

Cultural Negotiation and Adaptation: The Poetic Analysis of Li-Young Lee's *Rose* from the Perspective of "Jin Jiang Dai Hu"

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ABSTRACT

The poetic collections of Li-Young Lee over different periods encapsulate the subtle and complicated process of cultural negotiation and adaptation, which can be summarized as a constant process of "Jin Jiang Dai Hu", it may not only provide a lens for a better understanding of his poetry, but also enable us to delve into the diasporic Chinese community overseas. Most importantly, such process makes it possible for us to track the psychological development through his diasporic poetry, *Rose* is a good case in point. The study aims to analyze the selected poems from *Rose* through the perspective of "Jin Jiang Dai Hu", trying to find how Lee cope with the "cultural shame", "cultural amnesia", his sense of alienation and displacement both to his original homeland and adopted homeland after his family's settlement in America, which corresponds to his early poetic period. Therefore, the poetic analysis of Lee's poems may epitomizes the diasporic Chinese community overseas.

Keywords: Diasporic Poets; Cultural Negotiation; Cultural Adaptation; Jin Jiang Dai Hu; *Rose*.

INTRODUCTION

A Brief Introduction of Li-Young Lee

Li-Young Lee (hereinafter referred to as Lee) is a poet of Chinese ancestry. As one of the most influential American poets, he is famous for his poetic collections over different periods: *Rose* (1986), *The City in Which I Love You* (1990), *Book of My Nights* (2001), *Behind My Eyes* (2008), and *The Undressing* (2018). Lee also has a memoir, *The Winged Seed: A Remembrance* (1995).

Lee's family was forced to leave their original homeland out of political reasons, and he himself was born in Indonesia, far from his motherland, while his family's settlement in Indonesia did not last long, they went on exile once again from Indonesia to Hong Kong, Macao, Japan, and finally, they arrived in the United States in 1964.

Being one of the most important representatives of American poets, Li-Young Lee is famous for his lyrical and intense poetry, in the meantime, a constant process of cultural negotiation and adaptation is going on in his poetic collections, which can be seen as the process of "Jin Jiang Dai Hu". The term is a Chinese traditional idiom, "Jiang" refers to rivers, while "Hu" refers to "lakes", "Jin" and "Dai" refer to the "belt" of Chinese traditional clothes, in this sense, it is actually a metaphor of the confluence of different "lakes" and "rivers", in other words, it can be seen as a juxtaposition of different subtle cultural processes, such as cultural collision in the initial phase, cultural negotiation, adaptation, amalgamation, and integration in the middle and final phase of the process, in other words, the term is closely related to such terms as in-betweenness, third space. The study will mainly focus on the analysis of his early period poetic collection, *Rose*, which may enable us to track his psychological development on the one hand, how Lee cope with the cultural collision and shock during the early phase of "Jin Jiang Dai Hu". In this sense, it also makes it possible for us to delve into the diasporic Chinese community overseas.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Lee's poetic collections are filled with his childhood exilic memories. Slowik (2000) believes that those who have childhood exilic experience, they will not only suffer from the disintegration of personality at a very young age, their "cross-cultural" flight will also break the formation of an integrate and consistent historical and geographical view. Moreover, as one of the those exiled poets based in America, no one pay attention to their psychological development over years, in this sense, Lee was encompassed or circumscribed by a repressive kind of "literary silence", but other than that, the more agitating "silence" lies in the "cultural shame" stemming from his own family, promoting the cultivation of "cultural amnesia" after the family's settlement in America, which in turn aggravates and strengthens his sense of alienation and displacement both to his original homeland and adopted homeland. Moreover, Lee's cultural memories of his original home are not that consistent and nostalgic as other diasporic Chinese, as he was born and raised outside of his original homeland and his knowledge of it is mainly learned from his father's narration, therefore, his physical and emotional ties to it are less intense as well, in this sense, it is safe to say he does not have a strong attachment to and a hope to return to his original homeland, which instead has become a foreign land to him, even if he can communicate with his parents in Chinese fluently and is well acquainted with its culture and history. However, his "decentred connections" to his original home can also be considered as special bond maintained by the force of memory, nostalgia, and imagination of their original home, which not only becomes an integral part of his daily life, but also leads him to go through the constant process of the reconstruction and reconsideration of his identity, in the meantime, it enables him to draw sustenance from his family's past experiences of displacement, alienation, adaptation, and connection, reflecting his inherent connection to the imagery, cultural, and historical heritage of Chineseness which are shared by most diasporic Chinese. In the meantime, such Chinese is established and articulated through the interplay of individual and collective memories, while such social and cultural elements as traditions, myths, histories, and languages are going through a constant process of reconstruction and reproduction within the family, linking themselves and their subsequent generations to their original homeland. On the other hand, their maintenance of ties to the faraway original homeland is mainly through imagination and cultural codes.

Moreover, Lee's family history has become an integral part of his daily life, leading him to reshape his identity on the one hand, while establishing a sense of attachment and harboring a sense of alienation to his original homeland on the other (Kuah-Pearce & Davidson, 2008). To some extent, the memory in his poetry can be seen as personal memory on the one hand, while becoming the epitome of the social and collective memory of the diasporic Chinese community on the other, the reason lies in that the latter two kinds of memories are usually distilled from a wide store of social experiences encountered by those who are in diaspora, and they are in most cases transmitted through storytelling and oral narration.

In the meantime, as a diasporic poet of Chinese origin, Lee has the responsibility to preserve and pass on the family history and memory of the previous generation, most importantly, his own interpretation and imagination of the culture and history of his distant original home are conveyed through his poetic collections, which also play a significant role in establishing his diasporic identity in his adopted homeland. Moreover, it also plays a significant role in his poetry in that it is of great help in searching for a lost past, from which he derives and acquires a sense of belonging and spiritual asylum. That's the reason why his poetic emphasis is on family history, the relationship between father and son, his father's life experiences provide a lens for him to examine himself, the constant employment of first-person perspective and present tense blurs the boundaries between the past, the present, and the future. In the meantime, as the child of a diaspora, his birth also becomes a special impulse for his father to revitalize the past, reconstruct memories, and reinvent traditions through the language of Chinese, which is in itself a vehicle of cultural transmission. Moreover, their settlement in the United States and the naturalization of becoming American citizens arouse the memories of their original homeland while creating a sense of home and a sense of belonging in their adopted homeland. Such subtle and complex feelings enable him to chart the sociocultural and historical trajectories of the long lost past shared by the diasporic Chinese community on the one hand, while making it possible for him to compose a "mental map" and a "social tapestry" to see or relive the past of his forefathers and to empathize the ups and downs his forefathers had experienced at different historical junctures. In this sense, even if historical events and family history in his poetic narrations are usually appear in the form of pieces and snapshots, they are of great significance in inventing and reinventing the traditions, cultures, and history in which his forefathers lived and experienced. In other words, his poetic narrations of the family history and memories not only enable him to establish connections with his original home, but also to reexamine the relationship between himself and his adopted homeland, thus redefining and reshaping their sense of belonging and sense of identity in their adopted homeland. In the meantime, it is also of great significance in fighting against the sense of not belonging or sense of displacement in the early phase of their settlement, which is a profound feeling of alienation and disaffection that afflicted most early immigrants in a

foreign land far from their original homeland (Kuah-Pearce & Davidson, 2008). In a word, the poetic narrations of his personal and family history are not only a way to reconstruct his identity, but also a process of recovering and reinventing his cultural and historical heritage, revealing his confusion of immigrant condition and the underlying universalism through which he is able to bridge the self and the other, the global and the local. Just as Lee (2013) claims in his memoir, *The Winged Seed*, he always feels a sense of “placelessness” even in his most familiar place that can be called “home”, from which he derived a feeling of being a “guest” who is trapped between two worlds, it is actually a sense of being lost in America which penetrates most of his poetry, on the other hand, being a diasporic Chinese, who was born outside his ancestral homeland, makes it impossible for him to re-create and reconstruct his sense of belonging even through his diasporic poetry, the reason may lie in that such disturbing feelings as sense of displacement and sense of disconnectedness dominate most of his life. In this sense, he can be considered as “a dweller of nowhere” who makes constant poetic attempts to derive a sense of belonging and sense of home from his state of “placelessness”, in other words, he does not choose to straddle multiple cultures, instead, he tries to reside in the gaps or interstices between different cultures, thus explaining why he refused to be defined as one of Asian American writers (Manzanas & Sánchez, 2011)). In other words, during the process of searching for the sense of belonging and sense of identity in his poetic narrations, he finds that it is almost impossible for him to derive a sense of belonging from either the culture of his adopted homeland or that of his original homeland, in this sense, such displaced situation promotes him to find “home” in the interstices between different cultures and develop a sense of cosmopolitanism to resist against the sense of alienation and sense of displacement that have afflicted him for years. In the meantime, the cosmopolitanism illustrated in his diasporic poetry not only enables him to be recognized by the literary critics in his adopted homeland, but also makes him a renowned poet in his original homeland.

According to Yao (2001), the inclusion of some of Lee’s poetry into such canonical American literary anthologies as *The Norton Anthology of American literature* and *The Harper American Literature* marks his “tentative step” towards American literary canonization, in the meantime, it makes him one of the most prominent representatives of Asian American poets. In the meantime, it can be considered as his success in fighting against the cultural hegemony in his adopted homeland as one of those diasporic poets who are always being relegated to a marginal and subordinate status. The reason why Lee has been recognized in his adopted homeland may be his successful integration of the European model and the culture of his original homeland, which enables his poetry to transcend the physical and cultural limitations as well as the imposed hegemony on the one hand, while making it possible to establish a self-reflexive dialogue in his poetry on the other. In this sense, it can act as a bridge to connect the two cultural poles in his life.

In the meantime, the self-awareness of his diasporic experiences can also be considered as an important impetus to his poetic innovation, in this sense, he is able to develop his own poetic styles and forms to counter the discursive power of cultural hegemony, which always constrains individual expressions (Zhang, 2007). In this sense, Lee has developed a kind of introspective and lyrical poetic style which manages to juxtapose his personal memory, cultural, historical heritage, and universal themes, in the meantime, the employment of such sensory images as sight, touch, and taste enable him to integrate his abstract emotions with his family’s diasporic experiences. In the meantime, Lee’s free verse is characterized by its musical cadence and lyrical language, which make his lines flow with quiet, intimate, and meditative tone with spiritual and philosophical dimensions, while his fragmented poetic language always leaves meditative and contemplative spaces for readers to reflect on themselves.

Moreover, since the poetic persona in Lee’s poetry are always “faceless silhouettes” who are engaged in familial communications and rituals against a timeless and dreamy background, in this sense, Lee’s employment of a “diffuse” and “universal” self merits our attention, which corresponds to the Confucian view of selfhood on the one hand, while enabling it to reconcile the difference and conflicts between the self and the world on the other, thus achieving a kind of Confucian harmony through the creative tension between the self and the other. In this sense, Lee’s poetic tension originates from his poetic narrations of those fragmented memories, in the meantime, he manages to navigate these memories through his flexible employment of personal and impersonal, innocent and omnipotent poetic voice (Wong, 2017). On the other hand, the reason why Lee’s poetic voice is distinctive lies in that the poet manages to achieve a balance between the quiet and the profound, the intimate and the universal, thus making his poetry possible to explore such universal themes as love, loss, and sense of belonging. In the meantime, Lee’s diasporic experiences and exilic position enable his poetry to be imbued with a kind of in-depth emotional intensity and imagination, moreover, he makes poetic attempts to transcend the spatial and temporal boundaries by resorting to metaphysical elements while excluding those realistic and material elements.

In a word, Lee’s poetic collections may provide a good literary corpus for us to track the subtle yet complicated process of “Jin Jiang Dai Hu”, namely, the process of cultural negotiation and adaptation during his

lifetime, which enable him to become a renowned poet and cultural cosmopolitan in his adopted homeland. In this sense, the analysis of *Rose* in this study may enable us to delve into how Lee cope with cultural shock and linguistic differences during the early years of his settlement in America, which corresponds to initial phase of “Jin Jiang Dai Hu”.

THE POETIC ANALYSIS OF SEVERAL POEMS FROM ROSE

Rose, one of Lee’s earliest poetic collections, can provide a good lens for us to delve into Lee’s early period poetry as well as his poetic formation during his formative years ((Lee, 1986). On the other hand, the collection also provides us with a good literary corpus to appreciate the unique poetic style of Lee and delve into the reasons that prompt him to become a renowned American Chinese poet in American literary history.

On the other hand, before the poetic analysis of the *Rose*, it is a good choice to have a brief introduction of Lee’s early period poetry. The early period poetry of Lee is mainly concerned with such individual and intimate themes as the sensations and emotions related to his family history, the exilic experiences of migration or exile from place to place, identity, and most importantly, the father-son relationship, which has taken on symbolic meanings after his family’s immigration into the United States, in the meantime, the poetic delineation of the father-son relationship in his poetry can also provide a space for him to have a deeper understanding and reflection of his past and traditions, while implicating his desire to reconnect with his past, historical and cultural heritage. However, his memory of his father is not limited to the individual scope, instead, it has transcended the boundary of individual memory to take on a universal dimension, which suggests his poetic efforts to fight against the historical and cultural amnesia, which is intensified by sense of spatial and social dislocation.

As for the poetic structure of the collection *Rose*, there are 29 poems in the poetic collection, but they are not closely interrelated with each other. The major motifs of the collection are mainly concerned with his reflection on his sense of identity in his adopted homeland during his childhood, as can be seen from the poem, *Persimmons*, which will be analyzed in the later parts of the study. Another motif is his recollection of his familial history of their exilic years, most of the poems in the collection are concerned with this motif. Another motif is concerned with death, which is often found in Lee’s late period poetry, it can also be found in this early period poetic collection, as can be seen in his *Rain Diary* in the collection.

Identity and Family Memories

In *Persimmons*, Lee makes great poetic attempts to reconcile his identity as a displaced immigrant and naturalized citizen, the poem is imbued with sensory details, which enable the poet to ground his deep-seated emotions into those concrete and tangible experiences, the fruit “persimmon” here may act as a dynamic metaphor for language, memory, and cultural loss, in other words, nature and those common domestic objects in his poetry serve as a vent for his deep cultural expressions. The poem opens with a cultural conflict or difference between Chinese and American phonetic system, on the other hand, it can also be considered as a tension between the assimilation and cultural heritage,

In sixth grade Mrs. Walker
slapped the back of my head
and made me stand in the corner for not knowing the difference
between persimmon and precision.

The seemingly insignificant childhood memory not only illustrates Lee’s linguistic and cultural heritage, but the phonetic differences in Chinese and American language, in this sense, “Mrs. Walker” in the poem is the epitome of the insensitive and rigid American educational system which ignores and fails to recognize the cultural, linguistic, and ethnic differences between different cultures, in other words, the figure can be considered as the symbol of the cultural hegemony of the dominant culture (Yao, 2001). However, the poetic narration does not bother to delve into the underlying reasons of being punished, the central image “persimmon” leads the readers to flip through the poet’s fragmented memories and explore the deep-seated reasons of the cultural and linguistic differences, the following lines naturally shift to such different topics of the persimmons as how to choose and eat persimmons,

How to choose
persimmons. This is precision.
Ripe ones are soft and brown-spotted.
Sniff the bottoms. The sweet one

will be fragrant.

How to eat: put the knife away, lay down newspaper.

The poet digresses from the his memory of punishment to how to choose a ripe persimmon and how to eat it, illustrating a fact that his experiential knowledge of “persimmon” is far beyond the word itself, which further makes the punishment of Mrs. Walker more unreasonable and tyrannic, on the other hand, this part of the poem is instructional, meditative, and philosophical, moreover, the employment of free verse not only enables the poet to be free from the rigid restrictions of those poetic forms, but also makes it possible for the poet to communicate with his readers in a conversational tone with a sense of fluidity and continuity. Most importantly, this part of the poem suggests Lee’s appreciation of the ordinary, even the simple act of choosing and eating a persimmon has been elevated to a universal or ritual level, in this sense, even those routine acts in daily life may denote a careful choice in one’s life, thus inviting readers to reflect on their own life choices. Besides the mispronunciation of “persimmon” and “precision”, he also records how he had difficulty in learning other English pronunciations during his childhood in the following lines,

Other words
that got me into trouble were
fight and fright, wren and yarn.
Fight was what I did when I was frightened,
fright was what I felt when I was fighting
Wrens are small, plain birds,
yarn is what one knits with.
Wrens are soft as yarn.
My mother made birds out of yarn.
I loved to watch her tie the stuff;
a bird, a rabbit, a wee man (29-39)

The stanza is a poetic extension of the pronouncing difficulties he encountered in his childhood, and his efforts to overcome them through an English jingle, in the meantime, his mother’s skilled handiwork provides comfort and “cultural validation” during the poet’s search for a sense of identity and sense of belonging. Through the poetic narration of the mispronunciation of his childhood, Lee manages to negotiate and orchestrate the Chinese and American language and cultures through the process of “Jin Jiang Dai Hu”, which corresponds to different phases of cultural assimilation, in this sense, his early period poetry corresponds to the early phase of process where the initial contact or interaction of different cultures always leads to the collision and shock, but they will gradually subside and give way to cultural compromise and assimilation in the later phases of the process, in the meantime, he makes poetic attempts to construct his own ethnic identity and to search for a sense of belonging in his adopted homeland during the process.

My mother said every persimmon has a sun
inside, something golden, glowing
warm as my face (40-48)

I think the this is the most impressive part of the poem, to the poet’s mother, the persimmon is seen as a symbol of nature, source of power and energy, most importantly, the comparison of the sun to her son’s face illustrates the “persimmon” can be seen as a vehicle for an intimate and rich “familial connection” rooted in Chinese cultural heritage, rather than the narrow understanding of it as an exotic fruit. In the meantime, the cultural knowledge and wisdom of mother also prompts the poetic persona to perceive his ethnic identity from a positive perspective. In this sense, it is safe to state that the poem is one of the most representative lyrical and realistic poems of Lee, the poetic focus of which is on his personal memories and cultural interactions between different cultures, the central image is always a concrete object which pulls together Lee’s poetic narrations, indicating that the underlying poetic strain of Lee’s poetry is to assimilate Chinese cultural and linguistic elements into an “English matrix”, which is an effective way to validate and establish his ethnic identity as a naturalized American in his adopted homeland.

Death

“Death” is also a recurrent motif throughout most of Lee’s poetry published in different periods, which is usually considered as a mysterious and unfathomable “other”. “Rain Diary”, a poem from one of his earliest poetic

collection, *Rose*, is a good case in point, as can be seen from the lines,

Rain falls and does not
break. Neither does it stop,
but just pulls up
the gangplank and is gone.
It stands before me,
beside me, lies down
beneath me. How shall I praise it?
Rain knocks at my door and
I open. No one
is there, and the rain marching in place.
A rain has begun.
It is not the rain
that murmured all night at my window,
not the downpour I ran from in a field,
nor the storm which frightened me at sea.
It is moving toward me all my life.
Perhaps I shall know it.
Perhaps it is my father, arriving
on legs of rain, arriving,
this dream, the rain, my father.

In this poem, the imminent presence of death is compared to the falling rain, which arrives suddenly and unpredictably and leaves without any traces, prompting the poetic persona to delve into this unknowable and unpredictable mystery, which in turn poses a challenge to his understanding of self and the world. In this sense, it is safe to state that the dominant image of this piece of poem is the “rain”, which enables him to delve into such universal themes as memory, identity, and passage of time, while such poetic depictions related to the “rain” as “murmur”, “downpour”, and “storm” may refer to different phases or the ups and downs of life, moreover, the diverse poetic depictions of rain as gentle, omnipresent, and mysterious not only make the “rain” a multifaceted image, but also add multiple layers to its symbolic meanings. Most importantly, the “legs of rain” in the poem clearly indicate that the poet makes poetic attempts to personify the “rain” as a person, maybe his beloved late father, in this sense, it may denote the approach of an important figure on the one hand, and the intimate father-son relationship on the other, therefore, the “rain” here can be considered as a metaphor for his father’s constant presence and influence throughout the poet’s life. Moreover, the poem is also imbued with the poet’s confusion of the nature of the rain, but he is open to the understanding of it, thus suggesting he is trying to discover his identity and his desire to reconcile the past with the present.

Lee’s great interest in death may lie in that death is the common destiny or ultimate fate of all creatures regardless of their origins, species, and races, in other words, it is an inevitable process for everything, suggesting his introspective and meditative attitude toward life even in his earliest poetic collections, which becomes all the more prominent in his later poetic collections.

CONCLUSION

In summary, through the analysis of several poems from *Rose*, it is easy to see how Lee manages to juxtapose the Chinese and American elements through the process of cultural negotiation and adaptation, which corresponds to the initial phase of “*Jin Jiang Dai Hu*”. By comparing different phases of cultural interactions to different stages of the intersections of “rivers” and “lakes”, in this sense, it can be considered as an inclusive term to summarize such different stages of cultural interactions as cultural collision, negotiation, and confluence, which in turn reflects the process of how their diasporic identity are formed. In a word, being in diaspora is not merely a state of crossing national and physical borders, it is also an ambivalent and complicated experience of

crossing spatial, temporal, cultural, and historical borders. (Zhang, 2000) In this sense, the term can not only provide a lens for us to track the psychological development of the poet, but make it possible for us to delve into the underlying reasons which prompts Lee to become a cultural cosmopolitan in his adopted homeland. It enables him to develop a kind of cosmopolitan attitude to fight against the sense of displacement and sense of alienation caused by the interplay of different cultures, in this sense, he pledges no allegiance to any specific nation or culture, freeing him from the national and cultural boundaries. (Delanty, 2006)

On the other hand, Lee's poetic collections over different periods can provide a good lens and literary corpus for those who want to delve into the poetic and psychological development of those American poets of Chinese origin. The central image of "rose" in this collection can convey the poet's love and respect for his late father and prompts him to make a reflection on the transience of life and imminence of mortality. In this sense, Lee can be considered as an epitome of those diasporic Chinese in their adopted homelands, which enables us to have an in-depth understanding of the diasporic community overseas, who are going through a constant process of being integrated into their host society. (Kuah-Pearce&Davidson, 2008) Most importantly, the process of "Jin Jiang Dai Hu" enables us to track the poetic and psychological development of the poet in a chronological and thorough way.

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