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Author/s	Windy Xiao Xue
Affiliation	University of Macau
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Book Review

***Chinese American Literature without Borders: Gender, Genre, and Form* by King-Kok Cheung**

Publisher: Palgrave Macmillan

Date of Publication: 2016

Language: English

ISBN: 978-1137453532

Reviewed by

Windy Xiao Xue

Department of English, University of Macau

Chinese American Literature without Borders: Gender, Genre, and Form is a compelling model in the transnational comparative study, which examines the consciousness and aesthetics of Chinese American literature by throwing off shackles of language, culture and literary traditions.

"It looks to and from both the United States and China to reveal the multiple engagements of American-born and Sinophone writers"(1).

The author King-Kok Cheung, professor of Asian American Studies at UCLA, is an intellectual migrant standing at the crossroad between American and Chinese culture. This background affords her insight into the commonalities and differences between Chinese and Chinese American literature and the awareness of the significance of making the muffled voice heard on the two shores.

The whole book is divided into two parts, focusing on gender and genre & form respectively. The first part begins with the long-standing feud between Frank Chin and Maxine Hong Kingston, which Cheung points out seems to center on the problem of literary authenticity, but reveals the crisis of masculine identity in Asian American men, that is, males fear that their already asexual image would be further tarnished by Kingston's memoir. To fully analyze this, in Chapter 2 Cheung introduces wen-wu dyad in traditional Chinese norms to disclose that reconstructing masculine identity by emphasizing wu (martial arts) and ignoring wen (arts) is a mistake as it merely caters to the western ideal; after using protagonists in *China Boy* by Gus Lee and *Pangs of love* by David Wong Louie to support this view in Chapter 3, Cheung further argues that this way to revive the image of Asian males is "a double bind" (p.94): if simply chasing the western ideal, they always fall short of it and risk restoring the patriarchal order; if sticking to Chinese wenren (poet-scholar), they feel afraid to perpetuate the existing stereotype. To solve this dilemma, Cheung proposes that Asian Americans should "resist one-way adaptation and turn racial stereotype on its head and into a source of inspiration" (p.95), recodifying traditional Chinese male image as manly, sexual and seductive, and teaching people from other cultural backgrounds to appreciate the charisma. Thereupon, in Chapter 4 and 5, she propounds and

analyzes her ideal of masculinity—— Xu Zhimo, a romantic poet, and protagonists from *American Knees* by Shawn Wong, *The Winged Seed* by Li-Young Lee and *Phoenix Eyes* by Russell Leong, whose masculinity is demonstrated through arts and solicitude.

Part Two explores various innovations that Chinese and Chinese American writers have attempted. It first, in Chapter 6, zeros in on the innovation in the genre of autobiography, arguing that Chinese and Chinese American writers have fused familial, social and ethnic subjectivity into this genre, making this navel-gazing genre cross the boundaries of “generations, nations, epochs, race, gender, class, languages, accents, even across fact and fiction” (p.195). Chapter 7 examines a short story *The Photograph* written by Chinese author Bing Xin about a white woman’s life in China. Its uniqueness lies in its reversal of white gaze, and its description of the complexity of dynamics between two cultures. The last two chapters focus on innovation in language done by immigrant writer Ha Jin, who explores his bilingual style of expression, and poets Marilyn Chin and Russell Leong, who manoeuvre slanted allusion to Chinese tropes to bridge the gap between two cultures.

One of the strengths of this study, in my opinion, is that the innovation of autobiographies is read through a transcultural lens. Going beyond the prolonged controversy of literary authenticity in this field, Cheung turns to analyze the root that generates the transformation of the autobiography. She adopts the concept of Gish Jen’s “two very different models of self-construal, independent and interdependent self” (p.173): the former is associated to the west, particularly America, while the latter is associated to the east, including China. Normally, autobiography is a western genre constantly showing the independent and individual self, while Asian American writers infuse this American “independent self” with the Chinese “interdependent self”. Thus, compared with Chinese autobiography writers, they stress self-invention and empowerment; compared with western autobiographers, they write less subjectively, constructing a multi-voiced narrative, taking account of the history and social environment, and fighting against the dominant culture. This fresh way to look at the innovation of Asian American literature is insightful and incisive. From such a vantage of point, we should not appreciate Asian American literature according to a single standard or mores but treat it as a convergence of two cultures.

Since this book covers literary works in both Chinese and English, an inconvenience that readers might encounter is the different translations of one single word or character. For example, Chapter 2 mentions several times Guan Yu, a character from a Chinese Classic *The Three Kingdoms*. But due to the different translations, he is expressed as Guan Yu (his name in Pinyin), or Guan Gong (his honorific in Pinyin), or Kwan Kung (his honorific in Cantonese). Therefore, it might be confusing for readers who are not familiar with Chinese culture. However, Cheung, who has predicted this potential difficulty for non-Chinese readers, adds an index at the end of this book which lists all the works and writers that she has mentioned in the book with different versions of names. In this way, readers can refer to this part for the clarification of these proper names.

To conclude, *Chinese American Literature without Borders: Gender, Genre, and Form* is an inclusive comparative study on Asian American Literature, which covers a wide range of works written by Sinophone, American-born, and immigrant writers, be they autobiographies which rewrite feminine codes, novels which present alternatives to masculinity, short stories which

critique orientalism, or poems which assert heritage from both Chinese and Western cultures. The eclectic selection of literary works and the embracing attitude towards innovations in Asian American literature are not only intriguing to readers but also illuminating to postgraduate students and scholars in this field.

References

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Windy Xiao Xue is currently an MA student in the English department of the University of Macau. She is researching in the field of Asian American literature.
