’s anxieties over her estranged relationship with her homeland as a returnee and her conflicted feelings about China’s globalisation and westernisation are emphatically embodied in Niuniu, her narrator/protagonist who serves as her alter ego.<sup>4</sup> For Niuniu, however, returning to the US as homeland is an equally pressing concern. Niuniu’s vignettes often feature other returnees who constantly struggle to develop strategies to manage their sense of misplacement or displacement in China through an East-West romantic relationship, and Niuniu herself is no exception in her romantic adventures. On a brief return to the US, for instance, she has a fling with a Missouri prison guard, a Southern Baptist and Republican who stands for everything that Niuniu is not, whether it be his religious belief, political affiliation, aesthetic taste, or life style, yet she finds this romantic encounter reassuring, making her feel normal again. In another instance, she agrees to have a date over dinner with her admirer, a Chicago-educated returnee/college professor, who is rumoured to have a bright political future as a leading New Leftist in Chinese intellectual circles. However, her budding erotic desire for him is ultimately thwarted by his passionate yet self-righteous anti-US nationalist speech.

Both of these romantic interests, who in their own ways stand for political and nationalist extremes across the Pacific, serve as part of Niuniu’s efforts to find a cure for her failed love relationship with Len, a Chinese American ophthalmologist. Amid the novel’s loosely connected episodes, Niuniu’s melancholy romance with her Chinese American lover provides, in a sense, an organising principle for an otherwise plot-less narrative. Even though it is a subplot to the main theme of China’s transnationalism viewed through Niuniu’s portrayal, it becomes a framing device for Niuniu’s story. Niuniu’s return to

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<sup>4</sup> For a helpful account of how the author utilises autobiographical elements in her writing career, see Kong, Chapter 3.

China, it is revealed, is propelled not only by her journalistic passion for the changes in her homeland but also by her failed relationship with Len. Yet this personal tale of escape, clichéd as it may be, gives the novel a metaphorical dimension regarding home and identity.

Niuniu thus describes her attraction to Len when she first meets him at Berkeley:

There I was, a young foreign girl living in the States, and dating an older, handsome Chinese American man. As a third-generation Chinese American, Len was more American than most American friends I knew. He never tired of introducing me to the country. We went to baseball games and operas in San Francisco, took road trips down the Pacific Coast highway, and went camping in Oregon. He even taught me how to ski and dive. He enjoyed telling me the names of cartoon characters and music bands that I hadn't heard of, and explaining psychological or literary terms I had not known. He was knowledgeable and fun to be with, and at the same time he retained the humbleness of a Chinese man. (35)

Niuniu's portrayal of Len suggests that she is attracted not only to his maturity and good looks but also to his Americanness, his initiation of her into the American way of life and his retention of the "Chinese" virtue of humility. In this sense, Niuniu's memories of her tragic love affair with Len, which periodically resurface in her newly established life in China like a bad case of melancholia, eventually become a trope for her unresolved relationship with America itself. By the end of her narrative, Niuniu decides to return to the US, not as a hopelessly spurned lover, but as a woman empowered by her Chinese experiences seeking resolutions for her American life. Thus, just as she begins with a return to China, she ends her narrative with another return, this time to America. As she resolutely claims, "It is time for me to take a chance with my life again.... The answers to the rest of my life lie somewhere in America. I still have unfinished business there" (445). Despite her confidence, however, this return continues to testify to the divide between China and America and her displacement between these two sites of cultural and psychological conflicts. Her attempt to reclaim America thus only marks the beginning of her continuous struggle over home and identity.

I began my discussion in this essay with an image from Shawn Wong, which depicts the Pacific as an impasse for early Asian Americans. It is also an explicitly expressed Asian American cultural nationalist desire for home and identity, a desire monumentalised by Frank Chin's imaginary gold spike as a symbol of Chinese American rootedness in the American soil and Maxin Hong Kingston's yearning for a ghost-free, solid America. Annie Wang's transnational novel corresponds to and at the same time rewrites this nationalist project

through a revisit to the site of the Pacific at a drastically different historical moment.

In recent years, Asian American studies has begun to regard globalisation around the Pacific Rim as central to the field's development, yet critical works about this new site of transnationalism are still often confined within the US national boundaries. Given this, Wang's novel offers a more interesting narrative that locates the making of Asian American subjectivity outside US national borders, on the other shore of the Pacific. Niuniu's reconfiguration of the home-identity alignment is an alternative to the old equation of home as nation-state and citizenship, yet this new alignment also signifies the dispersal or vaporisation of the notion of home and its replacement by multiple social and cultural sites dictated by the logic of global capital. While global capital gives birth to a seemingly borderless world and a liberated transnational space for a new cultural imagination, including Asian American writing itself, it is also an illusion masking the remaining divide between Asian and American. In this sense, Wang's novel invites us to continue our efforts in locating and defining Asian America at multiple intersections of the national and the transnational across the Pacific.

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