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Hybrid identity, stylistic analysis and the shaping of a creative writing PhD

Abstract:

It may not be the usual practice in Australia for an English literary studies program in tertiary education to be combined with courses in applied linguistics, but it is the system in some universities in Hong Kong. Perhaps this is partly due to the language needs in Hong Kong, a largely vocational issue, and to the fact that students are learning English as their second language. The teaching of literature in Hong Kong, then, is complemented with an analytical domain of study focusing on fundamental aspects of the language itself—such as, grammar and syntax. Hong Kong’s colonial history has meant that English language education has been dominated by British expatriate scholars. Consequently, such university literature programs have been shaped and informed by formalistic approaches, such as discourse analysis. This is the background training I received before I came to Melbourne to pursue a doctoral degree in creative writing. As a result of this earlier training, my thesis has taken on an unusual form that combined an exegesis in the form of stylistic analysis and my own fictional work. In this paper, I will discuss the relationship between my stylistic study of Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*, and the writing of my novel. I will demonstrate how a close reading of figural languages used in Kingston’s work stimulates and interacts with my own creative process. *The Woman Warrior* portrays Kingston’s struggle between Chinese and American culture; my novel-in-progress depicts a quest for identity in the hybrid culture of contemporary Hong Kong. But now that my place of residence changed to Australia, further questions arise: Who am I writing for? How should I view myself as a Chinese writer who is somewhat indebted to western literary influence and ideological assumptions?

Biographical note:

Wing Yi Chan is a PhD student in creative writing at La Trobe University. Her research field is on novel writing, magic realism and stylistic analysis. She is particularly interested in fictions presenting migrations and identity conflicts faced by individuals in other cultural environments.

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Introduction

It may not be the usual practice in Australia for an English literary studies program in tertiary education to be combined with courses in applied linguistics, but it is the system in some universities in Hong Kong. Perhaps, this is partly due to the language needs in Hong Kong, which is a largely vocational issue, and to the fact that students are learning English as their second language. The teaching of literature in Hong Kong, then, is complemented with an analytical domain of study focusing on fundamental aspects of the language itself—such as, grammar and syntax. Hong Kong's colonial history has meant that English language education has been dominated by British expatriate scholars. Consequently, such university literature programs have been shaped and informed by formalistic approaches, such as discourse analysis. This is the background training I received before I came to Melbourne to pursue a doctoral degree in creative writing. As a result of this earlier training, my thesis has taken on an unusual form which combines an exegesis in the form of stylistic analysis and my own fictional work. In this paper, I will discuss the relation between a stylistic study of Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* and my novel. I will demonstrate how a close reading¹ of figural language used in Kingston's work stimulates and interacts with my own creative process. The paper has a significant core dimension which is stylistic analysis. It involves an innovative interdisciplinary connection between stylistic analysis, creative writing and questions of cultural and linguistic hybridity. What results, I hope, is an engagement in cross-disciplinary conversation about the nature of writing and the innovative pedagogy of certain kind of writing practice.

To begin, it is important to note that the text of one writer can influence another writer in different ways, some direct, some indirect. In terms of style, which is also my concern in this paper, stylistic elements from one text can be replicated directly in another text. For example, if a bat is a recurrent image symbolising China in one text, the same bat image can be reproduced to symbolise China in the second text. A less direct influence can be the reproduction of the same element but serving a different thematic purpose. In this case, the bat image in the new text can symbolise the writer's fear of death and be unrelated to China. Indirect influences, by contrast, often reproduce the thematic purpose/impact of an original stylistic arrangement. In this sense, neither the 'bat' nor 'China' needs to appear in the new text. Rather, since the recurrent bat image mythicises and estranges the writer's impression of 'China', the writer who is indirectly influenced reproduces the estrangement sensation. Yet, estrangement can be achieved through other stylistic arrangements, for example, it can be effected by describing a neighbourhood as a zoo. As a result, the new text echoes distantly the style of the original but the stylistic elements of the previous construction are not visible.²

My inspiration from reading Kingston's style in *The Woman Warrior* belongs to an indirect influence. In my exegesis, I observe that an important language technique that shapes Kingston's style is her cumulative use of estrangement.³ In the following section, I am going to demonstrate how Kingston exercises this major technique by analysing her 'tongue cutting' imagery. As well as highlighting the humour in Kingston's narration, I want to suggest that this style of writing reflects the theme of

cultural conflict and the process of identity seeking in Kingston's Chinese-American world.⁴

Kingston's 'tongue cutting' imagery

'Tongue cutting' is a major stylistic event in the last story of the collection, 'A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe'. It is Kingston's recurring image that symbolizes her being silenced as a young child. The 'tongue cutting' is first reported at the beginning of the story as a realistic event:

Example 1. Maybe that's why my mother cut my tongue. She pushed my tongue up and sliced the frenum. Or maybe she snipped it with a pair of nail scissors. (Kingston, 1977: 163)

There is indeed a surgical procedure called 'frenotomy' which is defined as 'cutting the frenum (frenulum) especially for release of ankyloglossia (tongue-tie)' (Anderson, 2003: 739). Thus, there is a possible realistic explanation to Kingston's 'tongue cutting'. In fact, Kingston's mother's explanation actually agrees with this medical procedure, since she says:

I cut it so that you won't be tongue-tied. Your tongue would be able to move in any language. You'll be able to speak languages that are completely different from one another. You'll be able to pronounce anything. Your frenum looked too tight to do those things, so I cut it. (Kingston, 1977: 164)

Though Kingston's mother's statements are complicated by metaphor (tongue-tied), like most of her speeches, a practical reason for the surgery is provided. It was a simple and common surgery even in 1940 when Kingston was born. Neither is it surprising, from my personal experience of Chinese society, to read that Kingston's mother performed the surgery at home, especially since the mother was a doctor. Indeed, the whole matter should be quite ordinary. However, in Kingston's depiction, the event is *estranged*.

First and foremost, Kingston's usage of the phrase 'tongue cutting' is a deliberate manipulation of the nature of the event. Although technically the treatment is done to the tongue, to call it 'tongue cutting' is an exaggeration. The action would be more accurately named 'frenum cutting'. Kingston's phrase 'tongue cutting' extends the partial surgical adjustment to the whole of the organ. This evokes a much more brutal image of chopping off the whole tongue, instead of just making a slit on the ligament. In addition to the frightening effect, the phrase 'tongue cutting', by overstating the matter, ironically achieves an additional meaning—one opposite to its original intention. Kingston's mother's explanation of the aim of the surgery is that it will facilitate Kingston's speech. However, to cut one's tongue is to take away the ability to talk. The exaggerating label Kingston chooses is certainly intriguing. Merely to state that 'mother cut my tongue' is sufficient to arouse the reader's curiosity and to suggest possible multiple meanings.

Secondly, after the exaggeration has estranged the event, Kingston's narration attempts to depict the by now 'strange' event as normal. The tone of Kingston's

narrator is consistently casual, light and playful. In the first example, she starts with an easy speculative ‘maybe’ and the aim of the statement is to find out the reason for the ‘tongue cutting’ surgery. Considering the fact that this is the first time the reader is introduced to Kingston’s provocative name for frenum surgery, Kingston’s sentence presupposes the normality of the event. In this way, Kingston first amplifies an ordinary happening to make it strange, describing the minor frenum surgery in the shocking language of cutting her tongue; then she deliberately understates it, referring to it as if it is familiar. Note that the latter attempt to normalise the estranged event does not actually weaken the former estrangement effect. As seen in the example, Kingston’s ironic tone is heightened by this first estranging and then normalising (presupposition). It draws attention to the sentence structure as well to the shocking ‘tongue cutting’. Thus, the normalising activity in Kingston’s narration can in fact be an indirect method of intensifying the strangeness of the event.

Later in the story, Kingston’s ‘tongue cutting’ leads to the development of a telling list inside her in addition to her throat pain, as seen in example 2:

Example 2. Maybe because I was the one with the tongue cut loose, I had grown inside me a list of over two hundred things that I had to tell my mother so that she would know the true things about me and to stop the pain in my throat. (Kingston, 1977: 197-198)

The logic connecting the new event of throat pain and the list of things to tell to the old event of ‘tongue cutting’ is vague. No clear reason is given as to why the tongue surgery leads to the growth of a list. As for the throat pain, it is not mentioned earlier in the text, but here Kingston assumes that the articulation of the list is the remedy for the pain. Such implied connection is intriguing. Throat pain can simply be a common medical condition. Somehow, as the severity of the throat pain intensifies, it seems that her throat is beyond her control. Examples 3 to 6 illustrate this:

Example 3. I shut my mouth, but I felt something alive tearing at my throat, bite by bite, from the inside. Soon there would be three hundred things, and too late to get them out before my mother grew old and died. (Kingston, 1977: 200)

Example 4. My throat hurt constantly, vocal cords taut to snapping. (Kingston, 1977: 200)

Example 5. One night when the laundry was so busy that the whole family was eating dinner there, crowded around the little round table, my throat burst open. I stood up, talking and burbling. (Kingston, 1977: 201)

Example 6. The throat pain always returns, though, unless I tell what I really think, whether or not I lose my job, or spit out gaucheries all over a party. (Kingston, 1977: 205)

These examples give the impression that there is another force driving her throat, tearing, straining and making it burst open. Allegorically, we can say this force symbolises the rebellious mentality inside Kingston that makes her anxious to get rid of the image of the traditional silent Chinese woman. Thus, the force is not external but rather an emerging side of her that drives her to express her opinions. Pain is only a metaphor for the urgency for self-expression. Nevertheless, as Kingston keeps

repeating references to the pain, its properties and its recurrences, she turns the supposed symbolic image into a real perpetual physical irritation. In addition to the ailment's realistic and even tangible quality, Kingston reinforces the pain's abnormal intensity by referring to its absurd autonomy from her physical self. Some of Kingston's sentence structures reinforce this autonomy of her pain. We can see that in more than one place 'my throat' acts as the subject of the sentence performing an active action: for instance, in the fifth example, 'my throat burst open' and in example six, 'the throat pain always returns'. In both cases, the throat acts autonomously. While the pain is basically a metaphor for part of the protagonist's mind in 'real life', Kingston's sentences deliberately render the pain mysterious by avoiding sentence patterns which feature participation of the subject self; for example, '*I* felt as if my throat burst open' or '*I* always had throat pain'. The way Kingston exaggerates the throat pain and gives the throat autonomy again *estranges* a commonplace medical symptom.

On depicting Hong Kong identity

In discussing the 'tongue cutting' imagery and its associated throat pain, I have focused on the stylistic details through which Kingston estranges ordinary real-life events. I have pointed out Kingston's unusual word choices in naming the subjects, her presuppositions, the implied relation between events, her emphasis on physical details and her special arrangement of the subject of a sentence. All these language techniques result in an estranging effect which thematically reflects Kingston's identity struggle as a Chinese woman in American society. Here, I want to present an excerpt of my own novel, which is also an identity-seeking story, to illustrate how the stylistic analysis of *The Woman Warrior* inspires my representation of estrangement. My novel-in-progress is about a desperate, young, male Hong Kong graduate, whose name is Yu, who goes to work in a funeral parlour. Since the traditional Chinese side of Hong Kong can be totally foreign to the younger more cosmopolitan generation, I depict the funeral parlour as an alternative world. When Yu leaves his usual post-colonial British world where materialism and modern technology dominate, he undergoes an adventure in the strange world of the funeral business, where death, tradition and pragmatism intermingle. The scene below is taken from the early part of the story in which Yu is waiting for the 'sorcerer' to brief him on the Chiu Chow style funeral:

'Even for dying matters they have to bargain,' yells Sorcerer Chiu Chow into his Nokia 3210 and gives his horsetail brush an angry swing. The long and silvery strands spark a half moon against his dark gown which serves rightly as the night sky. The folding chair cracks and squeaks under the pressure of his vigorous jolts. His right leg is bobbing impatiently on his left knee. The mobile phone with a black leather jacket that matches his gown is about to break in his grip.

'We said two thousand dollars for the red envelope, on top of the ritual fee, all the sacrifices, paper dolls, mourners' clothes, this and that. Guess what? After all had finished, they suddenly started to argue! Saying that the dance was too short, the chanting wasn't sincere, the incense smelt bad, and there were yellow spots on their

muslins...’ He swears a lengthy curse on the respected family’s eighteen last generations who have probably deceased. As he does so, he kicks over the white headbands Yu has diligently torn out from a roll of calico cloth and folded thrice into ten-inch long strips. Yu feels the push of a fat knee under the table—a signal from Chung who has just switched to clean the inside of a *dee-dah* horn, apparently with enormous concentration. His forever smile looks cheeky. Yu puts down his half-polished cymbal and toothbrush and stoops over the collapsed pile.

‘What’s the fucking point?’

Yu jumps at the snap, mistaken it is directed to him.

‘Wasted so much saliva. But still they paid the same price at the end. We say auspicious money is auspicious money. Like it or not, you give it. Those Mainlanders know nothing about practices. Talk, talk, talk. If they really have the guts, bring their dead body back north and do whatever.’ The sorcerer rolls his eyes. ‘Anyway, save a breath to warm my stomach. I’ll talk to you tomorrow when I see you. Yes, Lotus Scent Chamber. Bye.’

A beep ends the call.

Funeral hall no.5 is in silence.

Sorcerer Chiu Chow slips his black phone into his black gown, brings out a vacuum mug and starts to sip. His drink smells of goji berry and chrysanthemum. Chung raises the *dee-dah* horn to his mouth to test a blow. The silver head of the horn is like that of a trumpet, joined by a thin black wooden body with six or seven punctures on it. The end of the tube attaches to a silver mouthpiece with a pair of tiny reeds. Without warning, Chung holds the reeds between his thick lips again and a light musical tune leaps into the air. Though the thin column of the horn looks too small for Chung’s chubby fingers, the sequence of single notes floats and sinks without obstruction. The tune goes on in a simple rhythm, repeats around a handful of notes, not fast, not slow. Its tone is sharp, strong, but lined with a cracked edge that makes it sound sorrowful. The sorcerer taps the table with his long fingernails to time the pace, filling the pauses between beats. The three of them are back to Beijing. At the time of the Qing dynasty, passing time in a teahouse with a birdcage and cricket fights, like three old friends. Outside the scene, a dry sandy wind sweeps across the Forbidden City. (Chan, 2010)

In the above excerpt, the major estranging effect operates on the description of the Sorcerer Chiu Chow. It is important to point out that this type of ‘sorcerer’ character, ritual conductors, actually exists in real-life Hong Kong. Yet I choose to label them ‘sorcerer’ to draw an association with the characters who possess magical power in western fantasy fiction. Those characters can also be called ‘a mage, sorceress, wizard, warlock, witch, or necromancer’ (Mckillip, 2002: 54). Thus, the name ‘Sorcerer Chiu Chow’ evokes a strange image in the largely realistic Chinese context of my story. The use of unusual names to estrange an ordinary real-life subject echoes Kingston’s labelling technique in ‘tongue cutting’. This scene also is the Sorcerer Chiu Chow’s first appearance in the novel. Instead of giving background information on the sorcerer, I focus on his telephone conversation. This is a form of

presupposition through which I attempt to normalise the unusually named character. Yet, by elaborating on the sorcerer's conversation, I intensify his strangeness. The ordinary subjects of complaints, such as funeral clients, payments and mainland Chinese, are uttered from the mouth of a supposed magical 'sorcerer'. Presupposition as an estrangement technique here again echoes Kingston's technique in the 'tongue cutting' incident.

The point of focalisation in my story is Yu, the outsider in the world of funeral business.⁵ It is from his perspective that we encounter Sorcerer Chiu Chow, picture his manner and listen to his anguished talk. The awkward naming that combines Chinese with western magical connotations reflects Yu's incomprehension as he tries to make sense of the stranger through his western interpretative framework. Yu's anxiety to seek understanding is also accentuated by the vividness of his perception of the sorcerer's phone conversation. It sounds as if Yu is eavesdropping. The scene undergoes a dramatic turn when Chung plays the *dee-dah* horn. Yu's observation of the horn and Chung's playing is again described in detail, but when he imagines the three of them back to ancient Beijing, the image in his head somehow resembles an archetypal scene from modern television dramas. Yu's keen observation of the events reminds readers of his alienation⁶; his imaginative interpretation of the surroundings reveals his struggle to relate to the environment. In this way, the sense of estrangement in my novel is focalised through Yu's hybrid perspective as he re-encounters the Chinese tradition after having been influenced by western ideology and modernization. The estranging techniques are applied to depict his realisation of his status as an outsider within the environment and his struggle to redefine his identity as a Hong Kong Chinese.

In the above, I have outlined what I believed to be an innovative interface between creative writing, stylistic analysis and issues of cultural linguistic identity. As a final remark, let me share my own experience of estrangement during my creative process. Since I came to Australia to pursue a doctoral degree in creative writing, I decided to write a story about Hong Kong in English. I find myself struggling between languages and cultures more than ever. In order to translate the culture of Hong Kong literarily, I have to estrange myself from my home culture and examine it as an outsider. On the other hand, as I strive to delineate the Chinese culture in English, the English language also estranges me. Within this hub of confusion, one question stands out: Who am I writing for? The stylistic analysis of Kingston's work does not provide an answer to define my target audience. However, her technique of estrangement has shown me an honest way to express the perplexity of cultural hybridity. While the estrangement technique is part of the objective stylistic construction of my novel, its interpretation is subjected to the cultural locations of the readers. For, a readership from within the Chinese culture can respond to an estrangement effect quite differently, compared to a readership outside the Chinese culture, or one with a hybrid cultural background. I believe this estrangement technique can convey effectively the absurdity and the tumult in the course of struggles for identity that touches both myself and the hearts of my reader, whoever they may be. After all, we are all prone to face cultural estrangements in various ways in this globalising modern world.

Endnotes

¹ Although ‘close reading’ pertains to American New Critics, here it suggests a pedagogical approach to creative writing as prompted by Francine Prose: ‘[...] a close-reading course should at least be a companion, if not an alternative, to the writing workshop’ (Prose, 1999:11).

² The bat image appears repeatedly in *The Woman Warrior* (pg. 57, 66, 68, 73, etc). Its significance is discussed in my thesis-in-progress.

³ Viktor Shklovsky uses the Russian word *ostranenie*, translated as ‘making strange’ or ‘defamiliarizing’. He discusses that the purpose of art is ‘to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known’ (Shklovsky, 2004: 16).

⁴ *The Woman Warrior* is published as Kingston’s fictional memoir in which the writer narrates her struggle growing up as a Chinese-American girl in Stockton, California, around 1950’s.

⁵ Focalisation implies camera position; it refers to the viewing position the writer chooses to adopt (Mills, 2006: 139).

⁶ Bertolt Brecht’s theory of the alienation effect in drama suggests that alienating an event or character means ‘first of all stripping the event of its self-evident, familiar, obvious quality and creating a sense of astonishment and curiosity about them’ (Brooker, 1994: 191).

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