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## Relocation of Cultural Identity in *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book*

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### Abstract

Maxine Hong Kingston, born in California, America in 1940, is a celebrated Chinese-American writer. And she is the most representative female writer in promoting the prosperity of Chinese-American literature in the late 20 century. As a Chinese American writer's unique identity, she pays special attention to Chinese-Americans in her works. *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book* is her first real novel published in 1989. Its publication brought strong social shock and numerous literary critics and scholars to evaluate her works from different perspectives in a variety of literary theory. Unlike her previous works, *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book* transfers the focus from the reconstruction of Chinese-American history to the Chinese American cultural identity. Through careful reading of the text, this paper, with Homi K. Bhabha's post-colonial theory as a theoretical base, aims to explore the reconstruction and relocation of cultural identity after cultural perplexity and disillusionment, trying to open up a new way out for Chinese-Americans.

**Key words:** Maxine Hong Kingston; *Tripmaster Monkey*; Cultural identity; Disillusionment and relocation

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### INTRODUCTION

Maxine Hong Kingston is the most representative female writer in promoting the prosperity of Chinese-American literature in the late 20 century. As a second-generation Chinese American, she faces dual influences from both Chinese culture and American culture. And her particular cultural identity not only provides ideas and materials for her creation, but also makes her profoundly understand Chinese and American cultures. Therefore, her works, based on Chinese culture and impacted by American literature, mainly manifest the perplexity, collision and fusion between the Chinese and western cultures.

As a popular Chinese-American writer, Kingston's works leave a deep imprint on American mainstream culture. She published a series of works with large amounts of information about ancient China which is a mysterious country to many Americans and thus arouses much interest and attention from Americans. Her first autobiographical novel, *The Woman Warrior*, based on her own immigrant experience and published in 1976, has been considered as her masterpiece. And then *China Men* in 1980, *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book* in 1989 were both well-received. The above three novels make Kingston the leading figure among the modern Asian American writers.

*Tripmaster Monkey* is Kingston's first real novel. Different from *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men*, *Tripmaster Monkey* transfers the focus from the reconstruction of Chinese American history to the Chinese American cultural identity. And "Kingston's interest shifts from synthesis to multiplicity, and the search for direct self-expression develops into exploration of performance and masquerade." (Kingston & Janette, 1996, p.145) As her first non-autobiographical postmodern novel, *Tripmaster Monkey* won both the Pen USA West Award in Fiction and also the American Academy and Institution of Arts and Letters Award in 1990. The story is set San Francisco in the 1960s. And Wittmam Ah Sing, the

protagonist, is a fifth-generation Chinese American, hippie, playwright director and poet. This novel mixes Chinese classical novels, the western literary tradition and American culture, depicting the phenomenon of the entanglement resulting from Chinese American experiences of the two different cultures. In this novel, the issue of cultural identity is further discussed. Obviously, the protagonist, Wittman Ah Sing, is still regarded as “the Other” simply because of his yellow skin, dark hair and other Chinese features even though he treats himself as an American. Despite his own cultural location, he still cannot be accepted by American mainstream society. Thus, he named himself “the present-day U.S.A. Incarnation of the King of the Monkeys” (Kingston, 1989, p.33) to fight against American racism.

This work has aroused a lot of cultural criticism at home and abroad. Researchers have been discussing the work from the post-modern techniques of fiction composition adopted in the novel, for instance, intertextuality, parody, metafiction, and etc. There are fewer studies on *Tripmaster Monkey* than on Kingston’s first publication *The Woman Warrior*, especially for Chinese researchers. According to Zhang Longhai, *Tripmaster Monkey* remained nothing from 1989 to 2003 (Zhang, 2005, p.43). However, it cannot be ignored from the aspect of reconstruction and relocation of cultural identity on the basis of Homi K. Bhabha’s theory of “Hybridity” and “The Third Space”. Besides, studies on *Tripmaster Monkey* are under development at present, they are relatively less thorough and systematic, especially in China. Hence, this paper is to explore the issues of reconstruction and relocation from the perspective of Homi K. Bhabha’s postcolonial theory.

## 1. DISILLUSIONMENT AND REFLECTION

The protagonist Whitman Ah Sing once called himself a “beatnik”. He used to not only treat Jack Kerouac, a representative of American beat novelists, as his cultural idol, but also practiced the Beat way of life. He followed the life style of the white people and tried to imitate the writers of the Beat Generation. However, when Ah Sing found Kerouac called Chinese Americans “the twinkling little Chinese” (Ibid., p.69), he was furious about the obvious racialism. “What do you know, Kerouac? What do you know? You don’t know shit. I’m the American here. I’m the American walking here. Fuck Kerouac and his American road anyway” (Ibid., p.70). So in Ah Sing’s mind, Kerouac, as a spiritual kingdom and a model of the protagonist, is nothing but a stereotype white racist. The loss of idol and Ah Sing’s disappointment shatters his fancy of cultural inclusiveness of the white. Zhan Zuoqiong considers that the dilemma Nanci encountered and the negative comments on Chinese Judy urged Ah Sing to examine the distortion and stereotype of Chinese American images that the white culture imposes on them.

At this point, Ah Sing came up with the idea of finding the real way out for Chinese American culture and constructing Chinese culture that really belonged to them. At the moment, he began to shift from mimicry to doubt and negation of the white culture (Zhan, 2006, p.118).

Therefore, Ah Sing decided to create his own plays to present ethnic culture because he knew if he wanted to establish a positive image of Chinese, he must gain discourse power.

In *The Location of Culture*, Homi K. Bhabha (1994) believes that immigrants are inherent with dual cultural heterogeneity and double cultural perspectives, which make it possible for them to examine the white culture hegemony from another aspect, and finally shake its dominance. When Wittman heard Americans laugh at Chinese, the King of Monkeys hereby announced: “I’m crashing parties wherever these jokes are told, and I’m going to do some spoil sporting.” (Kingston, 1989, p.317) He began to accept and advocate his Chineseness when he was disappointed with American mainstream society. Thus, he wanted to pursue his unique identity after his disillusionment with white Americans. The protagonist Wittman Ah Sing had been making every effort to achieve this aim:

Wittman wanted to spoil all those stories coming out of and set in New England Back East—to blacken and to yellow Bill, Brooke and Annie. A new rule for the imagination: The common man has Chinese looks. From now on, whenever you read about those people with no surnames, color them with black skin or yellow skin... By writing a play, he didn’t need descriptions that rinated anybody. (Ibid., p.34)

When Wittman was writing his own plays, he expressed directly his dissatisfaction with the mainstream American society. He challenged the traditional stereotypes and discrimination that the white race inflicted on the yellow through his own practical actions and words. Meanwhile, he supported that the actors in his plays be all equal no matter what race or skin color they had, trying to include everything that was being left out, and everybody who had no place. Wittman described in the second chapter of this novel:

Wittman said, I’m going to start a theater company. I’m naming it The Garden Players of America. The Pear Garden was the cradle of civilization, where theater began on Earth... As playwright and producer and director, I’m casting blind. That means the actors can be any race...I’m including everything that is being left out, and everybody who has no place. My idea for the Civil Rights Movement is that we integrate jobs, schools, buses, housing, lunch counters, yes, and we also integrate theater and parties. (Ibid., p.52)

This quotation helps to draw a conclusion that even as a native Chinese American, he or she may still be discriminated or treated unfairly in education and work in America, his or her own country. In a good part of Oakland, “No person of African or of Japanese, Chinese, or any Mongolian descent will ever be allowed to purchase, own, or even rent a lot in Rockridge or live

in any house that may be built there.” (Ibid., p.150) In an interview with Timothy Pfaff in 1980, Maxine Hong Kingston said, “Buying a house was a way of saying that America—and not China—is his country.” (Pfaff, 1998, p.14) On behalf of Chinese Americans, Ah Sing asked to be fairly treated including all different skin colors, different races of Americans. In addition, when Wittman attempted to find a job to make his living, he encountered a lot of problems, including the survey for his previous jobs. “List your previous employment, beginning with most current... Retail clerk, Management Trainee, ZIP sorter, busboy and grease-trap rongeur, U. C. Psych Department subject. Wittman Ah Sing, this is your life.” (Kingston, 1989, p.226) Obviously, Wittman has always been doing trivial jobs, although he graduated from Berkeley, majoring in English. With his education background, Wittman deserves to take up a respectable and an honorable job. But due to his Chinese physical features, he is treated as a Chinese, an inferior race in the eyes of the mainstream society, so he is refused by most of opportunities. “The voice doesn’t go with the face, they don’t hear it. On the phone I sound like anybody, I get the interview, but I get downtown, they see my face, they ask, ‘Do you speak English?’” (Ibid., p.317) The anti-Chinese sentiment in mainstream society elbows Chinese out of most jobs, which finally make them cannot acquire relatively decent life and corresponding status in America. It makes Wittman Ah Sing disappointed and disillusioned.

In Chapter Nine “One-Man Show”, Wittman recalled an experience. He volunteered for an experiment in college, a test for Chinese-Americans. When Chinese-hyphenated-schizoid-dichotomous Americans were gathered in a lab, they were required to choose some words for depicting Chinese and Americans. Working from the heart inside, Wittman gave the Chinese side “Daring” and “Laughter” and “Spontaneous” and “Easygoing”, some Star Quality items. “But my bold answers were deviated away in the standard deviation.” (Ibid., p.328) Apparently, Ah Sing disapproved of the white discriminating Chinese Americans and he even thought “the American side got all the fun traits.” (Ibid., p.28) But in fact, white Americans have the so-called standard answers before this experiment. In white Americans’ eyes, all the positive words should belong to Americans, while all the negative words should be used to describe Chinese. Apparently, white Americans take advantage of this experiment to express their prejudice and discrimination against Chinese Americans. For white Americans, “inferior” Chinese-Americans are the outsiders and can’t integrate into the mainstream society. When Chinese Americans are in cultural aphasia and in control by American mainstream, Ah Sing clearly realized that “they treated me no better than any lab animal... I tell you, there’s a lot of Nazi shit going on in the laboratories. Don’t fall into their castrating hands.” (Ibid., p.328) He ceased to feel hopeful for American mainstream

society and he also realized that it is just a fantasy for a Chinese American to become an acknowledged member of the American family. It can be said that after the disillusionment Ah Sing has a deeper understanding about American society, which lays the foundation for his meditation and pursuit of his cultural identity.

## 2. PURSUIT AND RECONSTRUCTION

As Chinese-American writers, Frank Chin and Jeffery Paul Chan point out that the inferiority complex perfectly shows that a Chinese-American identifies with the white Americans’ standards of aesthetics, value judgments, behaviors and success. At the same time, from one aspect, it reflects that he or she has admitted that he or she is not a white American. He is in inferiority because he never reaches the standards that the white Americans set (Chin & Chan, 1972, p.67). When Ah Sing took a shower and became much cleaner than others, he was still regarded as “stupid race”. In consequence, he understood it was closely related to his physical features:

It has to do with looks, doesn’t it? They use “American” interchangeably with “white”. The clean-cut all-American look. This hairless body—I mean, this chest is unhairly; plenty hairy elsewhere—is cleaner than most. I bathe, I dress up; all I get is soo mun and sah chun. (Kingston, 1989, p.329)

Chen Aimin considers Chinese-Americans or Asian Americans never want to be equated with real Americans (Chen, 2007, p.145). In the mainstream discourse, the coloured at the edge of position can only control their own destiny by arming themselves. While, for Ah Sing, writing plays were his power source and his dependence for fighting. Therefore, he used his pen as a weapon to subvert the stereotypes imposed on the Oriental, especially on Chinese-Americans by the mainstream Western society and to express his ideal society.

Since the Civil Rights Movement, although it has changed a lot of Asians on the basis of mutual cultural understanding between Chinese and Americans, and although Hollywood seems to play roles in films, while the image of Asians has not changed much. Most Americans, on the one hand, still hold the everlasting prejudice that Chinese are superstitious, irrational and ignorant “Others”. On the other, they take advantage of mass media and other means to intensify the ancient “archetypal” images of Orientals, by which they strengthen American culturally hegemonic status and maintain American image (Ibid., p.117). Wittman early knew this reality, so he started writing his plays for Nanci when her audition was not fair due to her identity of Chinese American. Particularly, the images of Chinese-Americans in Ah Sing’s plays were different from what the mainstream American society shaped. In American mass media and literary works, Chinese men were timid characters or feminine and “castrated” men. However, Ah

Sing's plays were beyond the traditional stereotypes. He described the heroic spirit of "one hundred and eight" in *Water Margin*. So aggressive are they and dare to fight that they are real men.

Through displaying and advocating classic characters in Chinese literature, Wittman Ah Sing reshaped Chinese image, which effectively refuted the slander of mass media on Chinese men. There was no difference on ethnic and race or nation in his plays; he went beyond the narrow nationalism in the mainstream American society. On the other hand, it also shows that Ah Sing gradually pursued his unique cultural identity. Just as Ah Sing said, "We are the grandchildren of Gwan the Warrior. Don't let them take the fight out of our spirit and language." (Kingston, 1989, p.319) As far as Ah Sing was concerned, he was born and rooted in American land, so he was an indigenous Chinese-American but not a sojourner. No one can run away because he was the man there. From "we all the same Americans" (Ibid., p.282) to "I am deeply, indigenous here" (Ibid., p.327), he surpassed the previous understanding and reconstructs his own position. He no longer simply identified himself as a Chinese or an American, but to seek for his special and unique cultural identity as a Chinese American.

Considering the necessity of reconstructing a new cultural identity, Kingston created the image of Wittman Ah Sing who realized his dream by creating, directing and performing his own plays. By subverting the stereotypes and discrimination for Chinese Americans, Wittman expressed his desire to bridge and negotiate two cultures in his own plays. Ah Sing experienced the process from disillusionment to pursuit of his cultural identity. His life journey was totally reflected in the experience of playwrighting. As can be seen in the above discussion, Ah Sing succeeded in the reconstruction of the new cultural identity. But reconstruction itself is not enough, what matters most is where the newly-reconstructed hybrid cultural identity can situate.

Homi K. Bhabha's "the Third Space", composed of "Hybridity" strategy, opens up a room for negotiation. According to Bhabha, this is a space for "elaborating strategies of selfhood-singular or communal-that initiate new signs of identity and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself." (Bhabha, 1994, p.2) As a segment of the multi-culture in America, Chinese Americans would establish a harmonious cultural atmosphere on the condition that they both reserve the tradition of Chinese culture and absorb the essence of American culture.

The Third Space is established for not only Wittman himself but also for other Chinese Americans. For a long time, Chinese immigrants have been located in the edge of American society. Their demand and need have been neglected all the time. In order to change this situation and overturn stereotypes, Wittman, as a representative of Chinese-Americans, broke silence by creating his own

plays embedded into Chinese elements in plays. Besides, Wittman, as a Chinese American, was located in an embarrassing situation where he cannot get recognition from either Chinese or American society due to cultural differences. Thus he attempted to mix two cultures together to create a new culture, so that a Third Space was established where he found his new identity. Through the strategy of Hybridity and the Third Space theory, it can be seen that Wittman got an effective way to solve the identity problems that all Chinese Americans are faced with. In fact, *Tripmaster Monkey* tries to reconstruct the Third Space, which was manifested in the relocation of Wittman's identity, the marriage between Wittman and Taña, and the Pear Garden in the west. Actually, to some degree, the process of relocation of Wittman's cultural identity is the process of the reconstruction of the Third Space.

### 3. RELOCATION AND TRANSCENDENCE

In the Eighth Chapter "Bones and Jones", Yale Younger and Lance respectively played the role of Chang Bunker and Eng Bunker, the twins. Michele Janette (1996) describes like this in an interview with Maxine Hong Kingston, with the article entitled *The Angle We're Joined at*,

The famous joined twins Chang and Eng Bunker, Chinese-Siamese immigrants who made their fortune as a sideshow spectacle during the Civil War, appear in Wittman's play to embody and articulate hybrid identity.... And yet the scene is also characteristically ambiguous about the possibility of embodying any identity. Kingston casts two men of different races as Chang-Eng. The white and Japanese American performers reenacting the history of these Asian twins both confirm and qualify Kingston's claim in this interview that "You can be Chinese, too." (Kingston & Janette, 1996, p.145)

As expressed in the quotation, it is not difficult to see that Wittman's plays transcended the limits of ethnics, genders and nations, which is one of manifestations of cultural inclusiveness. Undeniably, it transcended binary opposition and it was not "West Meets East" but "West Meets West". It shows "I am who I am" and Chinese Americans are a new subject that is a result combined by Americanness and Chineseness. This is the pursuit of Wittman and Kingston as Chinese Americans.

They want us to go back to China where we belong. They think that Americans are either white or black. I can't wear that civil-rights button with the black hand and the white hand shaking each other... I'm the little yellow man beneath the bridge of their hands and overlooked. (Kingston, 1989, pp.307-308)

Finally, Ah Sing can soberly treat the reality of American mainstream society. "I'm having to give instruction. There is no East here. West is meeting West. This was all West. All you saw was West... I am so fucking offended." (Ibid., p.308) So Ah Sing started with his own actions to fight for justice and to make every

effort to create Chinese plays. From the play performance, it can be seen that Wittman managed to cross gender, race, nationality and language by mixing up the classical masterpiece *Water Margin*, *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* and *Journey to the West* with his plays. And he succeeded in surpassing the boundaries by means of putting all characters into the plays no matter what their ethnic and skin color is. "The Pear Garden in the West", from form to content, the diversity of ethnic culture is fully presented. Ah Sing attempted to build such a cultural attribute that it was not an alternative subject of ownership and affiliation, but a community beyond the borders, nationalities and cultures, where different ethnics and different cultures can be united and harmonious. As he stated in "One-Man Show", "We need to be part of the daily love life of the country, to be shown and loved continuously until we're not inscrutable anymore." (Ibid., p.310)

Once and for all: I am not oriental. An oriental is antipodal. I am a human being standing right here on land which I belong to and which belongs to me. I am not an oriental antipode...Without a born-and-belong-in-the-U.S.A. name, they can't praise us correctly.

Sojourners no more but... You not be Overseas Chinese. You be here. You've here to stay. I am deeply, indigenously here. And my mother and father are indigenous, and most of my grandparents and great-grandparents, indigenous... the entire U.S.A.—ours. (Ibid., p.327)

Thus, Ah Sing's self-location of cultural identity is clear here. Chinese-Americans are in the "intermediary culture", dissociating between Chinese culture and American culture. But the ethnic minorities will be detached from two kinds of cultural identities and from another level to examine their own cultural identity with the inherent diversification, heterogeneity and hybridity.

We're all of us Americans here. Why single out the white guy? How come I didn't get "an American" after my name? How come no 'American' in apposition with my parents and my grandma? An all-American cast here. No un-American activity going on. Not us...And "Chines-American" is inaccurate—as if we could have two countries. We need to take the hyphen out—"Chinese American". (Ibid., p.327)

As the fifth-generation of Chinese-American immigrants, Wittman Ah Sing is qualified to say that he is an American, rather than a sojourner or Chinese-American. Ah Sing challenged American tradition and prejudice against yellow colored people through his own actions and words. Finally, Ah Sing successfully performed a play which belonged to Chinese-Americans. Besides, he also realized culture attributives of Chinese-Americans clearly. The clashes and conflicts between two cultures do not necessarily result from the decline and disappearance of one or the other, because the two cultures can coexist in an equal and harmonious way.

From his abasement at the beginning to the pride for his Chineseness, Wittman Ah Sing regained his

confidence as a Chinese-American at last, even with Chinese features. In a nutshell, he finally succeeded in relocating his cultural identity in American mainstream society. "I am really: the present-day U.S.A. incarnation of the King of the Monkeys." (Ibid., p.33) For one thing, he highlighted his American identity. For another, it showed that Wittman was willing to accept Chinese culture. But all in all, Chinese is only an attribute, while American is his identity. Though with Chinese blood, except different skin color, hair, eye shape and legs, other Chinese features cannot be embodied in Ah Sing. Hence, he eventually realized he is neither a Chinese nor an American but a Chinese American. In the final analysis, he was not necessary to specifically manifest which culture he really belonged to because he is a Chinese-American, which was a new identity different from an American. Only when Wittman relocated his identity like this, could he find his proper cultural identity and rebuild his confidence as a Chinese-American.

At the end of the novel, Wittman said to his white wife Taña: "I'll clean up the place, I get the hint. You don't have to be the housewife. I'll do one-half of the housewife stuff. But you can't call me your wife. You don't have to be the wife either." (Ibid., p.339) So far, he was not only beyond the racial prejudice and committed to the pursuit of equality, he also transcended gender bias and chased equality and harmony between women and men. From Ah Sing's successful self-location, it can be seen that it is not desirable to always emphasize the origin of ethnic identity, because paranoid nationalism is not satisfactory. And, it is more undesirable to cater to the mainstream culture at the cost of alienating or even distorting home country culture. The development of Chinese and American culture is not a clash of opposites, but a combination of two cultures and an equal coexistence.

According to Kingston, Wittman finally transcended the binary opposition and created a harmonious community. In Kingston's view, people worry so much about assimilation, losing their own culture. They are so possessive of myths. She says that these myths belong to all of us. She said, "I'm going to give you one. When you hear this myth, you're Chinese also. This is my way of trying to get Wittman to transcend race. Even as he's talking about being a Chinese, it's really an American problem." (Kingston, 1996, p.155) Wittman Ah Sing succeeded in the end, which can be proved in an interview with Maxine Hong Kingston. When Michele Janette asked Kingston, "Do you think he succeeds?" (Ibid., p.149) Kingston answered, "His life isn't over yet...he gives more of a push to change the world...but I know he's going to succeed. He has to." (Ibid., p.149) Just as Wittman said, "It's the business of a playwright to bring thoughts into reality. They come out of my head and into the world, real chairs, solid tables. A playwright is nothing if not realistic." (Kingston, 1989, p.240) He was determined to make his dream come true. And then

“he serves as a figure of the author, pulling everyone he knows into an improvisational community performance. He revives a Chinese theatrical tradition in San Francisco to create a Pear Garden in the West.” (Kingston & Janette, 1996, p.142) Chinese culture has been reflected in his play and become one part of American culture. According to Kingston in an interview with Michele Janette, the meaning of Wittman’s ethnicity and gender lies in “trying to figure out someone else’s ethnicity or someone else’s identity... I still have the question, how does one become a man? And then another question, what is a Chinese American man?” (Kingston, 1996, p.146) Finally, the protagonist Wittman answered these two questions by creating, directing and performing his own plays. It can be found out that in his plays, Wittman pioneers a new space for Chinese Americans, that is the Third Space, which solves the problems of ethnicity and identity.

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## CONCLUSION

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In *Tripmaster Monkey*, Kingston did not directly put forward the way out for Chinese-Americans about their cultural identity, but rather indirectly by presenting the process in which the protagonist Wittman created, directed and performed his own plays, showing the Chinese-Americans seek self-identity and social status for themselves. Undoubtedly, both Chinese culture and American culture are indispensable to reconstruct and relocate the cultural identity of Chinese-Americans. It is the effective way for Chinese-Americans to accept their dual cultural identity so as to overcome their predicament. They cannot be defined simply as Chinese or Americans, but Chinese-Americans who has their own particular

identity, which is the combined result of Chinese culture and American culture. And this identity is mixed and diversified. To some extent, it provides a way out for other ethnic minority groups to reconstruct cultural identity under the background of globalization. Besides, the reconstruction and relocation of Wittman’s identity provides a reference for other ethnic minorities when they are confronted with perplexity of hybrid identity. And this paper hopes that it can arouse social attention to cultural inclusiveness.

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