

Pure Ethnicity in Hybridization:
A Returnee's Quest for Chineseness
in "Love in a Fallen City"
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Abstract: Most critics find Fan Liuyuan, the male protagonist in Eileen Chang's novella "Love in a Fallen City" (1943), to be a simple character. What they fail to take into account, however, is the complexity of Fan Liuyuan's identity as well as his predicament, both before and after his return to China. By adopting the concept of diaspora, the present study explores how his desire for an absent authentic Chinese culture is developed, and how his failure to come to terms with his hybrid identity in his search for pure ethnicity results in a series of fruitless attempts to construct his cultural identity in his homeland. Chang's depiction of this futile pursuit indicates that pure "Chineseness" exists only in the diasporic imagination rather than in any tangible object or place. Such a revelation negates the essentialization of pure Chineseness and allows for more diverse articulations of diasporic ethnicity.

Keywords: diaspora, returnee, cultural identity, hybridization, pure ethnicity, Eileen Chang, "Love in a Fallen City"

Introduction

John O'Donohue maintains that "distance awakens longing; closeness is belonging" (xxii). For those living in diaspora, the "longing" brought about by being away is often assuaged by returning to the homeland, which in turn creates a sense of "belonging." "Love in a Fallen City" (1943; henceforth "LIFC"), a novella by Eileen Chang,¹ however, indicates otherwise, that physical proximity (closeness) to the homeland

does not necessarily lead to a sense of belonging. The novella centers on its male protagonist, Fan Liuyuan (henceforth Fan), whose ruminations over his own hybrid identity lead him to return to China in search of a more definite cultural identity.

Although “LIFC” is regarded as one of Chang’s best works, Fan’s behavior has often been singled out for criticism. For instance, the prominent literary critic Fu Lei declared soon after the publication of “LIFC” that Fan never had any intention of getting married and settling down, and that his love affairs were nothing more than activities to kill time (10). Scholars still echo this opinion today. He Yuqing regards Fan as an immoral dandy and sly womaniser who pursues sexual pleasure capriciously (55), while Leo Ou-fan Lee finds it strange that Chang voices through Fan the existential dilemma of being human, since it is incongruous with his identity as a good-for-nothing rich man (296).

Other critics focus instead on the complexity of Fan’s identity. Some fleetingly categorize Fan as an “overseas Chinese” or “a second-generation immigrant” (Kong 296; Leung 94), while others offer a more detailed analysis. Lan Dizhi, for instance, regards Fan as a representative of Western culture, which is superior to the Eastern culture represented by Bai Liusu, and he holds that the depiction of Fan shows Chang’s admiration for Western culture (8–10). Such an assertion, though giving consideration to the influence of Western (British) society on Fan, still tends to simplify the influence by overemphasizing its positive aspect. In a different yet similar vein, Qian Yaling only focuses on the negative influence of British society on Fan (42).

Nevertheless, these critics fail to take into account a number of issues: what Fan’s predicaments are before and after his return to China; how Fan’s desire for an absent authentic Chinese culture is developed; why his efforts to pursue pure Chineseness end in failure; and how Chang understands Chineseness in relation to the second-generation diasporic returnee. This essay approaches these questions by adopting the concept of diaspora. Although some researchers have already used diasporic theories to study Chang’s works, they primarily focus on her writings (and rewritings) produced after her departure for Hong Kong and the United States. They either point to Chang’s impossible efforts to reproduce

Chineseness in English (Rollins and Chiang) or conclude that Chang wilfully caters to her American audience by adopting an Orientalist attitude (L. Chang 113; X. Wang 127–29). Though not applying a particularly diasporic perspective, some critics also mention briefly the influence of the overseas experiences on Chang's characters in her Shanghai period of writing. Rey Chow holds that Chang believes that sexism lies in “the core of cultural loyalty and patriotism” because it makes women the “bearers of cultural and sexual boundaries”—in effect making their transgressions “matter” while those of men are “overlooked” (170–71). The present study, however, will explore how such transgressions do in fact matter for men, as exemplified by Fan in “LIFC.”

Desire for the Absent

Fan is depicted as a rich 32-year-old bachelor who has just returned to China from Britain. Upon his return, however, he finds that his reality falls short of his idealized expectations of his homeland. He becomes attracted to Bai Liusu (henceforth Bai), a young divorcee from a declining aristocratic family, because he believes that she is a “real Chinese woman.” In the wake of the fall of Hong Kong, and after many trials and much hesitation, they enter into a marriage. It needs to be noted that as a second-generation Chinese immigrant in Britain, Fan's desire for a “home” originates from his fear of instability (Qian 41)—in terms of the marginalization and alienation he suffers in the host society, and the subsequent denial of his Chinese cultural identity. This has the effect of creating in him a sense of longing or desire that can be interpreted via Jacques Lacan's conception of the mirror stage:

[T]he subject becomes aware of her/his qualifying nature of lack (of speech, of mobility, of power, of access to discursive practices) and so develops into the desiring subject. From this point on the subject is defined by [a] paradigmatic system of absences and desires in all their most complex manifestations and simplest requirements for satisfaction. (Fuery 16)

Fan feels he lacks an authentic Chinese identity; both his physical distance from the homeland and his marginalized position in the host

country make it hard for him to feel authentically Chinese. His physical appearance marks him as ethnically Chinese, but he feels disconnected from a Chinese cultural identity. Since Fan is a second-generation immigrant, the birth of his Chinese identity occurs “simultaneously with the traumatic consciousness of [the] distance from that identity” (Chiu 607). He is perpetually troubled by a sense of absence, especially because he believes in the existence of a true and authentic Chinese cultural identity. As Ien Ang states, “the notion of a . . . cultural core, from which Chinese civilization has emanated—the so-called Central Country complex—has been deeply entrenched in the Chinese historical imagination” (229). In the process of pursuing this desired identity, Fan tries to establish forms of “quasi-presence” to fill this absence, hoping that the absence of a Chinese cultural identity can be eventually denied.

Fan’s sense of absence is partly caused by his illegitimate birth. His parents are unofficially married in Britain, and his mother does not dare face his father’s legitimate wife in China. As a result, Fan grows up in London. The illegitimacy of his birth “[leaves its] mark on him” (“LIFC” 123) and contributes to his frustration: he has “always been a bit odd anyway, due to his unusual childhood” (“LIFC” 122). His sense of alienation is exacerbated by the fact that he is denied the right to inherit his father’s property by the people of his clan. Over time, his identity crisis becomes even stronger, and his desire to be endowed with some legitimacy to fill the absence grows stronger.

Additionally, his sense of absence is also attributable to his identity as an Other in the host society. Being born and raised in Britain, Fan finds it very hard to establish a national and/or cultural identity. As a descendent of an “inferior” and “degraded” race that is “backward, heathen and decadent” in the imperial discourse (Bush 102), Fan goes through “some hard times” (“LIFC” 122) in the interpellation of the host society, which exerts power over him in the way that power “applies itself to immediate everyday life which categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize and which others have to recognize in him” (Foucault 781). Fan finds no acceptance in the host society since the dominant British discourse still categorizes and marks

him as an inferior Chinese, as an Other that does not truly belong. This labelling is so powerful that Fan comes to identify himself as an outsider, neither truly British nor truly Chinese. Being diasporic, he knows that it is impossible to claim what he regards as an authentic Chinese cultural identity in Britain. Under such circumstances, it is only natural that he begins to have “beautiful dreams” of his homeland (“LIFC” 140) and desires to return to China to restore what he thinks of as his cultural identity.

His longing to return to his homeland can be seen from his habitual act of gazing at the moon. The moon is significant in Chinese culture as it symbolizes family reunion and love. But for those away from home, it stands for the melancholy of not being able to return to a site of belonging, making it a reminder of absence. Although Fan has never actually *seen* the “Chinese moon” before his return to China, he nevertheless develops a Chinese diasporic sentiment towards it. This is evident in the instance when Fan despairs at finding out that Bai only wants to marry him for the sake of financial security. At that very moment, Chang describes explicitly how the moon is not clearly visible in Fan’s room, which heightens his melancholy. And when Bai yields to his request and comes to visit him in Hong Kong for the second time, the better view of the moon corresponds with his satisfaction. Since the diasporic habit of gazing at the moon must have been fostered before his return to China, it can be said that it is indicative of an immigrant’s longing to return to his or her homeland. Despite Fan’s return to China, however, his identity crisis is not resolved with mere geographical relocation.

Efforts to Construct a Chinese Cultural Identity

Once back in China, Fan thinks that he can turn his dream for authentic Chineseness, which has been absent from him for twenty-four years, into reality. His efforts to establish his Chinese cultural identity constitute a process of creating signifiers of real Chineseness to anchor himself. He first tries to seek recognition from his father’s clan, because Chinese culture dictates that one must obtain acknowledgement from the clan upon one’s return home. However, he finds that although he finally manages to get the legal right to inherit his father’s property, he still gets no

acceptance from his clan. Despite legal recognition as his father's heir, the fact that his mother has never been approved by his father's official wife makes the clan resent him and regard him as morally illegitimate.

Fan then tries to find his own identity in the people around him, learn from them what he thinks is "authentic" Chinese identity, and get his cultural identity validated. However, to his disappointment, he finds that his desire cannot be satiated. He has returned to a China in turmoil, with the Japanese invasion and the meddling of imperial powers—a far cry from his imagined peaceful ancient society where "ministers appease the world with the writing brush" and "generals mount horses and pacify the universe" (Zhou 36). He instead finds the people are "terrible," and the things they do are "awful" and "even harder to get used to" ("LIFC" 139). Since the China he experiences is not the one he has envisioned, he cannot establish his identity there. His disappointment also arises from his internalization of the imperial vision. As Stuart Hall contends, colonizers not only construct the colonized as different but also make them "see and experience" themselves as different and inferior (112). Accordingly, Fan adheres to the imperial discourse and views Chinese people as backward and awful. But Fan is nevertheless different from the colonizers who merely despise the colonized: his longing for an idealized China renders the dismantling of his dream painful, because it means that his desired cultural identity remains elusive.

After two disappointments, he begins his most important endeavour. He tries to find consolation in traditional Chinese culture since he cannot identify with contemporary Chinese society. This time, Fan's desire for absent Chineseness translates into wanting a "real Chinese woman." Fan himself states that he is not a real Chinese man, and that it is only in recent years that he has become "Chinese-lized," doggedly clinging to traditional practices and notions. It is only after deciding to resort to traditional Chinese culture to construct his cultural identity that he meets Bai and is attracted by her quality of being a "real Chinese woman." Fan's designation of Bai as such is interpreted by some as a manifestation of his colonial gaze (Lee 295). But such an interpretation would put Bai in the same position as the exoticized Saheyini, an Indian woman to whom Fan is attracted, as will be discussed below.

Suffice to say here that Bai is more than “an Oriental woman” to him, so much so that he feels no one should even mention her and Saheyini “in the same breath” (“LIFC” 138). Bai stands for the authenticity of Chinese culture he has been seeking.

Even in their first serious talk, Fan tells Bai, “I don’t care if you are good or bad. I don’t want you to change. It’s not easy to find a real Chinese girl like you” (“LIFC” 135). And when Bai says that she is nothing but an old-fashioned girl, Fan replies, “Real Chinese women are the world’s most beautiful women. They are never out of fashion” (“LIFC” 135), reflecting his diasporic conception of the homeland culture—an eternal sense of perfection. Fan’s remarks also indicate his eagerness to cling to something stable so as to fill the gap he perceives in his cultural identity, and so that he can change his identity to become what he regards as more fully “Chinese”. For Fan, Bai is a signifier of authentic Chinese culture; she is “like someone from another world,” and she has “little gestures, and a romantic aura, very much like a Peking opera singer” (“LIFC” 144). The Peking Opera is a traditional cultural form that symbolizes the grandness and beauty of Chinese culture. In Fan’s eyes, however, it becomes a tangible manifestation of authentic Chinese identity. Like a Peking opera singer, Bai stands for eternal beauty, which tallies with the romantic idealization that he has constructed of his homeland. A “real Chinese woman,” in Fan’s understanding, is beautiful, gentle, and polite—qualities required of a woman in Confucian teaching, and normally found in a woman from an aristocratic or scholarly family. Bai meets these requirements. Her resemblance to the Confucian ideal is a further representation of the traditional Chinese culture that he hopes can endow him with the identity he believes he lacks.

But despite Bai possessing these features, Fan still cannot satiate his desire for Chineseness. He discovers that his relationship with Bai (whom he believes to represent “pure Chineseness”) does not necessarily make him more Chinese, or does not validate his own Chineseness. When he later explains to her why he turns to promiscuity, he becomes confused and frustrated: “I don’t understand myself—but I want you to understand me! I want you to understand me” (“LIFC” 140). While “I don’t understand myself” demonstrates the ambiguity of Fan’s identity,

his plea of “I want you to understand me” shows that he desires Bai’s validation, or rather the affirmation of his identity. He initially sees in her the authentic Chineseness that he has been seeking but she turns out to be a mere signifier and is thus unable to bring him closer to his expectation of a Chinese cultural identity. Fan’s misconception of authentic Chineseness in Bai is futile, as Bai is not able to relate to his diasporic sentiments. She even takes offence when he compares her to a Peking opera singer, thinking he implies that she is just putting on a performance. Disappointed, Fan says, “My fault. I’m used to throwing out lines because everyone throws lines at me. But to you I have said a few sincere things, and you can’t tell the difference” (“LIFC” 144). It is no wonder that he becomes disappointed; he expresses his joy at finding the Chineseness in her, but she mistakes it for sarcasm. In short, Bai is unable to understand his predicament as a diasporic returnee, neither sensing his confused identity nor recognizing his desire to fill the perceived gap in his identity, to be more “fully” Chinese. All she wants from him is a convenient marriage and the consequent financial security. Fan’s desire to construct his cultural identity within the homeland culture therefore remains unfulfilled.

Futility of Pursuit

What hinders Fan from constructing his identity as an authentic Chinese is the fact that his identity is already unconsciously hybridized. Fan has partly internalized the imperial perspective, and the interpellation that he undergoes leads to his identification with the host society—in terms of thinking like a colonized subject. As Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin state, “[p]ower over the colonized subject may be exerted in myriad ways. . . . The colonized subject may accept the imperial view, including the array of values, assumptions and cultural expectations on which this is based, and order his or her behaviour accordingly” (227). Fan’s acceptance of imperial discourse can be seen through his relationship with Saheyini, whose appearance fits the imperial imagination of exotic and mysterious Oriental woman: “her long black hair hanging down to her ankles. She wore anklet of twisted gold over her bare feet . . . above the anklets one could just make out the

slim Indian-style trousers” (“LIFC” 132). As much as Fan is attracted by Saheiyini’s exotic Oriental features, he does not think much of her because he suspects that her claim to be an exiled princess is a lie. His vision of her echoes the colonizers’: while he is somewhat attracted by her, he secretly despises her, exhibiting “attraction and repulsion” in equal measure (Young 175). Furthermore, Fan labels Chinese people and events around him as “awful” and finds it hard to get used to them, which also reflects his hybridized vision. This is the intricate part of Fan’s diasporic identity. Although he tries to construct his cultural identity in the homeland, he unconsciously assumes the imperial view that once rejected him as an Other; hence, the land on which he stands is not only the desired homeland, but also a subaltern semi-colony to him.

However, the internalization of the Orientalist view on the part of the colonized is often “ambivalent, attenuated, intermittent and diffused by feelings of resistance to imperial power” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 227). Compliance and resistance co-exist in Fan’s identification with the imperial perspective. On the one hand, he constructs his understanding of himself, the host society, and the homeland within the framework of imperial discourse, and he accepts the identification of himself and his homeland as inferior. But on the other hand, the nation-state consciousness makes him resist imperial power. For instance, his relationship with Saheiyini demonstrates his identification, whereas his criticism of the British-style ballroom in Hong Kong shows his dis-identification with British colonial authority. The existence of both identification and dis-identification indicates Fan’s border experiences across space, revealing the hybridized nature of his identity. Fan himself knows this; as he tells Bai, “I’m not a real Chinese . . . but a foreigner who’s become Chinese” (“LIFC” 136). Just as the host society cannot fully expunge the traces of Chineseness in him, he has no means to deny the traces of imperial influence, either. As Dibyesh Anand states, diasporics “by their very existence problematize the notion of political allegiance because their loyalty can never be unambiguously to one or the other. They . . . forever straddle across boundaries” (104). Fan’s unconscious hybridization renders impossible an absolute distinction between Orientals and Occidentals in Orientalism.

The hybridized identity is the paradox of Fan's pursuit of pure Chineseness. The internalization of the imperial view means that he has consciously or unconsciously subjected himself to the interpellation of the host society and regards Chinese culture as less favourable, but the knowledge he gets from his mother or other Chinese sources instills in him "beautiful dreams" about the homeland. Thus, his hybridization becomes a reminder of the impossibility of assuming an authentic Chinese identity as an immigrant, which in turn foregrounds its "value" and propels him to keep it intact. According to Kuei-Fen Chiu, "the notion of hybridity, paradoxically, enables [one] to cling to the Chinese imaginary, which is taken to be an essential constituent of hybrid identity" (608). The Chinese imaginary becomes a comfort for Fan when he is away from the homeland because it represents the promise of a perfect identity for him to pursue. That is why he cherishes many beautiful dreams about China before his return.

Nevertheless, the geographic distance from the homeland results in temporal alienation. As a second-generation immigrant, Fan has no direct knowledge of China before his return. What he does know probably originates from his mother's stories of the old country or from books. Hence, as distinct from Benedict Anderson's analysis of European emigration to the new world, there is no simultaneity between Fan's imagined pure Chineseness and the reality of China. Anderson holds that European immigrants in new places—which were named after European metropolitan centers, such as New York and New England—felt their lives to be parallel to their old lives. This is because the colonial community's cultural coherence and political domination made it possible to maintain a sense of simultaneity with the homeland (187–89). But in the case of Fan's mother, the homeland's subordinate position and her own marginalization in the host country preclude such simultaneity. China is frozen in space and time for her, and the knowledge that she passes on to Fan about the homeland is further distanced from simultaneity. Triggered by nostalgia, she would narrate the more favourable elements of the homeland culture to Fan. In this way, Fan develops a "nostalgia for the imagined stability and coherence of past times and places," and he longs to "relocate the dislocated self some-

how in an earlier, more authentic, time and place” (King and Christou 110). However, developed under such circumstances, this authentic Chineseness exists only in his imagination. His failure to construct a Chinese identity in his homeland showcases the imaginary nature of pure ethnicity.

Fan cannot construct a cultural identity in China because the pure Chineseness in his diasporic imagination is characterized by ambiguity, which is reflected in his courtship of Bai. Early on he tells her that he does not want her to change, which seems to indicate that he regards her as the perfect Chinese woman—an ideal signifier of Chineseness. But over time, his uncertainty emerges: he arranges for her to come to Hong Kong, where he thinks she can be freed from the influence of the big family. Once there, however, he then wants to take her to the forests of Malaya, to return to nature—a contradiction that demonstrates the gap between Bai and the image of authentic Chinese culture in Fan’s mind. It is not so much whether Bai should change, but more that the image of authentic Chinese culture—the absent cultural identity that he desires—remains ambiguous in his heart. This ambiguity can also be seen in Fan’s material uncertainty about what dress is suitable for Bai:

“I can’t imagine you running through the forest in a cheongsam. But neither can I imagine you not wearing a cheongsam.”
 . . . “The first time I saw you, you were wearing one of those trendy tunics, and I thought you shouldn’t bare your arms like that. But Western-style clothes aren’t right for you either. A Manchu-style cheongsam might suit you better.” (“LIFC” 143)

Such ambiguity is also demonstrated in the shifting of objects he chooses to identify as signifiers of Chineseness: from his clan, to the people around him, and finally to Bai herself. These signifiers are reduced to objects of his desiring gaze and become signifiers of pure Chineseness. As Fuery states, “the object is relatively unimportant, for the subject is concerned with the gaze” (120). Fan’s gaze was “directly connected to the action of desire, and therefore of lack and absence” (Fuery 120).

What counts is not his relationship to the object, but rather his relationship to his desire for Chineseness.

The desire to settle himself in a more authentic China causes Fan to cling stubbornly to traditional practices and values. Nonetheless, the alienation remains. This can be seen in the instance where he calls Bai to tell her that he loves her and recites a poem from the classic Chinese *Book of Songs*:

Facing life, death, distance
[I will share my joy with thee].²
I take thy hand in mine:
We will grow old together. (“LIFC” 140)

Even Fan’s literary competency in Chinese indicates that he must have tried hard to learn and use the ancestral language within the different linguistic context in the host society as a means to inherit Chinese culture, for it endows him with a sense of “unbroken continuity” (Pan 248). But he makes a mistake when reciting the poem. The correct version of the second line should be “[h]ere is my promise to thee” (Yuan 40). The particular verse is about the lifelong promise that an ancient soldier makes to his beloved, but, in Fan’s mouth, the promise turns into a wish to share his happiness. Fan’s mistake is significant because it shows that he is unwilling to make a lifelong vow to Bai, so he can only try to share his happiness with her. More importantly, however, this mistake signifies his alienation from traditional Chinese culture, to which he is unable to return, although he claims that he is more Chinese-lized than an old feudal scholar. His dogged insistence on traditional notions originates from his belief that they can deny his absence and endow him with his desired cultural identity. But, in reality, he cannot truly understand the traditional culture.

Despite his mistake, Fan’s interpretation of the poem shows his reflective side. He tells Bai that although his Chinese may not ensure a thorough understanding of the poem, he still finds it immensely sad because human beings are powerless in the face of big events such as death, and yet they keep saying they will never part from each other, displaying an illusory sense of control. Fan’s interpretation of the poem

indicates his philosophical reflection and apocalyptic anxiety (Tao 134). Such a tendency is also evident in his talk with Bai, in front of a high brick wall: “[The] wall makes me think of the old sayings about the end of the world. Someday, when human civilization has been completely destroyed, when everything is burned, utterly collapsed and ruined, maybe the wall will still be there” (“LIFC” 139). What does Fan mean here? Is the wall the only material reference to the essence of a nation or a culture that will not be destroyed by any human force? Does the wall stand for differences that transcend time and space? When talking about the symbolic wall, he seems to challenge the authenticity of worldly things; everything, materially or conceptually, is ephemeral. In fact, his doubt might also be directed towards his pursuit of Chinese culture as well. Lee finds it inappropriate for a dandy like Fan to have “apocalyptic sentiments” and to make these thought-provoking remarks (296). But if Fan’s quest to establish his cultural identity is taken into consideration in terms of finding a sense of meaningful belonging in something stable, something solid like a wall, then such sentiments may be read as natural and logical.

Non-Essentialization of Pure Chineseness

Through Fan’s failure, Chang ponders on the conflict between traditional Chinese culture and China in modernity, and indicates the impossibility of essentializing pure Chineseness in China. Fan’s choice of Bai as the signifier of his absent authentic Chineseness is a metaphor of his own identity. He chooses Bai (the daughter of the father’s official wife) instead of her half-sister (the daughter of the father’s second, less legitimate wife). This particular choice indicates his intention to use Bai’s “legitimacy” to correct his own illegitimate origin. However, the fact that Bai is a divorcee implies that she has lost the purity of her Chineseness, because traditionally a woman is supposed to marry only once and stay married regardless of the conditions of that marriage. However, Bai resists the traditional fetters exerted on women by resorting to divorce when she cannot bear her first husband’s abuse. Moreover, Bai attracts Fan not only with her Chineseness, but also with her Westernized features, such as her dancing skills. As her sister-in-law

remarks, dancing is not something that a woman from a scholarly family like theirs is supposed to do.

However, though the scholarly family of the Bais is “uncontaminated” and traditional, Fan rejects it. The Bai family is a condensation of thousands of years of Chinese tradition—material traces of the past can be found in the household, and Confucian teachings are still referred to in conversation. Nonetheless, the three cardinal guides and five constant virtues³ that Bai’s third brother talks about are just excuses to force Bai to leave the house. As Shi Jie remarks, a big family like theirs should have demonstrated the harmony of traditional Chinese culture, but the fact is that selfishness, cruelty, and hypocrisy permeate the house (143). This is why Fan asks Bai to come to Hong Kong, to escape the crusty tyranny of her family.

The Bai family has fallen behind the times. The Bais claim to follow the old way of living, even refusing to synchronize their clock with the outside world. The house with its decaying grandeur is like a “fairylane where a single day, creeping slowly by, was a thousand years in the outside world. But if you spend a thousand years here, all the days would be the same, each as flat and dull as the last one” (“LIFC” 120–21). It is as out of place as the *hugin* played by Bai’s brother, which is out of tune. This *hugin* narrates traditional Peking opera stories of loyalty to the emperor, filial piety to parents, moral integrity, and a code of brotherhood, but Bai knows these stories are all distant, irrelevant to her aura of a Peking opera singer, which later enables her to capture Fan. Thus, the traditional family and original Peking opera stories that should have been the essence of Chineseness have lost their currency. There is no authentic Chinese culture for Fan to go back to in the first place.

Fan’s dogged pursuit of Chineseness reflects Chang’s resistance to the imperial marginalization of immigrants. Contrary to the claim that Chang admires Western culture (Lan 8–10), she actually defies the superiority of the West in “LIFC” and several of her other stories in *Romances*, such as “Steamed Osmanthus Flower Ah Xiao’s Unhappy Autumn,” “Aloewood Incense: Second Burning,” and “Red Rose and White Rose.” However, her defiance against Western superiority does not mean that she promotes the superiority of Chinese culture or even

essentializes Chineseness. She is aware that at a time of great changes, traditional Chinese culture cannot stand on its own, and asserts that China is not necessarily an example of authentic Chinese culture. As Ang argues, “Chineseness is not a category with a fixed content—be it racial, cultural, or geographical—but operates as an open and indeterminate signifier whose meanings are constantly renegotiated and rearticulated in different sections of the Chinese diaspora” (225). Ang opposes the essentialization of Chineseness by contending that its meanings are open to negotiation and that they have different articulations in “different sections of the Chinese diaspora.” Similarly, Chang’s delineation of the futility of Fan’s pursuit of authentic Chinese identity demonstrates that there is no situated community for the authenticity of Chineseness, thus negating the essentialization of pure ethnicity and opening up more possibilities for the expression of diasporic ethnicity. But while Ang tries to establish the legitimacy of Chineseness among Chinese diasporic communities, Chang’s focus is more pessimistic, mirrored in what she expresses about the menacing wind in the dead fallen city: the wind wails on and on,

[u]ntil . . . there was only a stream of empty air, a bridge of emptiness that crossed into the dark, into the void of voids. Here, everything had ended. There were only some broken bits of levelled wall and, stumbling and fumbling about, a civilized man who had lost his memory; he seemed to be searching for something, but there was nothing left. (“LIFC” 164)

In this instance, Chang sees and depicts the horror and nihilism of the world whereby nothing is left. The pursuer has lost his memory, so he forgets what he has been looking for. The identity, the distinction of superiority and inferiority, and even human civilization itself are all empty.

Conclusion

For Fan, going back to China is far from a heuristic journey to the source of identity. His indefatigable efforts and consequent failures to reclaim his Chineseness show that cultural identity is not a “fixed origin

to which we can make some final and absolute Return” (Hall 113). The non-fixity of his identity causes him to yearn for pure Chineseness as he experiences imperial marginalization in Britain. However, when he tries to construct an authentic Chinese identity after his return to China, his unconscious hybridization hinders him from doing so. He makes every effort to pursue pure Chineseness without realizing that it only exists in his diasporic imagination rather than in China. Ironically, his search for pure Chineseness is triggered by his diasporic experience in Britain and out of the hybridization of his identity. Ultimately, Fan is unable to find an exact representation of his imagined pure Chineseness in the homeland; it remains elusive to him and suspends his desire eternally. Bai and others he meets in China do not really satisfactorily represent the ideal “pure Chinese identity” he is looking for, and thus do not fulfill his desire to find a pure Chinese cultural identity.

Fan’s reflexive thoughts in the process of identity construction portray him as a thinking man. Therefore, critics’ tendency to label him as a simple character, or a “rake,” does injustice to the complexity of the novella and the author’s insights. Through Fan, Chang expresses her understanding and sympathy for returned immigrants. She does not construct Fan as the masculine superior West to save Bai, the representative of the feminine inferior East, as some scholars have claimed (Ma 142; Zhao 74). Her self-reflection of Chinese culture qualifies her as a mature intellectual and her depiction of the futile pursuit for pure or authentic “Chineseness” indicates that the concept merely exists in the diasporic imagination rather than in any tangible object or place. Such a revelation negates the essentialization of pure Chineseness and allows for more diverse articulations of diasporic ethnicity. In sum, Chang’s rejection of essentialized Chineseness through “LIFC” has allowed for more possibilities for the articulation of a hybridised ethnicity (diasporic or otherwise).

Notes

- 1 Chang (1920–1995) rose to fame as a writer in Shanghai in the early 1940s. She produced some short stories and novellas during this period that were collected in *Romances*. She departed for Hong Kong in 1952 and stayed there for three

years, during which she finished *The Rice-Sprout Song* (1955) and *Naked Earth* (1956). In 1955, she migrated to the United States and obtained her American citizenship in 1960. She rewrote “The Golden Cangu” (1943) into *The Pink Tears*, but it was rejected by American publishers. It was not until 1967 that the story was published under the title of *The Rouge of the North* in Britain. In addition, she produced another two semi-autobiographical novels in the early 1960s—*The Fall of the Pagoda* and *The Book of Change*—but they were only published posthumously in 2010. She lived an increasingly reclusive life in the US, rewriting her previous works and revisiting Chinese culture in a different space and temporality.

- 2 The second line “I will share my joy with thee” is our translation for 与子相悦, which is what Fan recites to Bai. The correct line in Chinese should be 与子成说, which means “here is my promise to thee.” The translator Karen Kingsbury has automatically corrected Fan’s mistake in her translation, but we feel that his mistake should be left intact since it shows his lack of knowledge of traditional Chinese culture.
- 3 These refer to the three principles—ruler guides subject, father guides son, and husband guides wife—and the five virtues, namely benevolence, righteousness, propriety, knowledge, and sincerity.

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