

# *A Study of Chinese Cultural Identity in Chinese American Female Literature in the 21st Century*

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**Abstract:** With the development of multi-culture, people's single cultural identity is constantly changing, and cultural identity is highlighted in the development of Chinese American female literature in the new era. How to understand the cultural identity of Chinese American women and explore the significance of cultural identity in their literary works is particularly important. Based on this, the study of the cultural identity of Chinese American female literature in the 21st century, and the conduct of an objective analysis and evaluation to find out the spiritual destination of female writers in Chinese American female literature works is significant. This paper focuses on the “tracing to the source” of Chinese cultural identity, analyzes the realistic problems reflected in the literary works of Chinese American women, and its role in promoting national culture and enhancing national consciousness.

## 1. Literature Review

Since the 1980s, foreign academic circles began to pay attention to the study of Chinese literature. The American “Modern Language Association”(MLA) has published many Chinese literature works, and some Chinese literature works have been published in American literary magazines, such as “Bridge” and “Asian American Magazine”. Chinese literature has entered the view of mainstream American literature. *The Columbia History of American Literature* has a column devoted to Asian and Chinese American literature. From the mid-late 1980s to the early 1990s, two major American literary anthologies, *NORTON Anthology of American Literature* and *Heath Anthology of American Literature*, also included Chinese literary works. Some American scholars began to pay attention to Chinese women’s literature. Some universities in the United States have set up the “Asian American Studies Center” and set up courses such as “Asian American and Chinese American Literature”, and the works of Chinese female writers are constantly included in the list of classic works. As early as the end of 1990s, American scholar E.D.Huntley (1998) made an in-depth study of Chinese female writer Amy Tan and her works in “A Critical Comparison”. He pointed out that Tan’s novels explore many issues familiar to readers, such as family relationships, language differences and communication barriers, cultural identity, race relations, cultural dislocation, and the role of women. Harold Bloom (2009), a professor at Yale

University, pointed out in his analysis of Amy Tan's works that Chinese American female writers represented by Amy Tan occupy an important position in the American literary world, and that most of their works are favored by feminists. In the United States, there are Chinese scholars, white American scholars and scholars of other ethnic groups who study Chinese women's literature. Their research generally has three directions: one is racial research; Second, social gender studies; Third is the study of cultural misreading and misunderstanding [1].

In recent years, China has made some progress in the study of Chinese American literature, broadening the scope of research on the works of Chinese American female literary writers. In the beginning, scholars only paid attention to writers such as Amy Tan and Tingting Tang, then extended to Bilian Ren and Huiming Wu, and also paid attention to writers such as Geling Yan who wrote in Chinese. The research scope is more extensive, not only involving cultural misreading, post-colonialism, female narration and other dimensions, but also began to analyze these literary works from the perspective of Chinese traditional culture such as Confucianism and Taoism, which enriched the research level of Chinese literature. In 2003, *A Study of Chinese American Literature* by Aimin Cheng was published, which summarized the research of Chinese American literature in China in the past 20 years. In 2004, Pingping Shi's *Mother-Daughter Relationship and the Politics of Gender and Race: A Study of Chinese American Women's Literature* was published, which was the first special introduction to Chinese American women's literature [2].

Since the 1980s, the special experience of Chinese American female writers has made them form multiple cultural identities. They have a stronger cultural sensibility, and gradually realize their multiple cultural, national attributes and "other" identities. Wang Xiaodan (2019) explains how Chinese female writers embody the image of "imaginary mother country" in their literary works under the specific historical and cultural context. She believes that for Chinese writers, cultural identity, as an important part of national identity, can only be realized in the coexistence and integration of Chinese culture and other cultures. Other scholars have also expounded their views on the identity of Chinese women in literature. However, the previous research also has some limitations. There are few holistic studies on the focus of Chinese American women's thoughts on fate and life choice in the cultural blend from a unique perspective, and the analysis of the ways and processes of their identity construction in the multicultural context is less [3].

Inspired by the above, this study on the identity of Chinese American female writers from a comprehensive and dialectical point of view, and the explanations of the difficult path of cultural identity of Chinese American female writers in the multicultural context through the crisis is done.

## 2. Definition of Chinese-American Women Writer

Due to the difficult to distinguish ethnic character of Chinese-American literature, whether it belongs to the category of Chinese literature or American literature, and the late start of the research, it is necessary for us to start from the relevant concepts and fully understand the connotation and extension of "Chinese-American literature". The following is to sort out the basic problems in the study of Chinese American literature from the two concepts Chinese-American women writers and Chinese-American women literature. Chinese-American women writers are women writers who were born, educated, and live in the United States or were born in China but moved to the United States. They are in the foreign cultural background that is different from China, and they perceive the integration and conflict of Chinese and Western cultures in the cultural differences, and record and express the cultural identity in the form of literature. Chinese American literature emphasizes ethnic and historical attributes. Highly respected, they are the backbone of Chinese literature in the United States. These writers have a high degree, knowledge of both Chinese and Western literature, classical Chinese literature and Western literature. They are a group of people who took the

initiative to stay in the United States because of immigration, business, work and other reasons after the reform and opening up [4].

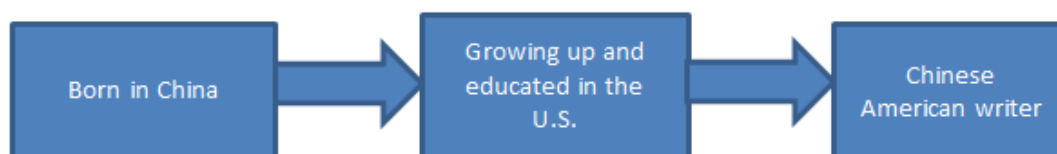


Figure 1. Definition of the Chinese and American writer

### 3. Literary works of Chinese American female writers

In recent years, the works of Qian Chen, one of the representative writers of new immigrant literature in the United States, have attracted attention, and his works have deep reflections on life and humanity. Her novels *Numerous Branches* (2012) and *Lotus Dew* (2013) comb through the past life in the homeland and focus on the fate of women.

*The Double female Flower* (2017) by Xiaowen Zeng, an American female writer, describes the marriage, love, psychology and fate of infertile women, reflecting her transcendence of the gender and the progress of her writing.

The works of American female writer Geling Yan, such as *Fusang* and *Pacific Tango* (2015), which were listed the top ten bestsellers in *the Los Angeles Times* in 2001, mainly reflect the life and fate of Chinese immigrants in the United States. These Chinese immigrants endured the “Chinese Exclusion Act” and racial discrimination in the United States. Although they tried to integrate into the white mainstream society, they could not get rid of their “other” identity. The works reflect their plight in a foreign country [5].

From the works of these Chinese American female writers, it is not difficult to see that their creative themes range from seeking the release of self-desire, to returning to traditional Chinese culture, to multi-cultural perspectives, and to deconstructing the entire cultural rules. In their writing, the anxiety about marginal identity and the pursuit of self-identity are expressed through culture reflection [6].

Table 1. Literary works of Chinese American female writers

writer	works	year
Qian Chen	Numerous Branches	2012
Qian Chen	Lotus Dew	2013
Xiaowen Zeng	The Double female Flower	2017
Geling Yan	Pacific Tango	2015

### 4. Analysis of Works of Representative Chinese American Female Writers

#### (1) Anxiety about marginal identity

Taking the Chinese American female writer Catherine Liu as an example, she was born in Taipei in 1964 and came to the United States with her parents at the age of four. She received a bachelor's degree from Yale University in 1985 and a doctorate in French literature studies from the City University of New York in 1994. She has been an assistant professor in the Department of French and Italian Studies at the University of Minnesota [7].

The characters in her work encounter many disappointments, such as unfair treatment as a child,

indifferent relationships with lovers and friends, and cultural conflicts with China, while the factors that make them unhappy have not been resolved. The stream-of-consciousness writing in the works make the melancholy of the protagonist appear more real and sentimental. The Chinese female writers' true self identity is expressed through their works, and the dominant status of self-struggle and the marginal identity of women are reflected. Through their descriptions of the self-desire, they explore their self-breakthrough under the oppression of "others" around them.

### (2) Self-reflection in history

Taking the Chinese American female writer Lan Samantha Chang as an example, Ms. Zhang was born in 1965 in Appleton, Wisconsin, whose parents came to the United States to escape fighting during World War II. After graduating from high school, she studied East Asian studies at Yale University, received a Master's degree in Public Administration from Harvard University, and then continued her studies at the University of Iowa, where she received a Master's degree in fine arts. After graduation, she worked at Stanford University and later at Wilson College of Warren University and Harvard University teaching creative writing. She loved literature from a young age, and began publishing at the age of 28 in magazines such as *The Atlantic Monthly* and *Ploughshares*, and her work was included in the Best American Short Stories of 1994 and 1996. In 2021, she was appointed director of the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop, becoming the first Asian woman to hold the position in the 70-year history of the prestigious Writers' Workshop in the United States. She has published two novels so far. Her work tells the conflict between the two generations in the Chinese family, as well as the rebellion and return to the traditional Chinese culture. The use of a large number of symbolic images in the works makes the works filled with the sadness of nostalgia and the sublimation of contradictions. The book was published to rave reviews and received a number of awards, such as the California Book Silver. The Chinese protagonists in her works have a self-reflection in history and realize the dream of self-liberation. The identity anxiety caused by being in the marginal space leads to the attention of Chinese works on their own cultural identity. The longing for the native land appeals to the imagination of and the entanglements with cultural symbols. Through the symbolic imagination and narration of the original village, the pursuit of identity sublimates from anxiety to aesthetics, thus realizing the poetic transcendence of self-construction [8].

### (3) The integration in cultural crossing

Take Jingyu Qiu and Kim Keltner Wong as example. Born in New York, Qiu received her bachelor's degree in East Asian Studies from Bates College in 1991 and her Master's degree in Fine arts from Columbia University. The short story collection *Trouble makers and Other Saints* is the result of the author's master's degree, The book consists of eleven short stories. The new generation of Chinese American women writers experienced the process from the resistance to other culture to the formation of a tolerant attitude towards it. Jingyu Qiu made the "troublemaker" on the edge become a kind "saint"; The protagonists in Kim Keltner Wong's works combine the pursuit of ethnic roots with cross-cultural communication. By injecting her personal experience into the description of the protagonist Owyang Lindsey's emotions in *The Dim Sum of All Things*, the Chinese American writer Kim Wong Keltner displayed the Chinese and American society in the eyes of the new generation of Chinese American female as well as her emotional world from the multicultural perspective. The analysis of the emotional writing style and poetic tendency of this novel helps readers to understand the artistic aesthetics and the significance of cultural poetics embodied in the "identity" writing of Chinese American literature, with the purpose of arousing the return of the artistic aesthetics in the Chinese American literature.

In the practice of self-pursuit, the new generation of Chinese American female writers have experienced the process of self-reflection, returning to history, reflecting on culture, transcending culture and ideology, and moving towards poetry. The new generation of Chinese American women

writers implant life experience into literary fantasy, build a bridge between self and others, and pursue poetic self and culture identity.

### **5. Sources of Chinese American Women's Sense of Cultural Identity**

The identity dilemma of Chinese Americans is caused by unfair political and cultural factors. As the victims of political and cultural discrimination, Chinese female writers have a grudge against political ideology. They try to avoid becoming the perpetrators of violence. They are far away from the influence of ideology, face the self-identity in other culture with a mind of truth, goodness and beauty, and actively construct the cultural identity in the diversity and integration of culture. This utopian ideal comes from the vigilance of reality of other culture. In this sense, the marginal status in foreign countries makes them deeply realize the culture value and self-identity, and makes them more eager to convert to Chinese cultural identity.

### **6. The Relationship between Gender Dilemma and Ethnic Dilemma**

For a long time, Chinese American female writers, as foreign ethnic groups, are inevitably subjected to cultural discrimination and gender discrimination from other ethnic groups. They are on the fringes of the social class, fighting against the racial discrimination of the Western racists while fighting against the patriarchal culture. Therefore, the works of Chinese American female writers are concerned with women's identity anxiety and survival dilemma in family and ethnic life under the cultural conflict between China and the West. The efforts some Chinese American women writers, like Amy Tan, have made for the issues of race and gender in their works, expressed the ideal of the deconstruction of dominant gender/racial formations and the reconstruction of the fair sexual politics. It becomes significant to dismantle the dominant racial formation as well as the dominant gender formation. Only when this goal is achieved can people become equal in a true sense. Only until then can the debates between feminism and nationalism be settled. This is because when people(s) are no longer divided by gender and/ or race, their relations will no longer be in binary opposition. Rather, they—male and female, white and non-white—will come together to find solutions to social problems such as sexism and racism.

### **7. The Emergence of Consciousness of Chinese Identity**

In the western society dominated by white male culture, the oppression to the Chinese American women and their descendants make them face difficulties in the process of cultural development. Due to the prejudice of ethnocentrism against foreign ethnic groups in Western culture and the obstacles of male-centered culture in Chinese and Western culture, Chinese American women are faced with difficult choices in the identification of cultural identity, ethnic identity and their own identity, and finally strengthen the identification of Chinese cultural identity in the process of identity pursuit. We should make a critical study of the literary works of Chinese American women in the 21st century, analyzes how the works of Chinese American women writers face cultural conflicts, pursue independence and self-worth, objectively reflect the real spiritual world of overseas Chinese, and show the distinct Chinese cultural identity of Chinese American women writers.

### **8. The Realization of Chinese Cultural Identity of Chinese American Female Writers**

Chinese American female literary works reflect the anxiety of Chinese American female writers from having no feelings of belonging, to the sense of belonging to the homeland again, and to the

impulse of subverting the culture identity, which reflects that these Chinese female writers realize that the transcendence of culture gap and the path of construction of individual identity in the process of cultural identity pursuit is difficult but significant. We find that the widespread theme of cultural conflict in Chinese American literature reflects the discomfort and pain that Chinese Americans experience in the process of dealing with Chinese and American culture. It is an inevitable pain when the native culture enters the culture of the host country, and it is an objective existence that cannot be avoided or eliminated. From another point of view, cultural conflict is inevitable, but it is not all possible when two cultures meet, and cultural fusion is accompanied by cultural conflict. Under the circumstances, the difficult cultural identity path of Chinese American female writers is sensed.

## 9. Conclusion

For a conclusion, the works of representative Chinese American female writers explore the Chinese cultural identity in Chinese American female literature. The Chinese American literature not only reflects the cultural adaptation made by Chinese American writers under the dual cultural background, but also shows us the perceptual understanding of the expression of “heterotemporality” of Chinese traditional culture in the cross-cultural context. The coordination between the native culture and the resident culture in Chinese-American culture shows the resilience of traditional Chinese culture, and also provides a useful reference for the world culture, including Chinese culture, to face the challenge of different cultures in the era of globalization.

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## Data Availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

## Conflict of Interest

The author states that this article has no conflict of interest.

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