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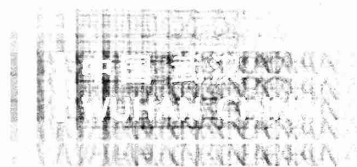
# FLS

# 外國文學研究

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# Ethnic Ethic and Aesthetic: Russell C. Leong and Marilyn Chin

King-Kok Cheung

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**Abstract:** Using four works by Marilyn Chin and Russell C. Leong, this essay engages with Ethical Literary Theory and Criticism on several fronts. It shows the ethical impulses that have galvanized many ethnic American writers since the Civil Rights movement of the late 1960s and 1970s. It questions the possibility of a purely “objective” Ethical Literary Criticism given that ethical or literary criteria are invariably inflected by race, gender, class, ethnicity, politics, and religion. Instead of placing ethics above aesthetics, it demonstrates their interdependence and inextricability. This article also introduces the topics of class exploitation, homophobia, sexual harassment, and marginalization of minority writers into the sphere of Ethical Literary Criticism.

**Key words:** Ethical Literary Criticism; ethnic literature; aesthetics; Chinese American literature; sexual harassment

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**标题:** 伦理与审美互彰: 族裔美国作家陈美玲与梁志英作品解读

**内容摘要:** 本文以陈美玲与梁志英的四部作品为例, 通过族裔美国作品讨论文学伦理学批评。自 20 世纪六七十年代的民权运动以来, 伦理成为促进族裔文学创作的强烈驱动力。笔者认为大部分伦理或文学标准都受到民族、性别、阶级、政治与宗教的影响, 因而对绝对“客观”的文学伦理学批评提出怀疑, 强调伦理与美学的相辅相成与不可分割性。少数族裔作家笔下的阶级剥削、同性恋仇视、性骚扰批判、与族裔文学边缘化等话题也被本文纳入文学伦理学批评的范畴。

**关键词:** 文学伦理学批评; 美国族裔文学; 审美学; 华裔美国文学; 性骚扰

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Ethical Literary Criticism, promulgated by Nie Zhenzhao and defined as a “critical theory that approaches literary works and their authors from the perspective of ethics” (Nie 84), has taken hold in both China and internationally.<sup>①</sup> This new theory has particular relevance for Ethnic Studies, which has been concerned since its inception with social justice. Nie’s theoretical venture also dovetails with my ongoing attempt to connect comparative literature and American Studies,

as well as Chinese and Chinese American literature, and to bring about reciprocal social and ethical critique, as I have attempted to do in *Chinese American Literature without Borders* (2016). Instead of extolling the ethical standard of a particular nation as universal, I seek to provoke critical introspection on both sides of the Pacific through the study of literature. Literary works that skillfully deploy interlingual and crosscultural poetics are especially effective in raising transnational ethical consciousness.

While I applaud Nie's meticulous formulation and rigorous theorization of Ethical Literary criticism, I beg to differ on its "objectivity" and its subordination of aesthetics. Nie believes that aesthetic criticism is inevitably "subjective" ("审美是一种主动心理活动,"<sup>②</sup> whereas ethical criticism can be conducted objectively: "the ethical value of the literary text should have been the target of [the critics'] research, and their moral principles should have merely served as toolkits in the process" (Nie 85). Nie's theory represents a "strong call for objectivity and historicism," seeing "the contemporary value of literature as its historical value rediscovered" (Nie 85). But I am skeptical that any school of criticism can be entirely objective, uninflected by a critic's personal values and ethical persuasions. Furthermore, if "ethical literary critics are encouraged to act as agents of some characters so as to understand them and defend them for their sake" (Nie 92), these critics cannot remain entirely neutral. The very determination of what constitutes "ethics" is a judgment call. Since ethics is not static but is constantly in flux, varying according to time and geographical location, with contending ethics even during the same period and in the same country, it is quite impossible for ethical literary criticism to be unmoored from a critic's own sense of mission, which in my opinion should include calling attention to the tendentious formation of ethics by the dominant culture at a given time. Ethical literary criticism can go beyond objective historicism to make us rethink and reevaluate our present mores.

One of the first questions that occurs to an ethically critical mind should be "Whose ethics?" Patriarchal ethics is very different from feminist ethics, ethics promulgated by the ruling class is very different from grassroots ethics, heteronormative ethics is very different from non-heteronormative ones, and Buddhist, Christian, and Islam, Taoist, Confucian, and Marxist tenets vie with one another to this day. The ethical goal of social justice that many racial, sexual, and other minorities work toward has been dismissed often by American conservatives as "political." A critic's ethical values, which are also contingent upon historical and geographical context, can amplify rather than obscure the ones within the literary text, especially when the critics and the writers are contemporaries.

Both Russell C. Leong and Marilyn Chin are self-professed activists who excel in crosscultural wordplay. Using two poems by Leong and two vignettes by Chin, I show how their works prompt us to envisage a world where people of different race, class, gender, and sexual orientation can live as equals in an imagined global community. "*Bie You Dong Tian* 别有洞天" by Leong divulges the transpacific exploitation of migrant laborers; "*Your Tongzhi Body*" uses the Chinese idiom *tongzhi* 同志 and Buddhist imagery to advocate treating sexual minorities as fellow human beings. "*Song of the Sad Guitar*" by Chin urges the contemporary cousins of abandoned wives and widows that punctuate Chinese poetry and American fiction to transform

lonely chambers into a creative room of one's own; "Fox Girl" adapts the ghost-story genre of Pu Songling 蒲松齡's *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* 《聊齋志異》 to spin a moral yarn against sexual harassment. By reading these works through the lens of ethical literary criticism, we can appreciate not only ethical relativity—the different moral standards in different parts of the globe at various times—but also rethink our own received norms. Readers East and West may all be "surprised by sin"—forced to confront our own prejudice, our own invidious assumptions. A critic cognizant of the emergence of Ethnic Studies from the crucible of the civil rights movement is likely to be more sympathetic with the ethics of equality embedded in their poetry, and more prone to espouse their "civil rights" ethics, as I have unabashedly taken upon myself to do. More than a "toolkit," my moral compass is what directs me to associate their writing with ethics rather than with ideology or politics in the first place.

Yet it is the writers' distinctive intercultural artistry that brings about transnational ethical enlightenment. Thus I deviate from Nie's assessment of aesthetics as solely a means to the ethical end:

Ethical literary criticism does not deny the value of aesthetic criticism but takes it as one of the important means of understanding literature for ethical aims.... *Without any moral teaching, the aesthetics of literature would cease to exist.... Only by working together with morality can the aesthetic value of literature be fully realized.* (Nie 88; Ross 10; my emphasis)

To my mind ethics and aesthetics must go hand in hand for "literature" to be worthy of its name and for it to have the desired ethical impact.<sup>③</sup> The art of telling or the art of persuasion rather than the lesson transmitted is what distinguishes literature from any flat-footed writing. Ethical writing lacking in artistic merit can hardly survive as literature if it strikes the reader as a "didactic" tract or, worse, as propaganda. I hazard that the inverse to Nie's contention is no less valid: only by working together with aesthetics can the moral value of literature be fully realized. One might even reverse Nie's contrast of subjective aesthetic criticism and objective ethical criticism: a critic must be sympathetic to the ethical import in Leong's and Chin's works to construe it as such, but their aesthetics still lends itself to objective literary analysis. Furthermore, a critic who shares the authors' ethical predilection may be best at unraveling the ethical and aesthetical matrix in the texts.

Ethics and aesthetics must coexist for either to realize its full value through literature. For any ethical lesson to take hold, it must be presented in a pleasing form so that the reader can learn without undue resistance. Great literature—Homer, Shakespeare, Milton, Tang and Song poetry, Gabriel García Márquez, Toni Morrison, Louise Erdrich, Mo Yan—seldom instructs directly but always cunningly, craftily, entrancingly.<sup>④</sup> Only literature high in aesthetic value can "teach" without sounding didactic. Indeed, if an ethical lesson is readily transparent, there will be no need for ethical literary criticism. Part of the role of the critic is to discern beneath the seductive aesthetic form its ethical kernel, which more often than not remains elusive. The works

by Leong and Chin, which provide literary entertainment and ethical illumination simultaneously, demonstrate the inextricability and interdependence of ethics and aesthetics. The “lessons” therein are exceptionally delectable on account of the two writers’ multiple consciousness as Chinese Americans and ethnic Americans concerned with other marginalized groups, their visceral empathy with racial and sexual minorities, and their scintillating poetics, especially their novel deployment of Chinese expressions and classical allusions. Their ethics and aesthetics are mutually constitutive and enabling.

### “*Bie You Dong Tian: Another World Lies Beyond*”: An Occasional Poem against the Exploitation of Migrant Labor

Russell C. Leong wrote “*Bie You Dong Tian: Another World Lies Beyond*” at the request of KUSC, the Los Angeles classical music radio station, to commemorate the opening of Liu Fang Yuan 流芳园 (the Suzhou-style Chinese garden on the grounds of the Huntington Library) in 2008. The opening coincided with China’s hosting of the Olympic Games that same year. To ensure that the architectural design resembles the Suzhou prototypes, the Huntington Library contacted the Suzhou Garden Development Co., which supplied fifty craftsmen, eleven stone artisans, and 850 tons of Taihu rocks (Skindrud). The construction of the garden took some ten years, costing over \$18 million.

Although Leong’s title replicates the Chinese proverb *bieyou-dongtian* 别有洞天 [“Another world lies beyond”] appearing on a wooden placard at this garden’s entrance, promising visitors that they are soon to enter an exotic world, the poem focuses on the construction rather than the completed artefact. Instead of going from a quotidian to a rarefied domain, it moves from the garden’s marvelous exterior to less privileged habitats. The poem lingers on the homespun workers and their equipment: “Girders peep from under the wood columns of the tea pavilion. / An orange tractor rigs its taciturn arm, waiting.” The personified orange tractor heralds the arrival of the Suzhou craftsmen, clad in “orange work vests.” Leong intentionally zeroes in on the unfinished garden so as to foreground the alien artisans rather than the product of their alienated labor.

Leong retools the Chinese proverb to reveal racial and social stratification and to remember migrant laborers on both sides of the Pacific—quite an “other” world than the one promised in the tourist brochures. His verse is inspired in part by Bertolt Brecht’s “Questions from a Worker Who Reads” (1935), which contains probing queries such as “Who built Thebes of the seven gates?... Did the kings haul up the lumps of rock? And Babylon. . .Who raised it up so many times?... Where, the evening that the Wall of China was finished / Did the masons go?” Brecht urges his readers to remember the minions who had slaved for the splendid “World Heritage” sites but who never got to enjoy the grandiose products of their labor. Similarly, Leong calls attention to the craftsmen and artisans who have come all the way from Suzhou to build the magnificent garden, and connects them with other migrant workers, past and present. Both the poem and its title carry transpacific reverberations. As with most visitors who admired the Bird’s Nest or the Water



Cube in Beijing during the 2008 Olympics, who usually did not give any thought to the invisible hands that built those grand edifices, visitors to the Huntington's Chinese garden in California are unlikely to think of the foreign laborers.

"Bie You Dong Tian" is divided into two parts. In the first the speaker focuses on the Suzhou artisans, their simple fare ("The workmen drink down their rice soup & steamed bread"), and the raw material with which they build the garden ("*Rain* / Gathers to the curved dip of 10,000 tiles. Silver / Rain threads onto 600 tons of Taihu rocks"), the aforementioned tractor, and a Latino security guard. In the second section the speaker encounters a Tongva (a Native American of the Los Angeles Basin who remarks: "You are new here. We have always been here"); and the Chinese workers puzzle over a "foreign scent" and wonder whether it comes from "Vagrant herb" or from "dynamite" handled by Chinese railroad builders of yore. An ethnic array over time and space is formed as the poet links the Suzhou workmen with the Tongva people, whose lands were commandeered by Euro-American colonizers; with the Mexicans / Latinos who now supply the bulk of the labor force in Southern California, and with the early Chinese emigrants who built the transcontinental railroad and who ended up dead or expelled. The various minority members here are connected not by the highbrow culture of the literati emblemized by Liu Fang Yuan, but rather by having "*black* / Eyes, sunburnt skin," folks "who, in their labor / Become elemental with the Earth."

Becoming "elemental with the Earth" evokes what Julia A. Stern describes as the premature entombment of those on which the American Republic was built: "These invisible Americans, prematurely interred beneath the great national edifice whose erection they actually enable, provide an unquiet platform for the construction of republican privilege, disturbing the Federalist monolith in powerful ways" (Stern 2). Stern refers primarily to African American slaves on the East Coast, but the displaced Tongva, Mexicans, and Chinese railroad builders may be reckoned as their West Coast counterparts, though their bodies were buried under another vaunted necropolis. There are worldwide vis-à-vis as well. Establishing a working brotherhood across temporal, ethnic, and national divides, Leong's poem, as I note earlier, echoes "Questions from a Worker Who Reads" by Brecht, who wryly observes that so-called wonders of the world such as the gates of Thebes, the triumphal arches of Rome, and the Great Wall of China glorify potentates who did not lift a finger in the construction of these monuments. Leong takes Brecht's irony one step further in suggesting that many of the builders actually "went under" these constructions for good. (The most literal examples of such live burial were the Chinese imperial tomb builders, buried alive along with the royal harems and retinues after the completion of the mausoleums.)

Leong repurposes the Chinese expression *Bie You Dong Tian* to drill into the reader a dissonant ethical awareness. The proverb that beckons visitors to an Oriental Eden is instead used to telescope the daily drudgery behind the fabulous artifact. Instead of referring to a Taoist paradise, *dong tian* here encodes a haunting ground for the wandering apparitions of Chinese railroad workers, many of whom died while producing one of the engineering marvels of their time. We are reminded of the less glorious chapters of U.S. and Chinese history, from the nineteenth-century's displacement of Native Americans and maltreatment of Chinese railroad

builders to the current transpacific exploitation of migrant laborers. Rather than providing a retreat from mundane affairs, the garden triggers in the speaker an epiphany about solidarity across time and space, and attendant accountability.

In presenting the Chinese garden as a contact zone of the colonizers and the colonized, business tycoons and migrant laborers, wealthy tourists and displaced workers, Leong disrupts celebratory nationalist and biographical narratives, and exhumes its vexed history. The name “Liu Fang Yuan”(translated literally as “Garden of Flowing Fragrance”) is redolent of the garden’s many trees and flowers. Instead of capturing such an aroma, however, Leong’s poem invites readers (along with the Suzhou workmen) to sniff the “voracious dynamite left / On the cotton trousers of 10,000 Chinese workers / Who dug tunnels for Huntington’s Central Pacific,” steering them from the present plaisance to a harrowing past. “Voracious” connotes the destructive power of dynamite that at once made the Central Pacific possible and devoured countless Chinese lives. The rocks in the garden elicit in the speaker not so much placid images of nature at rest as the cascades of stones touched off by explosives that left many buried in the garden’s vicinity.

Leong’s pungent wordplay also brings to mind another association with the garden’s name, since *liu fang* 流芳 (flowing fragrance) also can mean “to leave an honorable name,” as in the proverb *liufang-baishi* 流芳百世 (“Leave a good name for hundreds of generations”). The Huntington Library, founded in 1919, is named after Henry Edwards Huntington (1850-1927), whose eponymous legacy includes a beach, a park, a hotel, a hospital, a middle school, and at least two cities. Huntington seems to have succeeded in leaving his good name behind. But a somewhat shady association lurks in Leong’s poem, for Henry was the nephew of Collis P. Huntington, a railroad magnate and one of the Big Four in the creation of the transcontinental railway. Henry himself held several key positions working alongside his uncle with the Central Pacific. It was in the course of toiling for the Huntingtons under treacherous conditions that many Chinese railroad builders perished. Often juxtaposed with *liufang-baishi* is the antonymous proverb *yichou-wannian* 遗臭万年—“leaving a stench for ten thousand years.” In evoking the scent of explosives and conjuring up casualties, Leong’s poem—under the guise of a tribute—emits an unpleasant whiff of dynamite and death, standing as a memorial to the many Chinese, Latino, and Native American workers who labored anonymously in the San Gabriel Valley. This shadowy history of exploitation, exclusion, and colonization runs diametrically opposed to the American ethos of life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness, and to the Huntington enterprises launched in the name of progress. But that, too, is part of the Huntington legacy.

Leong’s poem is grounded in historical sedimentation, imbricating and implicating both China and the United States in the exploitation of migrant laborers. It turns a proverb that promises transcendental gratification into a Chinese-box of ethical reflections: the Chinese garden contains the workaday world of the Latino security guard, the sorrows of displaced Indians and Mexicans, the sweat of the Suzhou migrants and the bones of their Chinese forefathers—not those who loitered in a sixteenth-century Chinese garden in Suzhou, but those who sacrificed the most but benefited least in building China and America. Through dense historical and literary allusions Leong jostles our memories of the unsung earthly laborers of diverse worlds.

### “Your Tongzhi Body”: An Occasional Poem against Homophobia

In “Your Tongzhi Body,” Leong transmutes a homophobic slur into a term of compassion and solidarity. Just as “*Bie You Dong Tian*” raises our ethical consciousness about the exploitation of migrant laborers, “Your *Tongzhi* Body,” a poem occasioned by the Second Chinese *Tongzhi* Conference—a forum for gays, lesbians, bisexuals, transsexuals, and transgenders—held in February 1998 in Hong Kong—prompts us to put aside heteronormative prejudice. The poem begins:

I see a brown *tongzhi* body—  
 Neither Female nor Male  
 Eyes from Beijing  
 Lips from Hong Kong  
 Spleen from Guizhou  
 Belly from Guangzhou  
 Feet from Singapore.

I touch a smooth *tongzhi* body—  
 Without day, month, or year of birth  
 Whose fingertips  
 Reach to Canada and America  
 Whose thighs and calves stretch to Malaysia  
 Whose toes touch Thailand and Vietnam  
 Whose body travels from Italy to Australia....  
 For I possess this brown *tongzhi* body—  
 And so do you and you and you.  
 For we are one, or are we not?  
 (234-235; reprinted in Cheung 277)

The word that is repeated throughout the poem is “*tongzhi* 同志,” an idiom that has gone through many permutations, with ethical or “unethical” connotations. Andrew D. Wong has traced the changing meaning of the term, which gained political currency when it appeared in Dr. Sun Yat-Sen’s will: “*Ge ming shang wei cheng gong, tong zhi reng xu nu li!* 革命尚未成功，同志仍须努力 [The revolution is not yet over; comrades must continue to work strenuously]” (Wong 768; my English translation). During the Communist Revolution the appellation was used as an honorific reserved for Party members, signifying “solidarity, equality, respect, and intimacy among the revolutionaries”; after the founding of the People’s Republic, *tongzhi* became a common term of address among the masses, replacing nomenclature denoting class differences (Wong 768, 769). In the 1980s, anti-gay journalists in Hong Kong hurled the epithet at gay rights activists to ridicule them; shortly after, gay rights activists reappropriated the term to refer to members of sexual

minorities, boldfacing its “positive connotations of respect, equality, and resistance” (Wong 763, 765, 790n1). Soon the expression also appeared in mainstream media as a neutral tag for these minorities

“Your *Tongzhi* Body” harnesses the positive connotations of the term and extends it to an imagined global community, discerning beauty in variety and speaking to the need for tolerance, inclusion, and acceptance. By conjoining “a brown *Tongzhi* body” to various reaches of the globe, Leong not only charts the prevalence of sexual minorities in Greater Asia but also erodes the boundaries between people of different nationalities, between male and female, and between heterosexuals and homosexuals. In troping the diverse geographical regions as distinct components of the human anatomy, Leong suggests that there can be as many gradients of sexual difference as there are variances in human constitution, but they all belong to the same human family. In addition to underscoring the common humanity of sexual minorities and majorities, the bio-sexual imagery militates against conventional denigration of the body and conjoins it with spirituality.

The places referenced in Leong’s first two stanzas are some of countries from which the two hundred participants of the 1998 *Tongzhi* Conference originated. The specific enumeration of nine Asian Pacific sites undercuts the mainland official media’s coverage of homosexuality at the time as a “Western disease,” a foreign blight infecting the Chinese populace much as opium had done in the past. Leong’s title uses a term of common address under Mao to refer to sexual minorities, as gay activists have done, flouting the heteronormative practices of mainland China, Taiwan, Singapore, Hong Kong, and Malaysia. But the title does more: Leong “fleshes out” the epithet—through reiterative and polymorphous embodiment—so that it pertains to all humankind. The poem fuses the two meanings of *tongzhi*—as queer and as comrade—nudging it from the queer margin to the human center. This signifier in “Your *Tongzhi* Body” is a perfect example of a multiply “slanted allusion” (my coinage). Leong gives the checkered etymological development of this nomenclature an additional spin, converting it from a derogatory slur into a term of solidarity.

Leong further inculcates tolerance by infusing the *tongzhi* body with Buddhist imagery. First is the gender-bending figure: “Neither female nor male” conjures forth the image of the androgynous Guanyin 观音, the goddess of mercy; and of Buddha, represented as female or genderless in some parts of the world. Second is the indefinite time: “Without day, month, and year of birth” recalls the Buddhist calendar, according to which people can be born and reincarnated in different epochs. Third are the burgeoning limbs that traverse Canada, America, Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam and that bring to mind the thousand-armed bodhisattva, portrayed variously as either female or male and often amalgamated with Guanyin in Chinese Buddhism. Although these extremities reach out to every corner of the earth, they reside within the same corporeal contours. By merging the *tongzhi* body with a divinity sporting myriad helping arms and legs, Leong implies that the many branches of the human conglomeration are constitutive “members” that must cooperate for the well-being of the human family.

Since its usage as a common address under Communism, “*tongzhi*”—literally “same aspiration”—has been thrice tilted, by homophobic Hong Kongers who use the epithet as a slur,

by the gay activists who reclaim it as a badge of pride, and finally by Leong, who stretches the queer self-reference to include every *body*, to signify the human corpus. He does so by reinvesting the term with the positive connotations of “solidarity, equality, respect, and intimacy” that have accrued through Sun Yat-Sen’s exhortation to work together, Chinese Communists’ goal of an egalitarian society, and gay activists’ quest for acceptance and inclusion. To these Leong adds spirituality: instead of bifurcating body and spirit, and denouncing non-heteronormativity as sinful, Leong invokes Buddhism to foster expansive empathy and affiliative kinship. He further fortifies these positive connotations by parsing the moniker, homing in on *zhi* 志 [aspiration] and crossing the two meanings of *tong* 同: “same” and “together,” thereby accentuating the common traits of *tongzhi*. Being the *same*, the poet implies, *tongzhi* in all its senses should share a common *aspiration*—working *together* toward tolerance, mutual acceptance, and harmony rather than splintering into cliques.

Nie argues that “unlike moral criticism, ethical literary criticism does not simply evaluate a given literary work as good or bad on the basis of today’s moral principles. Instead it emphasizes ‘historicism’” (Nie 84; Ross 10). Literature revolving around sexual orientation is a good case in point. In China, homosexuality was for a long time regarded as “immoral,” even criminal, punishable by law. It was no different in England till the 1950s. In the United States, however, same-sex marriage is currently legal. Stateside electorate who discriminate against gays and lesbians may, on the other hand, be looked at askance as oppressive and therefore “unethical.” Ethical literary criticism, a great tool in revealing moral relativity on account of the historicist and situational nature of ethics, can encourage greater tolerance for differences: “we could use literature to teach people and tell them how to learn with the help of literary criticism” (Ross 10).

### “Song of the Sad Guitar”: A Prose Poem Awakening Feminist Consciousness

“Song of the Sad Guitar” (thereafter “Sad Guitar”) transplants Tang and Song poetry into a prose poem set in California during the 1980s. It begins with an encounter in the parking lot of a supermarket between Mei Ling, an unhappy woman who in 1988 was “banished to San Diego, California, to become a wife,” and a guitarist named Stone Orchid. Mei Ling was so drawn to the player and her song that she offers her a “Tsing Tao” [青島啤酒] and urges her to play on: “She sang about hitchhiking around the country, moons and lakes, homeward-honking geese...women climbing the watchtower. There were courts, more courts and inner-most courts.” A Chinese reader can readily detect echoes of Luo Binwang 骆宾王’s *Yong E* 《咏鹅》, Li Bai 李白’s *Chang Gan Xing* 《长干行》 along with Ezra Pound’s rendition (“Why should I climb the lookout?”), and Li Qingzhao 李清照’s *Linjiangxian* 《临江仙》 (“how deep is the deep court that deepens into another 庭院深深深几许.”) But the Chinese lyrics Chin alludes to throughout (including the title) is Bai Juyi 白居易’s *Pipaxing* 《琵琶行》. Mei Ling is so moved by Stone Orchid’s song, which resonates deeply with her own “banishment” and unfulfilled aspiration (“the singer I could have been”) that she urges Stone Orchid, again, to keep playing:

*Trickle, trickle, the falling rain.*

*Ming, ming, a deer lost in the forest*

*Surru, surru, a secret conversation*

*Hung, hung, a dog in the yard.*

Then, she changed her mood, to a slower lament, trilled a song macabre, about death, about a guitar case that opened like a coffin. Each string vibrant, each note a thought. Tell me, Orchid, where are we going? “The book of changes does not signify change. The laws are immutable. Our fates are sealed.” Said Orchid—the song is a dirge and an awakening.

The quatrain is reminiscent of Bai Juyi’s onomatopoeic description of the melody produced by the pipa player: “the bass strings resound sonorously like pelting rain 大弦嘈嘈如急雨, the treble strings sibilate softly like a secret conversation 小弦切切如私语”(my English translation throughout); the ensuing paragraph, of her shift to another, more poignant, register (“she sits and strums fervently 却坐促弦弦转急… The plaintive tune strays from preceding strains 凄凄不似向前声”).

Unlike *Pipaxing*, which comprises merely a postprandial encounter, “Sad Guitar” tells us what happens two years after the meeting between Mei Ling and Stone Orchid. Mei Ling becomes “deranged”: “I couldn’t cook, couldn’t clean.... My husband began a long lusty affair with another woman. The house burned during a feverish *Santa Ana* as I sat in a pink cranny above the garage singing, ‘At twenty, I marry you. At thirty, I begin hating everything that you do.’” Mei Ling’s garage song overturns the romantic trajectory in Li Bai’s “*Chang Gan Xing*” and Pound’s “The River-Merchant’s Wife: A Letter”: “At fourteen I married My Lord you.../ At fifteen I stopped scowling / I desired my dust to be mingled with yours . . . forever and forever 十四为君妇…十五始展眉, 愿同尘与灰.” Li Bai and Pound trace the deepening of connubial felicity into eternal love; Mei Ling, conversely, sings of matrimonial disenchantment.

Also unlike *Pipaxing*, “Sad Guitar” ends with a second, albeit virtual, encounter two years later between Mei Ling and Stone Orchid. While driving one day, the jilted Mei Ling hears Stone Orchid’s voice on the radio: “This is a song for an old friend of mine. Her name is Mei Ling... I’ve dedicated this special song for her, ‘The Song of the Sad Guitar.’” This song sets off an epiphany in Mei Ling: “I am now beginning to understand the song within the song, the weeping within the willow. And you, out there, walking, talking, seemingly alive—may truly be dead and waiting to be summoned by the sound of the sad guitar.” The prose poem proper ends here, but it is followed by a dedication: “for Maxine Hong Kingston.”

Even without the explicit dedication, the poem’s recurrent allusions to Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* are unmistakable. Kingston’s memoir features five women: a no-name aunt, Mulan 木兰, Brave Orchid (the narrator’s mother), Moon Orchid (Brave Orchid’s sister), and T’sai Yen (蔡琰). Given the common Chinese character *lan* 兰 (orchid), which appears in both Moon Orchid’s and Brave Orchid’s names, a symbolic sisterhood exists between them and Mulan, the legendary warrior. To this trio Chin has added “Stone Orchid.” Mei Ling reminds the reader of both Moon Orchid, who becomes deranged after her husband’s love affair, and T’sai Yen, the poet

in exile who creates lyrics in her banishment to the measure of “barbarian” tunes. Stone Orchid, for her part, is reminiscent both of Mulan, the androgynous warrior, and of Brave Orchid, the champion storyteller. Stone Orchid “fights” for female independence and emancipation through her intercultural song, and inspires Mei Ling to do likewise.

It is feminist ethic, however, that most strongly links *The Woman Warrior* and “Sad Guitar.” Despite Chin’s extensive allusions to Bai Juyi, also Li Bai and Pound, her prose poem is not dedicated to any male giant but to Kingston, arguably the first Chinese American female writer to articulate a feminist consciousness. Mei Ling’s plight at first replicates the sorry lives of Moon Orchid, who is repudiated by her stateside spouse; of the pipa player, a once popular musician now often left behind by her merchant husband; and of many a speaker in Li Qingzhao’s poetry—women who feel hapless, unworthy, or trapped without a mate. Just as Stone Orchid’s song rouses Mei Ling from her living death as an abandoned housewife to compose the prose poem “Song of the Sad Guitar,” Mei Ling (or her creator/namesake Marilyn Chin) in turn uses her own prose poem to spur other women to pull themselves together and to succor one another. “Sad Guitar” is in this sense an ethical manifesto that urges women to find their own voice through artistic creation, be it in music, poetry, or fiction.

This prose poem underscores the union of ethic and aesthetic, for its ethical effect is inalienable from its intricate architectonics. The Chinese-box structure I detect in Leong’s “*Bie You Dong Tian*” also enfolds Chin’s verse: Bai Juyi’s dedication to the pipa player within Stone Orchid’s dedication to Mei Ling within Chin’s dedication to Kingston; Li Bai’s merchant wife’s missive within Pound’s merchant wife’s letter within Bai Juyi’s merchant wife’s song within Mei Ling’s prose poem. But that’s not all. In both *Pipaxing* and “Sad Guitar” there is an encounter between two *artists*; in both, the speaker’s ethical consciousness is stirred by a musician’s performance; in both, the speaker is moved by the music to create another unforgettable song with ethical import—*Pipaxing* and “Sad Guitar” respectively. Finally, since Chin explicitly dedicates “Sad Guitar” to Kingston, the encounter between Mei Ling and Stone Orchid can also be read as the communion between two Chinese American literary talents—M. Chin and Kingston, the Muse whose memoir apparently lured Chin out of law school to become a writer.

The “song within the song” is a particularly resonant expression for the artistic genealogy animating the poem. Mei Ling 美玲 being Chin’s Chinese first name, this dyadic song can be construed as Stone Orchid’s “Song of the Sad Guitar” within Mei Ling/Marilyn Chin’s eponymous prose poem. The phrase captures how one artist inspires another, who also happens to be a *zhiyin* 知音—one whose ear is attuned to the other artist’s music. In *Pipaxing*, the poet’s deep appreciation of the pipa player’s performance prompts her to do an encore; her virtuoso playing in turn inspires the poet to write a memorable narrative poem, arguably the best and best known poem by Bai Juyi. His empathy for the player stems from artistic affinity, which in turn leads to his ethical reflection about human connection: “I sighed while listening to her pipa; hearing her story I broke anew into sobs. As fellow wayfarers on earth we need not have met to cherish this encounter 我闻琵琶已叹息，又闻此语重唧唧。同是天涯沦落人，相逢何必曾相识。” It is telling that the music of the pipa player and her life story work in tandem in moving the poet to

tears, inspiring his ethical reflection and the subsequent ode.

Similarly, it is Stone Orchid's song—"a dirge and an awakening"—that makes Mei Ling "feel deeply about [her] own banishment. The singer [she] could have been." It is a dirge, presumably, because it spells the death of female artists (like Mei Ling) who are forced to give up their creative aspiration after marriage; an awakening, because it urges women to find and nurture their own independent voices. Bai Juyi's pipa player, Li Bai's river-merchant's wife, and Li Qingzhao's widow bemoan their bleak seclusion, yet they are resigned to their lots. Chin's guitarist is a feisty singer who rouses dejected wives from their dolor, and who reaches out to Mei Ling with her song and solicitude.

By placing Mei Ling next to Bai Juyi's musician, Li Bai's (and Pound's) river merchant's wife, Li Qingzhao's widow, and Kingston's Moon Orchid—women who share desolation (and loss of beauty or sanity) on account of a husband's absence or desertion—Chin suggests that this female condition is timeless: "The book of changes does not signify change... Our fates are sealed." But her simultaneous reincarnation of Mulan, Brave Orchid, and T'sai Yen, as well as Kingston in Stone Orchid and Mei Ling recasts "Sad Guitar" from a dirge bemoaning the loss of one's prime into a call for feminist awakening, urging women who lead lives of quiet desperation to rise from their living death and to emulate the sassy guitarist who goes against the cliché of the lovelorn lady whose *raison d'être* depends on her lord.

The awakening is clinched when Mei Ling hears Stone Orchid again on the radio. By having the guitarist dedicate a song to Mei Ling, Chin broaches the possibility of female bonding and mutual support. Instead of wallowing in loneliness and regret about "the singer [they] could have been," bereft women, Chin intimates, can transform captivity into creativity, leverage sobs into songs. In fact, the dedication is reciprocal. Bai Juyi has explicitly promised the pipa player that if she agrees to play another tune, he will compose the lyrics for her music ( "莫辞更坐弹一曲, 为君翻作琵琶行" ), which have come down to us as *Pipaxing*. Without making an explicit promise to Stone Orchid (a doppelgänger of Kingston), Mei Ling / Marilyn Chin has also composed a poem to answer the guitarist's song. Her allusions to literature East and West emphasize how universal the feminine plight under patriarchy is and how imperative it is to fight for feminist emancipation through art and solidarity with other women.

"Sad Guitar" thus encourages female creativity and sisterhood, especially among women marginalized by patriarchal institutions—of marriage, academia, and literary establishment. While Bai Juyi never asks the pipa player her name, Chin devotes a dialogue to the guitarist's first name. This naming, as I suggest earlier, bears an indirect tribute to Kingston. In bestowing an allusive name on her guitarist so she would not remain nameless like the musician in *Pipaxing* or the no-name aunt in *The Woman Warrior*, Chin implicitly claims lineage to a Chinese American heritage, singling out Kingston—whose name is italicized in the concluding dedication—as her literary forerunner.

#### "Fox Girl": A Fable against Sexual Harassment

I would like to end with a lighter, though no less "ethical," work by Chin. "Fox Girl,"<sup>a</sup>



“reverse fable” in which a human turns into animals, is a discrete chapter from *Revenge of the Mooncake Vixen: A Manifesto in 41 Tales*. In this 3-page short story a female graduate is asked to escort and chauffeur a “so-and-so Mr. Famous Poet, who had a bad reputation around the country for sexually harassing graduate students” (132). The poet attempts to make lewd passes at the student, “a little Chinese girl born in Hong Kong and raised in San Francisco,” who at first seems all too ready to succumb to his overtures. As the poet becomes more ardent, however, the student metamorphoses into a red fox, arousing him all the more. But the amorous fox soon turns into a skunk that ejects a foul liquid all over the philanderer. The odor clings to the poet for good, and he is miserable ever after.

In addition to raising ethical awareness, Chin’s piquant fable about sexual harassment (a serious offense in American academia today, punishable by immediate termination of employment, but it is still perceived as a misdemeanor in China, if not swept under the rug completely) prompts us to think about theoretical and intercultural issues such as, the distinction between “moral criticism and ethical criticism,” the “historicism” of ethical literary criticism, and the attitudinal differences toward sexual harassment in the U.S. and in China.<sup>5</sup> While it may not be “immoral” for the poet to feel or express physical attraction toward a female student, it is unethical for the poet to solicit sexual favors in light of their power differential. The moral implications become all the more apparent as Chin’s tale unfolds. After the student introduces herself to Mr. Famous Poet at the airport, “he grabbed her breasts” and asked her to go to his hotel room, whereupon the student replies: “Okay, Mr. Famous Poet, whatever you say, but in exchange, you have to pull some strings and get me a tenured teaching job preferably in California” (133). “Of course, my influence is long and wide and reaches all the way to even California,” said the poet, who could not resist a double entendre (133). The poet could advance the student’s career in return for her favor and, by implication, he can also hamper her career if she turns him down. In either case, academic integrity or fair play is jeopardized.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, in a society in which such behavior is condoned or is commonplace, female students, as Fox Girl insinuates, could also capitalize on their physical appeal to further their career. By bargaining with the famous poet, the student also errs (or so we thought at first), compounding the ethical lapses. Her seeming attempt to parlay sex for success underscores the grave consequences of sexual harassment.

Chin’s tale also brings out the historicist nature of ethics, the interconnection of sexual and racial equality, and the double ethical standard for men and women. We are told of Mr. Famous Poet:

Because he was so famous, nobody bothered to tell him that groping female graduate students was *no longer* cool. Nor in his acclaim did he realize that policies had been *put in place* in universities for such behavior. He could actually get fired. Likewise, nobody bothered to tell him that his poetry was *no longer* relevant. The great Norton Anthology in the sky had already replaced his entries with a younger, hipper Croatian Navajo surrealist. (132, my emphasis)

Phrases such as “no longer” and “put in place” suggest, accurately, that there was a time when sexual harassment also went unpunished in the U.S., especially when the perpetrators were white and famous and male (and therefore powerful); students and junior faculty who were victims of sexual aggression had hardly any legal recourse. There was also a time when anthologies of American literature contained almost exclusively white male writers. The passage suggests that consciousness about gender equality comes hand in hand with concern about social justice for diverse marginalized groups, not just one’s own. Hence the Chinese American female graduate student crows about the fact that a Croatian Navajo surrealist has made her way to the Norton Anthology. (M. Chin was also one of the first Asian American poets to make her way to the *Norton* and *Heath* Anthologies.) In the wake of the civil rights movements in the late 1960s and early 1970s, women and people of color have finally populated the American workplace and literary landscape. “Fox Girl” illustrates, with consummate humor, the multiple fronts of civil rights ethics: the graduate student cares about women and other writers of color, as well as maligned animals: “With activist zeal, she wrote compassionately on behalf of the pea-brained stegosaurus, the doomed dodo and common roadkill” (133).

Instead of hitting Mr. Famous Poet or the reader with a straightforward lesson, Chin concocts a fantastic fable in the manner of *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*. As soon as the poet and the graduate student enter the car, the girl starts “yelping and shaking” and her long black hair morphs into a fluffy red coat: “Before his very eyes, she turned into a beautiful red fox” (134). She leaps onto his lap and climbs up onto his shoulders, nibbling “his ear with a seductive little growl” to the effect that a “violent rush of passion shot into his groin” (134). At this point the “fox girl” takes after the notorious fox demon 狐狸精 in Chinese and Japanese lore. But when the lecher returns to the car after heading for the trunk to get condoms (since “one cannot know what kind of sexually transmitted diseases are harboring inside fox vaginas”) (134), the fox has suddenly turned into a “two-hundred-pound gargantuan skunk [that] . . . raised up her skirt-of-a-tail and sprayed a foul yellow varnish all over him” (134). Thereafter:

This poet really stinks.... The revelation of the poet’s putrescence soars all the way up the hierarchical food chain. First the small magazines reject his poems. Then the poetry society rescinds its invitation. The Ford Foundation formally withdraws its fellowship money.... The Nobel committee shall opt for a mesmerizing lyric poet from the sub-Saharan desert who writes in Swahili. (134-35)

The moral of the fable once again connects ethics of gender with that of the literary establishment. (More on this later.)

Since matters concerning sexual harassment are still delicate topics in China, instructors and scholars can raise ethical consciousness through discussing “Fox Girl,” with its wink to *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* and with its literally biting humor. This tale enables us to discuss this issue without sounding judgmental or didactic, and without putting the U.S. on moral high ground, since such misconduct occurs on both shores. Chinese readers, owing to their familiarity with

the Chinese classic, will have an advantage over Western readers in their appreciation of Chin's inventive use of traditional folk tales, including converting a fox demon into a fox/skunk fairy and a female avenger. Students who have suffered from sexual harassment could at least feel some kind of catharsis via Chin's "poetic justice." Because the tale provides so much delight, readers are likely to find the sober lesson—perchance even a bitter pill for some men—lodged in the fable much easier to swallow.

### Conclusion

"Ethical codes and moral rules vary with different historical background and context," Nie rightly observed (Ross 11). Ethical literary criticism could go beyond seeing "the contemporary value of literature as its historical value rediscovered" to make us reevaluate our present and envisage a better future. Writers of Chinese descent whose works straddle both hemispheres are especially effective in allowing us to see how ethics, along with literary standards, is culturally and geographically inflected. What is considered normal, moral, and canonical in one country may be deemed intolerant and exclusive, immoral, and passé or antiquated on another soil.

The American literary establishment has traditionally privileged (white) male Anglophone writers as "universal" artists and turned its nose up at writers of color, especially at activists concerned with "political" issues. M. Chin is intent on combatting such biases. In "Sad Guitar," she pays literary tributes to women writers such as Harriet Jacobs, Charlotte Brontë, Virginia Woolf, and Maya Angelou (but replacing mad or captive women in the attic with Mei Ling in the Woolfian "pink cranny" in the garage), Chinese writers such as Bai Juyi, Li Bai, Li Qingzhao and, above all, to a fellow Chinese American writer Maxine Hong Kingston. In "Fox Girl" Chin not only pays indirect homage to Pu Songling but also makes pointed fictional references to a "Croatian Navajo surrealist" and to a "mesmerizing lyric poet from the sub-Saharan desert who writes in Swahili." Chin would no doubt also be pleased that I am using a critical theory originating from China to analyze her "manifesto."

Like *Fox Girl*, I consider inclusion of writers of different hues, ethnicities, and nationalities as a part of international literary ethics. I use Chinese American literature, which is still invisible in the two top Chinese Universities to make Chinese and U.S. students see the changing face of American literature in the wake of the civil rights movement. "Fox Girl" raises ethical consciousness about gender equality, spotlights the audacious artistry of a Chinese American female poet, and shows that it is both ethically and politically *incorrect* to privilege male (white or Chinese) writers or professors in the academy or in the literary marketplace. Male professors in the U.S. used to get away with sexual harassment, and the literary establishment once excluded women and people of color with impunity. But no more, as *Fox Girl* tells us tartly, albeit sensuously. The Chinese literary establishment can also learn from *Fox Girl*.

Highlighting the formal strategies of writers of color enables us to show that ethics, politics, and aesthetics can enrich, rather than detract from, one another. Aesthetics is indispensable in conveying the ethical messages in the four works discussed. In "*Bie You Dong Tian*" and "Sad Guitar," both Leong and Chin use a Chinese-box structure and "slanted allusions" to chip away

at class and gender inequalities. In “Your *Tongzhi* Body” Leong turns a figure that has been stigmatized as deviant into a composite subject of beauty. By reiterating the term *tongzhi*, the poet lifts it from its marginal position as a pejorative signifier to the very core of humanity. In “Fox Girl” Chin uses a reverse fable to turn a female “victim” of sexual harassment into victor and avenger. Unpacking Leong’s and Chin’s hybrid poetics enhances our appreciation of their ethical impulse and political critique. My stress on aesthetics has a similar subversive edge—an attempt to undermine dominant prejudice and to advance an egalitarian literary ethics. The political activism of Leong and Chin does not at all diminish their artistry. Their ethnic ethics and aesthetics are mutually enabling, redounding to each other’s advantage—to put it in Chinese, *xiangde-yizhang* 相得益彰.

### 【Notes】

① Nie Zhenzhao, “Towards an Ethical Literary Criticism,” Special Issue of *arcadia* 50.1 (2015): 84. This entire journal issue is devoted to Nie’s theory. See also Shang Biwu’s summation in “Ethical Criticism and Literary Studies: A Book Review Article about Nie’s Work” *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 15.6 (2013). See <<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2372>>

② 参见聂珍钊：《文学伦理学批评：论文学的基本功能与核心价值》，《外国文学研究》4（2014）：8-13。

③ UCLA used to offer a course entitled “The Bible as Literature,” with the King James version as the required text. While other translations of the Bible may carry similar ethical value, none can rival the King James rendition as literature by virtue of its exquisite poetry.

④ Elsewhere I have highlighted the “polyphonic indefiniteness” of Shakespeare and argued that it is precisely the bard’s ethical elusiveness that cinematic adaptations by Kozintsev, Kurosawa, and Feng Xiaogang fail to replicate. See King-Kok Cheung, “Is Shakespeare ‘Translatable’? Cinematic Adaptions by Kozintsev, Kurosawa, and FengXiaogang,” in *Shakespeare and Asia*, ed. Jonathan Hart (New York: Routledge, forthcoming).

⑤ Every other year UCLA faculty and administrative staff must complete a mandatory sexual harassment training, both to learn about what is considered to be unethical behavior and to protect staff and students from such behavior. Former UC Berkeley Chancellor Nicholas Dirks stepped down in August 2016 following months of criticism over his handling of sexual misconduct cases, especially hushing charges against a Mr. Famous Philosopher/ Professor accused of sexual harassment.

⑥ Therefore, it is not permissible for a professor to “date,” let alone make passes at, a student, in most American universities today, until or unless the latter has graduated or is no longer a student at the same university.

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