

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

'Theorizing in Narrative Form': Premonitions of Orientalism and Racist Love in Bing Xin's 'The Photograph'¹ King-Kok Cheung

Introduction

Long before the proliferation of international adoption in the United States, Chinese author Bing Xin [冰心] published 'The Photograph' (1934), a story about an American expatriate who adopts a Chinese girl.² The story reflects transcultural and interracial dynamics and heralds many of the theoretical insights later promulgated by postcolonial scholars and Asian American critics. Bing Xin (pen name for Xie Wanying [谢婉莹], 1900-1999) began her literary career around the time of the May Fourth Movement (1919) and earned her Master's degree from Wellesley College in 1926. Though one of the most esteemed Chinese authors of the twentieth century, she is hardly discussed transnationally. 'The Photograph' – published during a period in China (1917-1937) labelled by Shu-mei Shih as 'semi-colonial,' when many Chinese writers subscribed to a form of Orientalism that 'particularized Chinese culture as the locus of the past and endorsed the universal validity of Western culture'³ – carries a subtle critique of Orientalism and cultural imperialism. Its configuration of transpacific contact crosses the boundaries of Chinese, Chinese American, ethnographic, and postcolonialist studies; problematises both American colonialist assumptions and Chinese traditional values; and impugns culturalist approaches to transracial adoption.

'The Photograph' charts an unusual East-West encounter through a detailed psychological portrait of Madam Simpson, an American who has spent twenty-eight years in China. Retiring from her post as a music teacher in a missionary school, she adopts an eight-year-old named Shuzhen after the death of Mister Wang – the girl's father and Madam's Chinese tutor. When Shuzhen is eighteen, Madam takes her to New England where they meet Reverend Li and his son Tianxi; a friendship and a nascent romance develop between the two young Chinese. Upon seeing a snapshot of Shuzhen taken by Tianxi, Madam abruptly announces her intention to return to China. Bing Xin narrates the story in third person, presenting two-thirds of it through the lens of the white expatriate; but the author shifts to an omniscient point of view after Madam and Shuzhen move to New England. Madam comes across at first as cosmopolitan and compassionate; unlike her missionary compatriots in New England

¹ Research for this article is facilitated by an Academic Senate grant from UCLA; I am indebted to Hannah Nahm for her tireless research assistance. An earlier version of this article was presented in the International Conference Translating China: Constructing Alternative Modernities, co-sponsored by Tsinghua University, University of Cambridge, and Yale University (Beijing, 20-22 November 2009); it was translated into Chinese by Pu Ruoqian [蒲若茜] and Shuangru Xu [许双如] and published in '华文学：中国世界华文文学会刊' [*Chinese Literature Journal*] 28.3 (2012) 5-16. I thank Dominika Ferens and Russell Leong for their valuable suggestions.

² Bing Xin, 'The Photograph,' in *The Photograph* trans. Jeff Book (Beijing: Panda Books, 1992) 234-35; subsequent citations are from Book's translation (unless otherwise stated) and are given in the text.

³ Shu-mei Shih, *The Lure of the Modern* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001) x-xi, 374.

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Transnational Literature Vol. 5 no. 1, November 2012.

<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

who consider China as outlandish, she prefers this country to the United States. Reading between the lines, especially in light of the perplexing ending, however, the reader can discern troublesome undercurrents of Orientalist patronage and maternal possessiveness on the part of Madam, and of self-repression and internalised stereotyping on the part of Shuzhen.

The story exemplifies Edward Said's well-known pronouncement in *Orientalism*:

When one uses categories like Oriental and Western as both the starting and the end points of analysis ... the result is usually to polarize the distinction – the Oriental becomes more Oriental, the Westerner more Western – and limit the human encounter between different cultures, traditions, and societies. In short, from its earliest modern history to the present, Orientalism as a form of thought for dealing with the foreign has typically shown the altogether regrettable tendency of any knowledge based on such hard-and-fast distinctions ... to channel thought into a West or an East compartment.⁴

Since Said's seminal study about the tendentiousness of bifurcating peoples as Orientals and Occidentals, numerous interventions about the various strands of colonialist legacies have emerged. Chinese scholars who have examined the ambivalent portrayal of Madam Simpson in 'The Photograph' have nevertheless overlooked the postcolonialist insights embedded in the story.⁵ This essay demonstrates how the Chinese author – like the black female writers invoked by Barbara Christian – has engaged in 'theorizing ... in narrative forms.'⁶

Commodification as Chinoiserie and as Affective Labor

In *Embracing the East*, Mari Yoshihara notes that the most prevalent Orientalist conception between 1870s and 1940s was an association of the powerful West with virile masculinity and of the subordinate East with passive femininity and 'premodern simplicity, naturalness, tradition':

In the age of industrialization, commercialization, and urbanization, many Americans were anxious to assert and maintain the ideas and values considered to be lost in modern society, such as purity and sincerity. As Americans discovered such qualities in Asian arts and artifacts, they believed

⁴ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage-Random House, 1979) 45-46.

⁵ See for example 邱艳萍、李柏青 [Qiu Yanping and Li Baiqing], '镜想中的文化与人性—冰心小说《相片》读解' ['Culture and Character in the Mirror: An Analysis of Bing Xin's 'The Photograph'] 琼州大学学报 [*Xiongzhou University Newsletter*] 1 (2000) 21-32; 陈利 [Chen Li], '异邦想象和自我认同——再论冰心小说《相片》' ['Exotic Imagination and Identity: Bing Xin's 'The Photograph'] <http://www.xbwhyj.cn/html/qingnianyuandi/200903/13-1188.html>; 卓如 [Zhuo Ru] '冰心的文学创作' [*Literary Works by Bing Xin*] n.d. <http://www.bingxin.org/databank/yj/b/lbxd.htm>

⁶ Barbara Christian, 'The Race for Theory,' *Cultural Critique* 6 (1987) 52.

that the production, use, and display of Asian-style goods would represent and promote their moral and cultural refinement.⁷

Such consumption and display, Yoshihara observes, reinforced white, middle-class women's place in Victorian domesticity 'while cloaking the gender and racial ideologies inherent in such practices.'⁸ Madam, notwithstanding her extensive sojourn abroad, exhibits the same nostalgia for a pre-modern tradition when she is back in the United States – which she deems less refined than China. When every seven years she returns to her New England home it no longer feels like home to her, and she is annoyed by the uncouth American youth who 'would quickly show their lack of interest or respect, and on occasions would even laugh and sneer at her.' At such times she would retreat into herself with 'thoughts, fond thoughts, of another place far to the east, where she truly felt at home ... [where] she had raised the quiet and virtuous Shuzhen' (235).

This polarisation of the United States and China – especially the association of verbal restraint with Eastern virtue – places Madam squarely in the company of American Orientalists. Throughout the story she along with other Americans constantly equates Chinese virtue with reticence: 'The girl had a certain quality and character that simply could not be found in Western girls. She possessed a quiet depth' (241). Frank Chin et al., the editors of *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian-American Writers*, specifically impute the Western association of Asian virtue with silence to 'racist love.'⁹ Although the editors have in mind the stereotypes imposed on Asian Americans, their observations are equally applicable to American perceptions of the Chinese:

One measure of the success of white racism is the silence of that [minority] race and the amount of white energy necessary to maintain or increase that silence. ... The stereotype operates as a model of behavior. ... The successful operation of the stereotype results in the neutralization of the subject race as a social, creative, and cultural force. ... Given fear of white hostility and the white threat to the survival of the subject minority, it follows that embracing the acceptable stereotype is an expedient tactic of survival.¹⁰

According to Chin et al., the American nation state extols Asians who are quiet and submissive to white authority and reproves other racial minorities – particularly African Americans – who challenge its supremacy. Furthermore, this maintenance of racial hierarchy requires ethnic collusion, a point also made by Arif Dirlik when he

⁷ Mari Yoshihara, *Embracing the East: White Women and American Orientalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003) 4, 26.

⁸ Yoshihara 26.

⁹ Frank Chin, Jeffery Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Hsu Wong, eds. 'An Introduction to Chinese- and Japanese-American Literature,' in *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian-American Writers* (1974; Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1983) xxv. I have explored different valences of Asian (American) silence, including its positive manifestations, in *Articulate Silences: Maxine Hong Kingston, Hisaye Yamamoto, Joy Kogawa* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993). Yet Shuzhen's reticence – which stems from timidity, acquiescence, and repression – does invite racist love and limit creativity and agency.

¹⁰ Frank Chin et al. xxv-xxvii.

observes that Orientalism requires ‘the complicity of [Asians] in endowing it with plausibility.’¹¹ Madam may not be consciously typecasting Shuzhen any more than Shuzhen is wittingly adhering to an ethnic cliché, yet the reiteration of the adoptee’s commendable reserve strikes a disquieting note. Since the white mother is the benefactor, the orphan may have inhabited the lauded stereotype as ‘an expedient tactic of survival.’

The dynamics in the adoptive relationship appears invidious not only in the older woman’s equation of Shuzhen’s taciturnity with Eastern mystique but also in her objectification of the youngster, who is recurrently compared with exotic flora:

One summer day, like a dainty willow blossom borne on a summer breeze, Shuzhen fell gently into the courtyard of her heart. ... The girl was as frail as a willow blossom, thin, sickly, and pale. But there was something about *this young thing* that so contrasted with the dark and lifeless atmosphere around her that Madam Simpson could not forget the little girl. (237, 239; my emphasis)

According to Yoshihara, American catalogues of East Asian merchandise around the turn of the twentieth century contain ‘photographs and illustrations not only of items being sold – such as ivory carvings, embroideries, porcelains ... but also of landscapes, people, and various images of the “Orient.”’¹² In Madam’s mind Shuzhen likewise blends with Chinese sceneries and curios. The white woman, whose ‘life was stagnating like a pond in summer with no source water and no outlet’ (237), adopts ‘this young thing’, notably, on a Christmas Eve:

Shuzhen sat in front of the fireplace beside Madam Simpson. In the light of the blazing fire the older woman looked into the gaunt and timid face and those deep-set black eyes: there was something so mysterious, so desolate in *this tiny thing*. Madam Simpson slowly reached out and touched the hand of the girl. ... And then, as she clung to the tiny hand in the warm glow of the parlor fireplace, she slowly began to sense that it was not just the hand of a little girl that she was holding; she was now grasping Mister Wang’s poetry, Mrs Wang’s exquisite embroidery; she was holding the very essence of Eastern womanhood, all the silent mystery of ancient China. (240; my emphasis)

One can hardly find a more telling illustration of Orientalism. Instead of embracing Shuzhen in flesh and blood, Madam regards ‘this tiny thing’ as an exotic Christmas present – a mysterious ‘package’ of Chinoiserie, the very embodiment of aesthetic Orientalism. Bing Xin magnifies Madam’s fetishisation of traditional China by using, whenever she enters the expatriate’s mind, stylised poetic similes such as ‘a dainty willow blossom borne on a summer breeze’ and ‘a stream in a meadow’ in contrast to her unadorned presentation of Shuzhen’s thoughts, or of the conversation between Shuzhen and Tianxi.

¹¹ Arif Dirlik, *The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997) 108.

¹² Yoshihara 31.

To Madam, Shuzhen is China doll incarnate. She therefore does not seem overly concerned with the adoptee's emotional wellbeing, though she is fully aware of the child's physical, verbal, and emotional inhibition:

And so for the next ten years Shuzhen grew up at the side of Madam Simpson. The girl was like a stream in a meadow, its slow water too deep to gurgle, too placid to be heard. Although well cared for, Shuzhen remained a short and skinny girl, and her face was always a sad, pale shade. She never showed sorrow, never showed joy. She answered when spoken to, but no more, and she went around the house as silently as if she were on tiptoes. (241)

This depiction reminds one of a timeless tableau rather than of a growing teenager. Considering that the girl is constantly *beside* Madam, her reserve may have emanated from a sense of unremitting parental surveillance. Madam nevertheless finds the hushed yet solicitous presence to be a solace. The care she bestows on Shuzhen is requited manifold by the daughter who plays the role of a scrupulous handmaiden, ever mindful of her adoptive mother's needs and mutely active in the background.

Whenever Madam Simpson was sick, the lass would quietly and meticulously take care of the older woman with gentleness and genuine feeling. Whenever Madam Simpson would look up from her bed, Shuzhen was always sitting at her side. ... 'You're like an angel sent from Heaven!' Madam Simpson would always want to say, but as she looked into that ashen face and sorrowful eyes, she would hold back her words. (241)

Shuzhen is in effect performing what David L. Eng terms 'affective labor.' Calling attention to 'the racialization of intimacy in our global age,' particularly to the widespread adoption of Chinese girls by American citizens, Eng cautions: 'we need to consider how the stereotype of the hard-working, agreeable, and passive Asian girl, ever eager to please, works to smooth over political problems, economic disparities, and cultural differences.'¹³ Madam embraces the stock image and takes for granted the adoptee's constant vigil. She seems content as long as the rueful teenager 'serves' as her guardian angel. Not once does she attempt to find out the cause of the youngster's timidity or plumb the depth of her sadness. Shuzhen later confides to young Tianxi: 'Since my father died, I have always felt no one understands me in my silence' (253).

It is not that an emotional bond is absent between the adoptive mother and the child. Yet what connects the two is not mutual understanding but forlorn co-dependence:

Both of them felt like outcasts in the world, lonely fragments that fit only into each other. The sense of loss and loneliness brought them closer together that day [after sweeping Mister Wang's tomb during Qing Ming Festival]. As they walked home, Shuzhen could feel herself being bathed in the motherly love

¹³ David L. Eng, *The Feelings of Kinship: Queer Liberalism and the Racialization of Intimacy* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010) 109, 110.

and compassion that Madam Simpson had for her. They never went out much; Madam Simpson slowly lost contact with most of her friends, and she even lost interest in collecting antiques. Her life was now centered on this fair and delicate willow blossom, Shuzhen. (242)

Madam's fondness for the child is clearly due in part to their similar personality: gentle, reticent, withdrawn, despondent, and self-conscious. The fact that the two share these attributes suggests that they are, *pace* Madam, not exclusive Chinese traits, not the epitome of Eastern womanhood. Her maternal devotion, however palpable in the passage above, is undercut by her acquisitiveness and possessiveness, and her unwitting exploitation of the adoptee. Qiu Yanping [邱艳萍] and Li Baiqing [李柏青] notice that Madam stops keeping a dog and collecting antiques soon after the adoption, as though 'Shuzhen were merely "a little dog" and an "antique" to allay her loneliness.' Qiu and Li, however, stop short of linking such fungibility with what has come to be associated with Orientalism.¹⁴

Especially unsettling is the American mother's fear of losing her daughter to marriage:

There was something in that thought that froze her heart. ... Loneliness, a chilling sadness overwhelmed her ... she trembled ... and pushed that terrifying thought out of her mind. ... However, if anyone should broach the subject of Shuzhen's marriage, Madam Simpson would simply smile smugly, and with practiced tact change the subject. (242, 243)

The translation 'terrifying' fails to capture the sense of the original Chinese expression 'buxiang [不祥],'¹⁵ meaning *inauspicious* or *ominous*. Few mothers would look upon the prospect of a daughter's marriage so adversely. Madam is clearly perturbed by its consequence – of her being left alone. Her selfishness in wishing Shuzhen to remain with her forever is a far cry from maternal love but is completely in line with her commodification of Shuzhen as antique, pet, and handmaiden.

Racist Love and Racist Hate

The asymmetrical relationship is even more pronounced after Shuzhen accompanies Madam to New England, where the American mother is occasionally 'asked to speak at the church on the present situation in China' while the Chinese daughter 'would quietly sit and listen': 'Everyone thought [Shuzhen] was adorable. Her quiet and respectful disposition was especially admired by the older women who showered the girl with little gifts' (245). Madam is venerated as an authority on China; Shuzhen, as the demure Oriental. The white woman fits the profile of what Dirlik calls 'Sinified Westerner' whose "'Orientalization"' was what qualified [her] to speak for the Orient,' while Shuzhen emblematises 'self-Orientalization.'¹⁶ The church ladies'

¹⁴ Qiu and Li 27.

¹⁵ 冰心 [Bing Xin], '相片' ['The Photograph'] in 《冰心作品精编》 [Selected Works of Bing Xin] ed. 卓如 [Zhuo Ru] (1934; Guilin, China: 漓江出版社 [Lijiang Chubanshe], 2006) 397.

¹⁶ Dirlik 110, 111.

eleemosynary attitude, along with Madam's 'matronizing' behavior, also brings to mind what Stacilee Ford terms 'maternal exceptionalism,' denoting American women 'who drew on their national and gender identities, particularly their "feminine" roles as mothers and/or nurturers, to claim a certain authority' in Asia.¹⁷

Like Shuzhen, Tianxi, too, chafes under white patronage. Instead of holding his tongue, he voices his frustrations with American missionaries' proprietary stance toward the Chinese:

Last year the church sent Father here to study more theology, and they also have supplied me with a very generous stipend so I can come and attend classes. The sad part is that I would prefer to study art, but because of the conditions set up by the church, I must attend classes on theology. They want to make me into a pastor ... but I have no desire to wear a black robe and stand behind a pulpit all my life! (251)

The missionaries' derailment of Tianxi's secular aspiration coincides with Madam's insidious control of Shuzhen's character and comportment. Both young persons have been recipients of white beneficence with invisible strings attached. Tianxi receives a missionary stipend to study theology at the expense of pursuing his own interest; he is expected to serve the church in return for the evangelical assistance. Similarly, Shuzhen is expected to repay Madam's kindness to the extent of curtailing her own independence, personal growth, and pursuit of happiness.

Through Tianxi – who decries the ethnographic gaze of the American missionaries and questions their presumption of cultural superiority and their supposition that Cathay can be easily encapsulated and known (specifically through him as a participant-observer) – Bing Xin anticipates Said's critique of a reductive colonialist epistemology and its attendant hierarchy:

To speak at the church and have people come up to me afterwards and ask questions about China scares me to death. From my scant twenty years of life, what do I know about four thousand years of Chinese history and what it means to us today? The very idea of doing that annoys me. ... What rattles me even more is when people say that China had no culture before the coming of Christianity. At the seminary they ... call me a 'model Chinese youth.' Some of the educators who have been in China ... like to take me with them on their fundraising campaigns. ... [They] introduce me to the audience with something like, 'Just look at the kind of Chinese youth our education there has produced!' Isn't that just the way a circus man shows his trained monkey to the crowds? ... If there is anything praiseworthy about me, it is no thanks to these people! (251)

Tianxi's scathing comments about condescending Christian educators prefigure not only Said's arguments but also those of the editors of *Aiiiiiiii!* concerning 'racist love,' of Dominika Ferens concerning white gaze, and of Asian Americanists (such as

¹⁷ Stacilee Ford (Hosford), 'Gendered Exceptionalisms: American Women in Hong Kong and Macau,' *diss.*, U of Hong Kong, 2002, 114.

Victor Bascara and David Palumbo-Liu) concerning the dubious construct of the 'Asian American model minority.'¹⁸

In accordance with 'racist love' and 'racist hate' – European American approbation of tractable racial minorities and condemnation of dissidents from white sovereignty – the American missionaries at the turn of the twentieth century took pride in the Chinese who accepted Christianity and denounced as heathens those who adhered to ancestral worship. Tianxi complains that even Chinese Christians are being subject to the white gaze, paraded as trophies of evangelical triumph. His description of the farewell ceremony for a missionary about to leave for China further reveals American revulsion against indigenous Chinese culture: 'The missionary candidate ... says a final sad but stirring farewell, and everyone shows the person the utmost respect and pity as if the fellow was heading for some disease-infested jungle full of savages!' (252).

This negative association of China with malaise and barbarism seems diametrically opposite to the assessment of Madam, who holds a highly romanticised view of the culture – so much so that she has virtually made the country her home. She so prefers respectful Chinese youth to their boisterous American counterparts that she scrupulously cultivates a pure Chinese specimen:

Everyone praised Madam Simpson for how she raised Shuzhen: for the ten years that she took care of her in China, Shuzhen remained entirely Chinese in looks, action, and spirit. She never wore Western clothes. Except when with folks who could not understand Chinese, Madam Simpson never spoke to the girl in English. If any of the boys from the school came to their house for an occasional party, Shuzhen would timidly stay at the Madam's side and would never enter into the games or bantering. Even when she passed the candied fruit or other refreshments, she would always keep her eyes modestly downcast and speak in a whisper. (243)

Madam's Sinophile attitude may seem a welcome exception to American missionary vilification of China. But I would suggest that the two apparently opposed tendencies are fundamentally related. In ensuring that Shuzhen abides by her notion of a Chinese paragon, the adoptive mother is no less self-serving and guilty of stereotyping than her compatriots. The racist love she showers on Shuzhen is the obverse of the racist hate of her countrymen who openly revile Chinese culture. Shuzhen's Chineseness is being inculcated not through interaction with other Chinese but by being sequestered and confined to 'Madam's side,' under the maternal assumption that the 'get-togethers ... most young people enjoy so much were uncomfortable times for Shuzhen, and she never liked them' (243). Once removed from Madam's watchful eye, however, Shuzhen relishes the companionship of her peers (especially Tianxi) in New England. Thus one must interpret the young woman's alleged preference for solitude as a concession to parental wishes, to the alien mother's 'Chinese' upbringing of her.

¹⁸ Dominika Ferens, *Edith and Winifred Eaton: Chinatown Missions and Japanese Romances* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002) 80-110; Victor Bascara, *Model Minority Imperialism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006); David Palumbo-Liu, *Asian/American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999) 171-81.

Contesting Epistemologies

In *Cold War Orientalism* Christina Klein distinguishes between European texts about Asia published before World War II, which generally depict Asians as racially inferior, and postwar American texts that tend to espouse 'racial tolerance and inclusion' and serve as 'the official ideology undergirding postwar expansion.' She continues: 'in forging emotionally satisfying bonds across the divides of difference ... the sentimental could serve as an instrument for exercising power.'¹⁹ Although 'The Photograph' was published before World War II, it brings out the two forms of Orientalism expounded by Klein – the one dismissing Asians as inferior and the other demonstrating white sympathy. Of specific relevance is her point about the 'double-edged' power of sympathy in interracial adoption. Adducing the example of the Welcome House, an adoption agency that Pearl Buck launched in 1949 'to find families for Asian and part-Asian children born in the United States whom other agencies refused to handle,' Klein connects adoption across racial boundaries with Cold War Orientalism:

The white mother that figured so prominently in postwar middlebrow culture ... possessed a complex genealogy. ... The figure of the white parent to the nonwhite child has long worked as a trope for representing the ostensibly 'natural' relations of hierarchy and domination. The infantilization of racialized Others and marginalized social groups has been a standard rhetorical means of legitimating unequal power relations.²⁰

Madam, in keeping Shuzhen under her constrictive custody, is a precursor to the postwar middlebrow white mother. Her possessiveness, already perceptible in China where she would brush aside any thoughts of Shuzhen's marriage, becomes glaring in New England when she comes across Tianxi's photo of Shuzhen:

Madam Simpson suddenly froze in shock!

In the background was the thick, gnarled bough of an old oak, its branches adorned with new leaves, at the bottom was a lush green lawn, and in the middle was Shuzhen. Her hands were on a picnic basket that she was opening ... her face reflected all the young woman's spirit, personality, and joy. Her perfect smile revealed her beautiful white teeth, and in her eyes there was a vitality that Madam Simpson had never seen in the girl for the ten years she had known her!

Madam Simpson trembled slightly. A deep and dark feeling suddenly seized her. It was not fear, nor was it anger, it was not even remorse. ... She clutched the photograph tightly as she stared at it. (257)

In the Chinese original Shuzhen's expression in the photograph signifies more than 'vitality': 'her face flushed with coyness; her radiant smile suffused with rapture and

¹⁹ Christina Klein, *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945-1961* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2003) x-xi, xiv-xv.

²⁰ Klein 175.

awash with tenderness [满脸的娇羞，满脸的笑，惊喜的笑，含情的笑].²¹ The original leaves little doubt that Shuzhen is in love with Tianxi. Madam, who catches through the photo her first glimpse of Shuzhen's passion, spirit, and womanhood, is startled by the development. Because of her vested interest in keeping the adoptee primly Chinese, she is dumbfounded by the incongruous double.

The reader, on the other hand, has learned of the girl coming to life before, when alone with Tianxi after meeting him at dinner. Upon listening to his tirade against American missionaries, she feels galvanised by his presence – which she likens to ‘an illuminating light so warm and powerful that it penetrated and enveloped her very soul. As she looked into Tianxi's face, his cheeks burning and eyes blazing with passion for the truth he spoke, tears began to well up in her eyes’ (252). Tianxi's impassioned speech obviously strikes a deep chord in Shuzhen, who perhaps for the first time realises the extent to which she has been stifled by her adoptive mother. Unlike Madam, who has persisted in seeing Shuzhen as the embodiment of ancient Chinese art, Tianxi ‘could immediately sense in her the “new China” ... a dynamic and progressive China’ (253). Whether Tianxi's perception is any more accurate than Madam's, the discrepancy suggests that the image of an impassive daughter is largely a maternal fantasy, perhaps perpetuated by the role Shuzhen has felt compelled to play beside Madam.

Far from being relieved and pleased by the photo, which displays a sensuous and vibrant young lady, Madam is devastated. Her bewilderment may be diagnosed as a form of ‘Orientalist melancholia,’ a term coined by Rey Chow to describe those white sinologists who censure contemporary Chinese writers for not living up to time-honored Chinese literary criteria: ‘But this moralistic indictment of the other's infidelity masks a more fundamental anxiety ... that the Chinese past which [the sinologist] has undertaken to penetrate is evaporating and that the sinologist himself is the abandoned subject ... [that] the historical relation between the “first world” and the “third world” is reversed.’²² Madam experiences a comparable ‘dis-orientation’ brought on by the stark new impression of the Chinese lass she has presumed to ‘know’ so well hitherto. She feels destabilised by another subjectivity, displaced by an alternate epistemology.

Subversion of the Master's Tool

The eponymous photograph recalls, albeit with a subaltern twist, Susan Sontag's observations: ‘The most grandiose result of the photographic enterprise is to give us the sense that we can hold the whole world in our heads – as an anthology of images. ... It means putting oneself into a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge – and, therefore, like power ... it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed.’²³ Photography in Sontag's formulation sustains the relationship between the coloniser and the colonised. Bing Xin's title similarly alerts readers to particular ways of seeing. Most of the narrative sketches are mediated by Madam's limited perspective, filtered through her Orientalist lens. In making Tianxi

²¹ 冰心 [Bing Xin], ‘相片’[‘The Photograph’] 405; my English translation.

²² Rey Chow, *Writing Diaspora: Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993) 4.

²³ Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 1973) 3, 4, 14.

the photographer in the story, the author wrests the authority from Madam and enables the reader to detect optical distortions and oblique angles in her framing of the Chinese characters, particularly Shuzhen's. If photography is often made to serve possessive colonialist ends, Bing Xin – by using Tianxi's image to contest Madam's construction of the deadpan Chinese girl – shows it is possible to use the master's tool to deconstruct the master's predatory vision.

Tianxi's photo unhinges Madam because her icon has summarily fallen under what James Clifford calls "endangered authenticities."²⁴ She may even feel betrayed or deceived by Shuzhen's Oriental veneer that she herself has so painstakingly varnished. Moreover, her response inverts another one of Sontag's premises: 'All photographs are *memento mori*. To take a photograph is to participate in another person's (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, mutability ... to contact or lay claim to another reality.'²⁵ Instead of allowing Madam to participate in *another person's* mutability or to lay claim to another reality, the sight of her daughter exuding 'the fragrance of youth' trains the affrighted eyes on her own wizened complexion and signs of mortality: 'She looked across the room at the mirror on her vanity. Her hair was disheveled ... and her face was ashen white. She peered at her own bloodshot eyes, and at the wrinkled face' (259). Previously, Madam has used the adjective 'ashen' to describe Shuzhen; now the relation between the 'first world' and the 'third world' (to echo Chow) and between subject and object is reversed.

The photograph unleashes the greatest fear of Madam all along: the adoptee's marriage. Though she does not explicitly attribute her consternation to that dreaded scenario, her convulsive reaction upon viewing the photo recalls her earlier turmoil at the thought of Shuzhen's marriage: 'there was something in that thought that froze her heart ... She trembled ... and pushed that terrifying thought out of her mind' (242). In both instances she 'froze' and 'trembled.' The photo evidently telescopes in her mind's eye the looming possibility of losing Shuzhen to Tianxi, and this time she cannot simply push away the thought. The tightness with which she clutches the photo reveals her nervousness about losing both cognitive and physical grasp of the adoptee and her determination to hold on to Shuzhen.

The photo was taken during an excursion in Madam's absence. Being ill, she could not join the young people for the outing: 'She was going to ask Shuzhen to stay home and take care of her, but afraid the girl's presence would be missed too much by the others, and because she assumed that Shuzhen would not go alone anyway, she said half-heartedly that the girl should go on ahead with them' (258). Her inner thoughts disclose her manipulative proclivity and her limited understanding of the adoptee for, to her surprise, Shuzhen 'smiled and told the group she would join them, and they all ran down the porch steps and disappeared in the car' (258). The youth's readiness to leave Madam behind puts one in mind of Zora Neale Hurston's folktale 'Member Youse a Nigger' in which the white master counts on his slave John to stay with his 'loving' family after emancipation. Yet John is more than happy to leave: 'le Massa kept callin' 'im and his voice was pitiful. But John kept right on steppin' to

²⁴James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988) 5.

²⁵Sontag 15.

Canada.²⁶ Shuzhen may feel grateful enough to Madam, but she too wishes to be liberated from her white matron.

In New England Shuzhen has become an evolved fledgling eager to take wing. Her inhibition hitherto has been to a large degree conditioned by Madam rather than being intrinsic to her Chinese character. By the same token, her transformation into an outgoing woman can be credited to the influence of Tianxi as well as to the American ways to which both of them have been exposed. Tianxi encourages Shuzhen to mingle with American youth and to consider attending college in the United States. The idea of an American college education for Shuzhen had in fact occurred to Madam, but shortly after seeing the photograph she changes her mind and announces what becomes the tale's clincher: 'I'm thinking, daughter, about returning to China' (259). Not 'daughter' but '*haizi* [孩子]' or 'child' is the vocative used in the Chinese original. Since one does not leave a child to fend for herself in a foreign country, Madam undoubtedly intends to return to China with Shuzhen.

Taking Shuzhen back just when she is blooming, falling in love, and exploring life on her own makes little sense. But it seems Madam is bent on nipping adulthood and courtship in the bud. Presumably she thinks that once back in China and away from Tianxi, the adoptee will resume her wonted role as the shadowy presence that remains by her mother's side out of filial piety. Despite good intentions in adopting Shuzhen, Madam bears the colonialist mark in tagging the adoptee as an Other and as a dependent who should repay maternal care with lifelong servitude. Shuzhen's response to Madam's announcement is withheld from the reader. She may decide to stay against her adoptive mother's wishes, or Tianxi may decide to go back to China with her and both of them may put romantic love before filial debt. Since the story was published at a historical juncture in China when Western influence was spreading rapidly and when the received code of conduct was being challenged, the opened ending leaves ample room for each reader's imagination.

Published decades before Said's *Orientalism* and the *Aiiiiieee!* anthology, 'The Photograph' already contains kernels of these later theoretical deliberations. Bing Xin is far ahead of her time in divulging the colonialist mindset of Madam beneath her admiration of Chinese culture and her affection for Shuzhen, and in roundly censuring, via Tianxi, the supercilious missionary gaze prior to World War II. 'Defining Asia' over the course of the nineteenth century, Ferens points out, 'was largely the province of missionaries and lay travelers.'²⁷ 'The Photograph' provides an early literary glimpse of how New England missionaries sought to garner ethnographic knowledge and of how they operated in accordance with preconceived notions of the Orient. Tianxi's advice to Shuzhen to learn about another culture by making American acquaintances suggests a much more viable way to know the 'other'; while he also generalises about the West ('I have always respected Westerners' courage and zest for life. I very rarely find an American young person perpetually somber and pensive like we are' [253-53]), his observations are derived from everyday human encounters and not from ethnography. The white mother, despite spending decades in China, has chosen to admire the culture in the form of

²⁶ Zora Neale Hurston, 'Member Youse a Nigger,' *Mules and Men* (1935; New York: Harper & Row, 1990) 90.

²⁷ Ferens19.

ancient art and, soon after the adoption, to occlude herself and her child from associating with living Chinese.

The story thus deprecates reductive ways of knowing and illuminates Said's dictum that 'the line separating Occident from Orient ... is less a fact of nature than it is a fact of human production.'²⁸ Bing Xin blurs the line by indicating that Madam and Shuzhen share many attributes as introverts; that the adoptive mother sees the adoptee as embodying pre-modern Cathay while Tianxi regards her as epitomising new China; that Madam and her missionary compatriots hold divergent views of China as the cradle of civilisation and as a hotbed of barbarians, respectively; that Tianxi's impressions of outgoing Americans hardly apply to Madam. These contradictory clues all go to show the need for intersubjective knowledge transcending binary oppositions.

'The Photograph' as Sinophone Chinese American Literature²⁹

This narrative also collapses the distinction between Chinese and Asian American writing. Its crisscrossing of three strands of Orientalism – Madam Simpson's racist love, the American missionaries' imperialist disdain, and Shuzhen's enactment of the 'model minority' stereotype – foreshadows many of the key themes elaborated by Chin et al. in the introduction to *Aiiiiieee!* In portraying the loneliness of a white woman in China and the alienation of Chinese youth in the United States, the story traces the thorny process of migration and acculturation across nations. The pang of double exile suffered by Madam in China and the United States resonates with the experiences of many early Asian immigrant characters, including the protagonist in Younghill Kang's *East Goes West* (1937), the farmer in Bienvenido Santos's 'Scent of Apples' (1955), and the Vietnamese cook in Monique Truong's *The Book of Salt* (2003).³⁰ The sense of displacement felt by Shuzhen and Tianxi in New England parallels that of Sui Sin Far/Edith Eaton in her autobiographical 'Leaves from the Mental Portfolio of an Eurasian' (1909); yet 'The Photograph' contrasts significantly with Far's short story 'Pat and Pan' (1912), in which the race of the adoptive mother and child is transposed and in which the author, as Cynthia Callahan observes, uses the transracial adoption to 'critique the assimilationist agenda of religious missionaries.'³¹ The objectification of Shuzhen and Tianxi further brings to mind the titular protagonist Sakura Jiro in Onoto Watanna/Winnifred Eaton's 'The Loves of

²⁸ Edward W. Said, 'Orientalism Reconsidered,' *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (1986; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000) 199.

²⁹ Sau-ling C. Wong uses this term in 'The Yellow and the Black: Race and Diasporic Identity in Sinophone Chinese American Literature.' *Diasporic Histories: Cultural Archives of Chinese Transnationalism* ed. Deeborah L. Madsen and Andrea Riemenschnitter (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2009) 77.

³⁰ Younghill Kang, *East Goes West: The Making of an Oriental Yankee* (1937; New York: Kaya, 1997); Bienvenido Santos, 'Scent of Apples,' in *Scent of Apples: A Collection of Short Stories* (1955; Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1979) 21-29; Monique Truong, *The Book of Salt* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2003).

³¹ Sui Sin Far [Edith Eaton], 'Leaves from the Mental Portfolio of an Eurasian,' *Mrs. Spring Fragrance and Other Writings* ed. Amy Ling and Annette White-Parks (1909; Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995) 218-230; 'Pat and Pan,' *Mrs. Spring Fragrance* 160-166; Cynthia Callahan, *Kin of Another Kind: Transracial Adoption in American Literature* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011) 158.

Sakura Jiro and the Three Headed Maid' (1903), in which a Japanese immigrant must earn his keep in the New World by making a voyeuristic spectacle of himself.³²

'The Photograph' bears especially close resemblance to Ruthanne Lum McCunn's biographical novel *Wooden Fish Songs* (1995), which depicts the adulterated love of Fanny (a white woman) for her adopted Chinese son Lue Gim Gong (1858-1925).³³ The two adoptive mothers hold much in common. Fanny regards Lue as her 'creation' and treats him both as a 'field Negro' who tends her orchard and a 'house Negro' who attends her sick bed. Madam fashions Shuzhen according to her own Orientalist conceit and expects unconditional gratitude. The only difference is that Fanny takes credit for Lue's Christian demeanour whereas Madam ascribes Shuzhen's sedateness to Eastern femininity. Given the many overlapping concerns between 'The Photograph' and the Asian American texts, it merits consideration as Chinese American literature alongside Anglophone works (that already fall within this rubric) by Chinese nationals such as Chiang Yee, Lin Yutang, Wu Ting Fang, and Yung Wing. Most of the other pre-World War II authors mentioned focus on the experience of Chinese in the United States; Bing Xin alone evokes the reverse odyssey of an American woman in China.³⁴

In its dual critique of American Orientalism and Chinese patriarchal familism, the story aligns perfectly with Asian American literature. Wu Bing (in fact a daughter of Bing Xin), pioneering scholar of Asian American literature in China and founder of the Chinese American Literature Research Center in Beijing, has published an essay entitled 'Reading Chinese American Literature to Learn about America, China, and Chinese America.' 'The Photograph' sheds light on all three terrains through its depiction of Christians in New England, Americans in pre-World War II China, and Chinese in America. Wu's appraisal of Chinese American literature as 'introspection literature' for readers in China and specifically her reservation about Chinese filial obligation apply to the narrative as well, given its ambivalence toward traditional values.³⁵ Unlike Qiu and Li, who hold up Shuzhen as the exemplar of two positive aspects of Chinese culture – the traditional virtues of Old China and the progressive virtues of New China³⁶ – I believe Bing Xin beckons us to look critically at the conventional inculcation of reticence, filial duty, and disproportionate gratitude.

³² Watanna, Onoto [Winnifred Eaton], 'The Loves of Sakura Jiro and the Three Headed Maid,' *A Half Caste' and Other Writings* ed. Linda Trinh Moser and Elizabeth Rooney (1903; Urbana and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003) 60-66.

³³ Ruthanne Lum McCunn, *Wooden Fish Songs* (1995; Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2007).

³⁴ Bing Xin – being an author who spent substantial time in the United States and who (at least in this story) depicted Asians in the New World – fits the comprehensive definition of Asian American author proposed by myself and Stan Yogi; see King-Kok Cheung and Stan Yogi, eds., *Asian American Literature: An Annotated Bibliography* (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1998) v-vi.

³⁵ Wu Bing, 'Reading Chinese American Literature to Learn about America, China, and Chinese America,' *Amerasia Journal* 34.2 (2008) 99-108; 吴冰 [Wu Bing], '关于华裔美国文学研究的思考' ['Concerning Asian American Literary Studies'], 《外国文学评论》 *Foreign Literary Criticism* 2 (2008): 20. The excessive filial debt demanded of Asian American daughters is also the subject of a recent book-length study; see erin Khuê Ninh, *Ingratitude: The Debt-Bound Daughter in Asian American Literature* (New York: New York University Press, 2011).

³⁶ Qiu and Li 22.

These values, defamiliarised through Madam Simpson's Western eyes, take on a troubling light, allowing the author to make insinuations against American Orientalism and conventional Chinese feminine ideal simultaneously. In reinforcing the 'Eastern' virtue of reticence and in believing that Shuzhen will remain forever obliging after returning to China, Madam is not simply blinkered by her stereotypical vision. Other than her dread of losing Suchen through marriage, her familistic notions – perhaps just as inimical to a youngster's self-development – are not so different from those of traditional Chinese parents. Shuzhen herself, before encountering Tianxi, has been conforming not only to maternal expectations but also to patriarchal protocols for Chinese women. In sitting quietly in the New England congregation while Madam lectures on China, thereby conferring on the American woman the exclusive power to speak for the Other, she is an accomplice in abetting Orientalist representation and bolstering cultural hegemony. Although Tianxi also balks at representing his homeland to an American audience, his reluctance stems from his sound reasoning that any generalisations about this vast country inevitably fall short. Furthermore, his vision of 'new China' – lively, passionate, and expressive, as captured in his snapshot of Shuzhen – affords an appealing alternative to the timid willowy figure enshrined in traditional Chinese paintings and cherished by Madam.

International Adoption

The assignation, preservation, and reinscription of traditional values have far-reaching repercussions today on account of widespread inter-country adoption. Klein contends that transracial adoption of Asian orphans during the Cold War era was not merely a private affair but a 'social practice' fraught with political ramifications.³⁷ The interracial adoption in 'The Photograph,' arguably a precedent to Klein's Cold War examples, offers a sobering contribution to on-going debates over the viability of various cultural approaches to raising adoptees whose racial and national origins differ from the adoptive parents'. In cases of Chinese girls with European American families, in particular, adoptive parents face the choice of whether to bring up the adoptee according to conventional Chinese values or according to their own customs and beliefs. Vincent J. Cheng, who argues that issues surrounding transracial and inter-country adoption are 'important reflections of Western cultural attitudes toward cultural identity and authenticity,' communicates his misgivings about the popular 'heritage industry' putatively designed to help Chinese adoptees in the United States to learn about their culture:

Such choices are not likely or frequently to be made ... on the basis of actual lived experience, but rather on the basis of cultural stereotypes ... resulting most frequently (and unconsciously) in Orientalisms and fetishizations of an exoticized otherness, evocations of an exoticized but dead past, or exercises in what ... Renato Rosaldo has so aptly coined 'imperialist nostalgia.' ... We would not apply the same dynamics of authenticity when there is no racial difference involved, that is, with white babies.³⁸

³⁷ Klein 174.

³⁸ Vincent J. Cheng, *Inauthentic: The Anxiety over Culture and Identity* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004) 64, 79-80.

Racial difference, compounded by personal preference, accounts for Madam's calculated attempt to shield Shuzhen from Western heritage. By refraining from speaking English to her and from teaching her about American culture, Madam deprives the adoptee of a valuable bilingual and bicultural upbringing. It is Tianxi, vehement critic of Western missionaries, who nevertheless stresses the importance of crosscultural interchange: 'I believe we ought to use our time abroad ... to travel,' he tells Shuzhen. 'I have always respected Westerners' courage and zest for life. ... I really think you ought to join them sometime; it would really broaden your horizon' (254). In the end, Madam's nostalgic, culturalist projection of the adoptee morphs into Tianxi's rendition of a vivacious Shuzhen embodying 'New China' – a rendering that is surely no less authentically Chinese during and after the iconoclastic May Fourth era (a period from about 1919 to 1926) that witnessed the erosion of Confucian culture and the ascendancy of western ideals.³⁹ Though published well before adoption across racial lines began to gain currency, this early transnational tale is one of the first to evince the hazards of essentialising and fetishising adoptees and regarding them as cultural acquisitions.

Conclusion

Bing Xin is perhaps the first Chinese writer to reverse the Orientalist gaze by creating a story around an American woman. According to the historian David Roediger,

White writers have long been positioned as the leading and most dispassionate investigators of the lives, values, and abilities of people of color. ... Writers of color ... are cast as providing insight, often presumed to be highly subjective, of what it is like to be a 'minority.'⁴⁰

From this vantage point – and extending it to the Pacific Rim context – Bing Xin's experimental appropriation of white authority is nothing short of insurgent. Just as the eponymous photograph inverts the colonialist relationship noted by Sontag, the narrative confounds established Orientalist hierarchy. Madam regards her Chinese ward as an ethnographic subject, but she herself is simultaneously subjected to the probing gaze of the Chinese author.

Far more nuanced than the one-dimensional maternal perception, however, is Bing Xin's portrayal of Madam, whose psychological complexity rivals that of Megan Davis, the white female protagonist in *The Bitter Tea of General Yen* (1933) directed by Frank Capra.⁴¹ Palumbo-Liu notes that Megan, an expatriate romantically drawn to but culturally repulsed by the Chinese general, vacillates 'between wanting to escape from Yen and wishing to convert him to Christianity.'⁴² Madam's attitude toward

³⁹ In Wang Ning's words, "the May 4th Movement began the process of Chinese modernity, in which Western cultural trends and academic thoughts flooded into China, destroying the mechanism of China's long-lasting nationalism," in "(Re)Considering Chinese American Literature: Toward Rewriting Literary History in a Global Age," *Amerasia Journal* 38.2 (2012) xvii.

⁴⁰ David R. Roediger, ed. *Black on White: Black Writers on What It Means to Be White* (New York: Schocken Books, 1998) 4.

⁴¹ The film is based on a novel with the same title by Grace Zaring Stone (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1930).

⁴² Palumbo-Liu 59.

China is no less vexed. Her decision to stay in the country attests to her feminist independence and her willingness to become assimilated into an alien culture. Yet her attempt to preserve the adoptee as China doll betrays her ‘Orientalist melancholia’ and ‘imperialist nostalgia.’

Unlike ethnocentric Chinese or American writers, Bing Xin delicately balances chiasmic registers in the story. On the political level the author’s sympathies are with the young Chinese against the American Orientalist ideology embodied by Madam and the New England missionaries. On the psychological level the dynamic is reversed: the narrative champions American individualism and self-development over identification with family and nation. On this level Madam’s attraction to China is no more peculiar than Shuzhen’s growing fascination with the United States, and the author depicts the white recluse’s predicament feelingly. Although I have focused on interracial politics to emphasise the author’s foresight regarding Orientalism, the nuanced sketch of Madam – a perspicacious character study of an ageing woman who has chosen to remain single and to spend most of her life in an Other world – warrants no less investigation. To borrow Dirlik’s words, Madam exemplifies ‘the Orientalist [who] is “Orientalized” ... in the very process of entering the “Orient” intellectually and sentimentally.’⁴³

Viewing ‘The Photograph’ with the hindsight of postcolonialist and Asian American studies allows us to see the prescient author in a subversive light. The literary audacity whereby Bing Xin arrogates to herself white ‘authority’, her artistic finesse in delineating the dynamics of interracial adoption, and her sensitivity in attending to the political and psychological dimensions of the narrative continue to radiate across borders and centuries. At a time when most Chinese writers leveled their critique at Chinese feudalism and looked up to the West as a source of salvation, Bing Xin homed in on the hierarchical relationship between the United States and China and cautioned against imperialist perils. She conveyed the difference, back in 1934, between Orientalism and a newly evolving Chinese culture, and between Eurocentrism and universality.

⁴³ Dirlik 119. I thank Ferens for prodding this dual construal of Madam.