




Perspectives of Ethical Identity in Ng's *Steer toward Rock* and Jen's *Mona in the Promised Land*

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Recommended Citation

Su, Hui. "Perspectives of Ethical Identity in Ng's *Steer toward Rock* and Jen's *Mona in the Promised Land*." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 17.5 (2015): <<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2734>>

This text has been double-blind peer reviewed by 2+1 experts in the field.

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Volume 17 Issue 5 (December 2015) Article 3

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<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol17/iss5/3>>

Contents of **CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 17.5 (2015)**

Special Issue ***Fiction and Ethics in the Twenty-first Century***. Ed. Zhenzhao Nie and Biwu Shang

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol17/iss5/>>

Abstract: In her article "Perspectives of Ethical Identity in Ng's *Steer toward Rock* and Jen's *Mona in the Promised Land*" Hui Su examines Fae Myenne Ng's and Gish Jen's novels. In the novels, the protagonists make different decisions: in *Steer Toward Rock* Jack after displacement in China adopts US-American identity and in *Mona in the Promised Land* Mona, a second generation Chinese American, selects Jewish identity. Owing to their different situations, the two protagonists reflect challenges of identity building in the case of the "Other" in US-American culture and society. Su argues that Ng and Jen, although varying in their perspectives, suggest enlightening views in their configurations of identity building in order to re-examine US-American literature and culture.

Hui SU

Perspectives of Ethical Identity in Ng's *Steer Toward Rock* and Jen's *Mona in the Promised Land*

Chinese American literature began in the nineteenth century and flourished in the twentieth century (see, e.g., Bloom; Jin). Among contemporary Chinese American women authors Fae Myenne Ng and Gish Jen are two rising stars. Ng has received awards such as the American Book Award (2008) and the Guggenheim Fellowship (2009). *Steer Toward Rock* (2008) is Ng's second novel after her acclaimed debut *Bone* (1993). *Mona in the Promised Land* (1996) is Jen's second novel after *Typical American* (1991) that received the National Book Critics' Circle Award and it was ranked among the list of the *New York Times* best sellers of 1996 and among the list of the *Los Angeles Times* ten best books in 1996. For scholars and critics of Chinese American literature, there is an increasing interest in identity issues within a global community. Yet when compared with the critical attention on the women writers' earlier works *Steer Toward Rock* and *Mona in the Promised Land* are less studied. Hence my examination of their differing visions of the process of self-identity with the perspective of ethical literary criticism provides insights into the challenges of identity building by immigrants.

In the two novels, the contrasts of the US-American experience between the old world and the new country are embodied in the characters of Jack and Mona. Underlying the personal and individual decisions of one's identity lie the historical and sociological factors that influence their decisions. In a historical context, during the nineteenth century, the United States was viewed by Chinese as the "Gold Mountain": they came to California in large numbers to better their lives and worked as laborers during the California gold rush and later in the building of rail roads, hence the reference "Gold Mountain" to the gold rush and the U.S. as a "land of opportunities." However, in 1882 the United States Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act which denied citizenship to those Chinese immigrants already settled in the country and prohibited new immigration from China. The Act also prevented Chinese immigrants from reuniting with their family members. However, the 1906 San Francisco earthquake changed the situation and the Chinese practice of "paper families" was a way for many Chinese to acquire legal residency by signing a contract with an already legal resident or citizen of Chinese background. Following World War II during the Cold War, the Chinese Confession Program (1957-1965) was established in order to eliminate the creation of "paper families" (see, e.g., Lau). Confronted with discrimination and racism, first-generation Chinese Americans could not be assimilated or identify with US-American identity and experienced discrimination.

Ng's *Steer Toward Rock* is about Chinese Americans' experience of identity building and its crisis during the above mentioned Chinese Confession Program and tells the story of a nineteen-year-old Cantonese who bought the name of Jack Moon Szeto in order to immigrate to the U.S. as the "son of a native" Gold Szeto, a gangster who operates a casino in San Francisco's Chinatown. Jack falls in love with Joice Qwan with whom he has a daughter, Veda. However, his fake father Gold arranges for Jack's Chinese "bride" Ilin Cheung to join her "husband" Jack, but Ilin is meant actually to be Gold's second wife, i.e., mistress. In order to break his bond with Gold, win the love of Joice, and build a family of his own Jack decides to enter the government's Chinese Confession Program to report Gold and the arrangement with him. Gold is eventually deported and Jack becomes the victim of retribution for his betrayal and is left crippled. It is not until in his late years that he acquires U.S. citizenship. The ethical relationships of protagonists in *Steer Toward Rock* center around the contract between Jack and Gold and Jack's life is narrated with regard to his pursuit of U.S. citizenship. Jack's attempt to establish his identity could be categorized into three stages: mistaken identity, identity loss, and identity confirmation. The lives and identities in *Steer Toward Rock* are centered in bonds and promises other than blood relationship: Jack is a "paper son" sold by his poor Chinese parents to Gold. In order to fulfill the contract with Gold, he is forced to play the role of son and husband, hence his situation becomes that of a "paper family." In his case, he must have a wedding and marry a fake wife, Ilin. Further, he has to maintain a false paternal relationship and show his filial respect to Gold: "paper or blood, I paid my respects. Every New Year's, I visited the Father with sweets and good wishes. Every Harvest Moon Festival, I delivered a box of double yolk moon cakes and on the solstice, I brought the Father a sack of winter oranges. This was the proper ceremony and I performed it" (7).

In the context of an ethical perspective, the relationship as prescribed by the contract of the fake disrupts Jack's self-identity and his relationship with his community. The marriage between Jack and Ilin makes Gold's relationship with Ilin illegal and Jack's intimate relations with Joice immoral and unethical. However, the ethical confusion results from the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act (not repealed until 1943) that restricted Chinese immigration to the U.S. and as these laws prevented Gold from reuniting with his wife who was in China, Gold arranged the marriage for Jack in order to have a replacement, second wife. As a consequence, although Jack and Joice are in love and have a daughter, they do not have a chance to marry legally and Joice remains a mistress. Hence the complicated and unethical relationships: the manufactured "paper family" defines Gold as Jack's father, Jack's marriage is a sham and Ilin as Gold's mistress becomes Jack's mother in name. If he admits the false relation of

his "paper family," he is faced with the ethical taboo that his father marries his wife. Yet the reality is that he cannot get out of his false marriage.

The convoluted plot speaks to the entangled circumstances of Jack's history in China and the U.S.: as an illegal immigrant, Jack has to abandon his identity and even the name on his identification papers is not his real name. The irony of his relation with others is perhaps best summed up as follows: "The women I loved wasn't in love with me; the woman I married wasn't a wife to me. Ilin Cheung was my wife on paper. Indeed, she belonged to Yi-Tung Szeto" (3). Jack's expression of his situation indicates the painful loss of a personal identity perceived and legitimized in society. As Zhenzhao Nie points out, "a social identity refers to an individual's self-concept of identity as perceived and acknowledged in a social community. In this sense, a social identity is in essence ethical" (264; unless indicated otherwise, all translations are mine). Before Jack came to the U.S., he was adopted by a childless woman in his village and then sold into a contract with Gold. His name and family ties are first striped by the circumstances of adoption and then denied by false claims for his entry into the United States. It should be noted that the Chinese Confession Program was set up to prevent communists from entering the U.S. fraudulently and Chinese Americans with fraudulent citizenship (called "paper son" because of their fake papers) were asked to confess their illegal entry into the country. Any Chinese American with fraudulent identity, if discovered, could be deported immediately. Confessors, however, in exchange for the confession, were not offered legal resident status, but immunity from prosecution and deportation meaning that their status were "amendable to deportation."

Jack decides to cooperate with the Chinese Confession Program and confesses to the authorities his contract with Gold in order to rid himself of his false identity, which unfortunately does not automatically reveal his other, previous, identity. "Confession" is a moral choice yet a hard one. While Jack confesses his illegal entry, he has to denounce Gold as his "paper father" and as such he betrays his fake father despite the fact that he was sold into the false paternal relationship. On the other hand, to renounce his false relationship with Gold leads inevitably to the disturbance of an entire clan as the confessor admits the fraudulent ties with his family members on paperwork and thus transforms his status within the community. If he chooses to maintain the false relationship, his true self is not recovered and he cannot not achieve a sense of identity and capacity for self-reflection and awareness. As Jack's paperwork is fraudulent, he remains in a precarious situation facing the danger of being deported and thus remains in a continuous state of denying his identity while finding it impossible to relate to a sustainable identity. After Jack's confession, his passport is confiscated by the government and because of the lack of social support and legitimation, he is faced with the dilemma of identity loss during most of his lifetime. It is not until his adult daughter Veda and "paper wife" Ilin challenges him that he decides to be a legal US-American citizen.

Although Jack suffers the pain of confusion and loss of identity, he is in a constant state of searching for his identity. One's identity is "the evidence and symbol of social existence" (Nie 263) and if an individual develops a low sense of membership and belonging in particular groups, he/she suffers the negation of self esteem, but also is deprived of rights and freedoms of U.S. citizens as in the case of Jack. Jack's hesitation between claiming his identity as a "paper son" and attempting to attend the Confession Program reveals his attempt to reaffirm his sense of community in a foreign land and the recognition of a continuous and consistent self at the level of interacting with significant others. Further, Jack's pursuit of identity is tied to the process of assimilation and acculturation; nevertheless, one way to acquire a framework for socializing is to identify himself in relation to his place of birth China and as such to situate himself in the social and cultural group on the level of biological bounds and moral and ethical beliefs. In his later years, Jack expresses to Veda his wish of going back to China, a wish eventually realized by his daughter Veda. Veda returns China and succeeds in finding Jack's biological mother in a small village in Canton. The act of searching for his ancestors embodies Jack's desire to construct a particular and meaningful self/other bond constitutive of his personal identity. It is not until then that Veda understands his father's insistence of returning to his homeland: "returning to China was turning to the mother" (211). Through fulfilling his father's wish, Veda also rebuilds her association with a community she never had.

For Jack, the real life problem he is constantly confronted with is how to become a US-American citizen and this is complicated of course by his history including his name: after Jack passes the examination for US-American citizenship, he is asked which name, Yuo Seen Leun or Jack Moon Szeto he would prefer to be addressed by and recorded. Veda notices Jack's facial expression: "My father set his jaw and I felt locked into some middle jail. That's when I understood. His expression was one that hand battled me all my life, and it was also the one that I had seen all over China. The enduring, the tenacious, the vexing face" (255). Despite Jack's seeking to establish a sense of self during his whole life, his confusion with his name indicates his insecurity in the attempt to fit into US-American society as he lost contact with the Chinese American community while failing to win encouragement and reinforcement in US-American society altogether. In the end, Veda helps his father to make the decision of having Jack Moon Szeto as his name as a new US-American citizen. In his case what matters is not whether he has adopted a Chinese name or a US-American Anglophone name. Although one's name is a merely signifier of an individual, a name recognized and legalized in a society directs towards a per-

ceived membership in a social group which the person can identify with and it is not until the end of the novel that Jack establishes his social and personal identity.

Mona in the Promised Land is set in 1968 when "the blushing dawn of ethnic awareness has yet to pink up their inky suburban night" (3). The novel is about a second-generation Chinese American born and raised in U.S., Mona, who is confused by cultural contradictions: unlike her parents who are first-generation Chinese immigrants, she grew up in US-American culture believing in the spirit of democracy, freedom, and equality (it is another matter that equality was and still is not accorded to all US-Americans especially African Americans). The difficulties of adolescence are complicated by her question of Chinese identity imposed by family and society. However, her exploration of independence and identity building leads to conflicts between her and her mother. As a consequence, Mona has to leave her family in order to claim her independence and the novel ends with the forgiveness of Mona's mother and Mona's establishment of cultural identity by marrying American Jewish Seth.

In her struggle to define herself, Mona experienced the stages of challenge, exploration, and self-creation. Born in a Chinese quarter, at the age of 8 the whole family moves to the fashionable suburb of Scarsdale, New York. Being first-generation Chinese Americans, Mona's parents Ralph and Helen struggle to earn a living under difficult circumstances and finally become pancake house owners. As such, they are able to provide a comfortable life for Mona and her sister Callie. The parents, absorbed with pursuing the "American dream," hope their daughters would make themselves into middle-class US-Americans and acquire a respectable social status. Therefore, they extricate themselves from Chinese traditions of the homeland and encourage their daughters to accomplish their aims with diligence. Mona's sister Callie, as expected by the family, was admitted to Harvard University through hard work, but Mona is in discordance with the traditional family and its requirements. Mona's parents hope that she has an assimilated identity: they want her as daughter of Chinese immigrants to integrate into mainstream US-American society, but at the same time to retain much of their traditional Chinese culture, norms, and behavior. To their disappointment, Mona feels disconnected with the cultural heritage of her Chinese background and is in complete immersion and identification with US-American cultural values. She refuses to be categorized into Chinese American and Mona neither understands Chinese language nor Chinese traditional culture. Caught between expectations by her family, the model identity imposed on her by US-American society, and her desire to remake her life in the image of the modern US-American immigrant, Mona feels propelled to renegotiate her ethnic identity. It is the contradiction of assimilation and Mona's quest for identity that separate her from her parents and sister.

In addition to identify herself as a "proper" Chinese American, Mona establishes with her friends "Camp Gugelstein," an interethnic community of Chinese, Jewish, Black, and White participants in which they examine interethnic coexistence and the porous nature of cultural identity. The group members "recognize racial difference and ethnic diversity while maintaining equality and love" (Partridge 226). In the camp, the members discard stereotyped concepts of ethnic difference: Mona decides to convert to Judaism and her high school boyfriend Seth, nominally Jewish, who adopts a Japanese Buddhist lifestyle, seems to switch from Jewish to Japanese to Black to US-American at various times as the story progresses. Naomi, the Black college roommate of Mona's sister Callie who learns Chinese in a preparatory school and shows intense interest in Chinese culture, plays Taiji, tries Zen-like meditation, chants of Buddhist scriptures, does yoga, makes kites, and cooks Chinese dishes. The "American-ness" that Mona embraces is about self-creation of cultural identity: in her words, "American means being whatever you want" (49). Mona's pursuit of cultural identity is built on the premise that one's identity is not determined by blood relationship, ethnicity, or religion. She believes that through dialogical and intersubjective identification, one can define one's personal identity. "Switch" is a word used frequently by the novel's characters including Mona. For Mona, the lived experience of "American-ness" with its liberal democratic system in a multicultural context means the self-creation of ethnic identity: "everybody who is born here is American, and also some people who convert from what they were before." Mona argues that anyone "could become American anyway," "like I become Jewish, if I wanted to. I'd just have to switch, that's all" (14). The diversity of life in "the promised land" implies a "mosaic" culture in which US-American identity is built upon the premise of self-invention.

The novel's title, *Mona in the Promised Land*, has religious implications: "The Promised Land" in the Bible refers to the land promised by god to Jews. The imagery of the "Promised Land" is invoked in the novel as a land of freedom for ethnic minorities in the United States. As one of second-generation immigrants, Mona conceives of US-American culture as a dynamic mix of customs and traditions from various ethnic and cultural entities be it European, African, Native American, Asian, Polynesian, Latin American, etc. The love of freedom and the value of the "American dream" attracts immigrants who share common aspirations and values: "In the promised land, each individual can adopt their desired ethnic identity. In this sense, being an American means sharing one common culture and nationality in a general sense" (Jiang 321). When comparing the diverging perspectives of identities embodied in the protagonists in *Steer towards Rock* and *Mona*, one can find that their understandings of the US-American experience and perspectives of identity are formed within different historical backgrounds.

For example, Jack's lives are pushed ahead in a new world where his concern is to obtain legal identity. For Mona, the claim to a Chinese American identity is open-ended and transformational. While refusing to be defined by the paradigms ascribed to Chinese Americans, Mona renames and self-creates her ethnic identity as Jewish. Mona's exploration of identity is directed towards the question of the nature of Chinese American identity in a larger context of interethnic coexistence.

Mona's vision of ethnic identity goes beyond the angry and despairing psychological state of Jack who was faced with danger of being deported and subject to discrimination. For Mona, one has the autonomy to freely adopt one's identity while Jack's priority is to make a living in the new country in his forged identity. Most Chinese immigrants in the 1950s and 1960s were from the peasantry or working class who attempted to seek a livelihood in the new land. In the case of Jack, the Chinese Confessional Program prevents him from acquiring U.S. citizenship and more importantly, deprives him of individual freedom. Jack's experience reminds us of the tale of Mona's parents the Chinese immigrants who went to the U.S in search of the "American dream" as recounted in Jen's first novel *Typical America*. It is worth mentioning that Mona's story took place in the late 1960s when already many immigrant families are assimilated into mainstream US-American culture and achieved economic success. Being an American-born Chinese, Mona does not share the anxiety of the illegal status that haunted Jack during his whole life nor would she understand Jack's concerns of struggling for a decent life in the U.S. This explains Mona's decision of her own identity building in the heyday of the civil rights movement when ethnic stereotypes are criticized and dismissed. In the 1960s, the federal government determined to end racial segregation and discrimination against African Americans and to secure the equality of rights of citizenship. Since then US-American ethnic minorities began their quest for social equality. As Mona has US-American education, she acquires a sense of individuality and desire to change the world and this is reflected in her conversion to liberal Judaism known for its views on equality. In contrast, Jack, born and raised in China, neither speaks English nor is familiar with US-American culture and life. For Jack, the complexity of his fraudulent relationship with "paper families" situates him in the circumstance of securing his survival in the U.S. by acquiring citizenship.

While Mona is one of the typical second-generation children of immigrant parents, Jack represents first-generation Chinese Americans who immigrated into the U.S for various reasons. Like most Chinese immigrants who came from China, Jack is diligent and prepared for fighting to improve his status. As an American-born Chinese and owing her parents' hard working, Mona's status is improved and accordingly, her cultural identity experiences transformation as well. Mona stresses her understanding of and contributions to the US-American experience rather than the alienation and confusion experienced by her parents. She believes that ethnic identities are not instinctive and natural, but socially constructed. Jack wanders between his desire for US-American citizenship and Chinese identity, while Mona is at a new stage of constantly renegotiating and redefining the meaning and boundaries of ethnic identity in a multicultural society. Jack categorizes himself in and psychologically attached to Chinese identity as his belonging to an ethnic group self-concept is based on racial difference. Mona is different from Jack in her knowledge and understanding of self-concept and for her the identification of certain religious beliefs or values other than physical features or character qualities defines one's identity.

A common topic among the works of contemporary Chinese American writers including Ng, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Amy Tan is the Chinese American experience situated in the clash of Eastern culture and Western culture and the challenge of the assimilation of Chinese culture in White mainstream US-American society. These writers share similar ideas about ethnicity as it exists in the U.S. However, Jen takes a diverging path by examining the fluidity of cultural identity. Her fascination with identity and ethnicity translates the theme of multiculturalism and multi-ethnicity in US-American society into her exploration of what it means to be a "typical American" and of the issues of the interaction between cultural values among various ethnic groups. The challenge of identity in a multicultural society is not excluded within Chinese Americans, but is a common topic among other ethnic minorities: in *Mona* Jen challenges ethnic classifications of identities common to previous Chinese American works. Through portraying Mona's pursuit of identity, Jen explores the possibilities of having fluid and flexible identities without necessarily corresponding to ethnic belonging. In an interview when asked of her purpose of writing *Mona*, Jen emphasizes that "this book does not intend to provide a picture of the White Americans in traditional sense. What is unique about American culture is the transmutation of the construction of identity. In fact, the first-generation Americans are a group of Englishmen who gave up their English identity. The American culture is characterized with the shift of identity. Some argue that your Chinese ethnicity is the most important identity which you are born with and belong to for life. If you construct an identity cross the boundaries of ethnicity, you are betraying a real self. For me, as various ethnic groups are merging together in America and the boundaries of racial cultures are blurred, it is naive to assume that one can only be entitled to one cultural identity" (Shi 4).

In *Mona* Jen practices her understanding of the self-invention of identity based on the affiliation with certain cultural beliefs and values. Mona decides to become Jewish because she feel emotionally attached to Jewish culture and feels connected with Judaism. Mona's conversion to Judaism is out of rational consideration: "I like it here at the temple. I like it that you tell everyone to ask, ask, instead

of just obey, obey. I like it that people are supposed to be their own rabbi, and do their business directly with G-d. I like it that they're supposed to take charge of their own religion" (34). Mona's remarks demonstrate what underlies her identification with Jewish culture and values, namely the pursuit of an independent self, which is also in accordance with the spirit of individualism as valued in US-American culture. Although Mona's identity building is more ideal than practical, the significance of the novel lies in its insight into the complexity of identity in contemporary multicultural US-America and readers are compelled to rethink the question of what it means to be a US-American and to reconsider the cultural implications of ethnicity and race. According to Xiao-huang Yin, there are several types of "images" of the Chinese American in Chinese American literature: one considers the U.S. a land of wealth and opportunities and return China after a relatively short stay, another is the Chinese who takes great effort to conform to White mainstream culture and dissociates from Chinese culture, and yet another is who thinks of himself/herself as US-American with the culture's values, but who should not be treated as an exception because of his/her Chinese ethnicity.

Reading the narration of Jack's and Mona's beliefs and actions with Yin's categorizations, we find that Jack is one who feels connected to Chinese culture and Mona, in contrast, considers herself to be US-American. The transformation of the consciousness of Chinese immigrants as portrayed by Chinese American writers reflects their different perspectives of Chinese Americans' identity across historical periods. In earlier Chinese American literature, one common subject is Chinese immigrants' attempt to refigure the self in the hardship of living. The poems at Angel Island, for example, express the displacement and alienation that Chinese immigrants felt when they disconnect with the homeland and feel imprisoned in the new country (see *The Poetry of Angel Island*; see also Yin). Other writers such as Pardee Lowe and Jade Snow Wong challenge the process of assimilation and acculturation to White mainstream US-American society from an Orientalist perspective. In their texts the exoticism of Chinese culture is emphasized and exaggerated. The attempt to conform to US-American mainstream culture leads to a psychological state of double consciousness; nevertheless, writers like Frank Chin and Shawn Wong recover Chinese masculinity against the accepted stereotypes of Chinamen and shatter the shadows of Orientalist perceptions of Chinese ethnicity. In *Mona*, Jen liberates herself from the thinking patterns of ethnicity and race and explores the meaning and boundaries of ethnic identity on the premise of multi-dimensional value orientation and personal choice.

A comparison of *Steer towards Rock* and *Mona* leads to the observation that Chinese immigrants' perception of identity across different historical periods undergoes the change from a binary distinction to multicultural perspectives. For a long time, in US-American society predominated by White mainstream culture, Chinese Americans and other ethnic minority groups occupied a marginal position in the social and cultural structure. However, the notion of self-contained and consistent cultural identity is challenged in contemporary US-American society as it overlooks the interaction between cultures and limit the cognition of the different dimensions of culture. With the development of the civil rights movement since the late 1960s, the legal status and rights of ethnic minority groups are recognized. In this background Chinese Americans' self-perception experiences changes as well. The change of identities and identity building in the post-1960s provides the background for *Mona*, in which new uncertainties lead to critical awareness of ethnic minority identity. Mona's cultural alliance indicates that one can create one's identity which is not strictly corresponding to ethnicity nor conforming to White US-American culture. In Ningkang Jiang's view, "Gish Jen provides answers to the question of 'who is American' — a question which is put forward in the beginning of the establishment of this country — in her literary text by reconfiguring the concept of national ethnicity. 'The free choice of identity' is premised on the essential idea of the principle of autonomy, which is the nature of American-ness" (321). Jen's examination of the fluidity of ethnic identity expands the connotations of ethnic identity. The notion of self-creation of identity provides a broad view in investigating the issues related to identity confusion and crisis which could be used for reference when discussing the identity issues of immigrants in a global age.

In conclusion, Ng's and Jen's perspectives of identity building by Chinese Americans vary: Ng chooses to "confront the trauma and disaster brought by the racism of the Acts of Immigration in Chinese American history" (Lu 22). Through delineating the difficult and humiliating lives of Chinese immigrants, Ng reveals their tragic experiences in great depth. Jen, however, envisions the notion of the self-invention of identity breaking away from the traditional vision of binary distinction between Chinese traditional culture and US-American culture embodied in the double consciousness of Chinese American immigrants. It should be emphasized that in multicultural US-American society, racial discriminations are not eliminated: In *Steer toward Rock* Ng focuses on the experiences of early Chinese immigrants subject to the unfair treatment and direct readers' attention to the historical events of the Chinese Exclusion Act and the Confessional Program. Ng and Jen, although varying in their perspectives, suggest enlightening views in their configurations of identity building in order to re-examine US-American literature and culture.

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