

REFLECTION STATEMENT

As a young Chinese-Australian woman, in the process of defining my own voice as a writer/thinker, I have come to realise the necessity of challenging dominant constructions of Chinese diasporic identity that have developed over recent decades. My Major Work, a fictocritical essay, critiques the ‘golden age’⁷¹ of Chinese expatriate memoir writing that has been elevated to levels of literary stardom for tales of concubinage, overcoming grinding – but colourful – poverty and political oppression. My title, *Dismantling the Great Wall*, reappropriates this iconic image of Chinese culture to express the barrier of inflexible cultural clichés that must be “dismantled” to define individual experiences within the complexity and polyvocality of Chinese diaspora. I deliberately splinter my authorial voice into two different, albeit complementary, voices – through my fictional protagonist and my own persona – to allow Corinna to function as a symbolic stand-in for my audience, who share initial assumptions about Western literary constructions of Chinese identity.

Corinna Chung’s initial inability to see beyond “the wall,” as I relate in my fictocritical narrative: “I see her, pitifully, still standing there, under a Great Wall”, despite her Chinese Australian background, critiques the orientalism implicit in simplistic “truths” – replicated and added to “the wall” that constructs Chinese identity. The interweaving narrative threads and polyphonic ‘voices’ within the four sections are drawn from the fictocritical structure of Milan Kundera’s *Unbearable Lightness of Being*⁷², whereby each title explicates the key motif of that section. This allows the development of my theme from Corinna’s initial

⁷¹ Ommundsen W. (2015) “This story does not begin on a boat” What is Australian about Asian Australian writing? , Yu O. (2002) *The Eastern Slope Chronicle* Blackheath: Brandl and Schlesinger

⁷² Kundera M. (1984) *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* Harper and Row

acceptance to an increasing sense of questioning with each stage, bringing her to my own position whereby she ultimately articulates my thesis.

This intertextual “great wall” prevents the articulation of personal representations, a concept shaped by Jean-François Lyotard’s seminal *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*⁷³ through his insistence that cultures and ideologies are inevitably ‘bounded’, something I critically explore as producing “the fallacy Lyotard termed an ‘ostensive phrase’⁷⁴ that reduces unresolvable conflicts to standardised rules of judgement. The motif of “bricks” as books was influenced by the iconic image in Jean-Luc Godard’s film, *La Chinoise*⁷⁵, referred to in critical section in Part IV “where the visual metonym of books as a wall behind which people barricade themselves embodies ideology as defensive.” For me, this is the problem, as the intertextual construction of books such as *Wild Swans*⁷⁶ by Jung Chang, *Unpolished Gem*⁷⁷ by Alice Pung, *Mao’s Last Dancer*⁷⁸ by Li Cunxin, *Chinese Cinderella*⁷⁹ by Adeline Yen Mah, become impenetrable, silencing voices that cannot be encompassed within the wall as their contradictions express the true complexity of Chinese diasporic identity in Australia. This needs further attention as by pastiching their narrative tropes through excessive compression of “markers of Chinese identity”, I deconstruct the increasingly hegemonic versions that function ‘intertextually’⁸⁰ as Julia Kristeva expounds, that shape a univocality that individual writers find hard to contest.

This concept was first articulated in Edward Said’s study, *Orientalism*⁸¹ as it explored the consequences of reducing culture into decorative object status, rejecting universalist claims

⁷³ Lyotard J-F. (1988) *Differend: Phrases in Dispute*: Manchester University Press.

⁷⁴ Ibid at 28

⁷⁵ Godard J-L. (1967) *La Chinoise*

⁷⁶ Chang J. (1991) *Wild Swans* Harper Collins

⁷⁷ Pung A. (2006) *Unpolished Gem*

⁷⁸ Cunxin L. (2003) *Mao’s Last Dancer*

⁷⁹ Mah AY. (1999) *Chinese Cinderella: The Secret Story of an Unwanted Daughter* Delacorte Press

⁸⁰ Kristeva J. (1984) *Revolution in Poetic Language*

⁸¹ Said E. (1978) *Orientalism* Pantheon Books.

of canonical Western constructions that ignored boundaries of cultural and ethnic difference. Thus, consequently I chose my epigraph from his breakthrough text to underline my critique of the hegemonic constructions of Chinese identity. Indeed, I examine potential discourses of “Otherness” within the essay sections of my Major Work. Ouyang Yu’s, *The Eastern Slope Chronicle*⁸², was invaluable for its Rabelaisian attack on Orientalism, which tackles, as I relate in the essay section, “the head-on the complexities of re-negotiating racial and cultural identity.”⁸³ He points out boldly that the national policy of multiculturalism still marginalises Chinese immigrants as the Other, offering a literary analogue for Said’s theory.

To subvert the commercially successful constructions of “Chineseness”, the stereotypical Chinese identity akin to 19th century Chinoiserie, I draw upon foundational post-colonial theorists such as Edward Said and Sneja Gunew, where Gunew’s ‘pathologies’⁸⁴ reinforce Said’s critique of orientalising fictions. Thus, by utilising critical perspectives of marginalised voices such as Ouyang Yu and Andy Quan to critique forces of market capitalism determining “authentic” representations of Chinese identity, I aim to dismantle the normative tropes constructing “Chineseness”. Such increasingly hegemonic versions function intertextually, as Julia Kristeva defines it, by producing cultural clichés rather than complex authentic explorations of the contradictory, multivalent reality of Chinese Diasporic identity.

Influenced by the Advanced Module A text, *The Hours*⁸⁵ by Stephen Daldry and its exploration of multiple voices and metatextuality transposed through three divergent contexts, my Major Work similarly uses three drastically different ‘voices’ - Corinna, my own critical persona, and the fictional unassimilated Grandfather - to explore the possibility

⁸² Yu O. (2002) *The Eastern Slope Chronicle* Blackheath: Brandl and Schlesinger

⁸³ Ommundsen W. (2015) “This story does not begin on a boat” What is Australian about Asian Australian writing? .

⁸⁴ Gunew S. (1996) *Performing Australian Ethnicity: “Helen Demidenko”*.

⁸⁵ Daldry S. (2003) *The Hours* Paramount Pictures Miramax Films.

of portraying Chinese culture authentically. Indeed, these voices problematize the notion of shared Chinese identity, presenting contradictions as they add a facetious – and even ultimately satirical – multimodal quality. Impressed with Sylvia Plath’s use of polyvocality and fragmented identities in her poetry anthology, *Ariel*⁸⁶, to complement Betty Friedan’s exposure of “this sense of dissatisfaction and yearning”⁸⁷, I extrapolated equivalents between Chinese-Australian identity deconstructing hegemonic version of cultural identity. This is shown through my, and Corinna’s question, “were these the orientalisng fictions of Chinese diaspora identity?”, allowing me to parallel to Plath’s polysemic subversion of patriarchal univocality.

My choice of Fictocritical form thus stems from my rejection of univocality, all too often embodied in the limited perspectives of creative writing and critical essays. The polyvocality of Fictocriticism was thus the perfect way to enunciate the multivalent Chinese diasporic identity without oversimplification. A departure point for my research into this form was Lyotard’s, *Marie goes to Japan*⁸⁸, offering the character vehicle of Marie to realise the truth through the empathetic structures of narrative without the cold condescension of the academic voice. Furthermore, both Milan Kundera’s *Unbearable lightness of Being* and Virginia Woolf’s manuscript, *The Pargiters*, offer different uses of Fictocriticism, with Kundera intertwining philosophical threads and Woolf utilising alternating essay chapters with a fictional equivalent to illustrate her thesis. The freedom and experimentation of this form thus inspired my own innovation to utilise a table of literary concordances drawn from the commercially-successful Chinese memoirs, as a physical representation of the bricks in the Great Wall.

⁸⁶ Plath S. (1965) *Ariel* Harper Collins Publishers

⁸⁷ Friedan B. (1963) *The Feminine Mystique*: W.W. Norton and Co.

⁸⁸ Lyotard J-F. (1997) *Marie Goes to Japan*. *Postmodern Fables*.

Beyond such polyvocality, as Julia Kristeva termed the use of different voices and perspectives⁸⁹, is my further subversion of “absolute” truths regarding the articulation of identity through dramatic irony, “It still formed a false consciousness that prevented [Corinna] from envisioning any alternate identity⁹⁰”. The adoption of Homi-K Bhabha’s sense of “the interstitial passage”⁹¹ that I represent through Corinna and my own divided identities allows me to reflect his optimism about “the possibility of cultural hybridity”⁹² that is personal, fluid and continuing renegotiated throughout our lives and our writing. Thus, the homosexual Australian writer, Andy Quan, who appropriates motifs through poetry, specifically “Apple-pears”,⁹³ exposes hybridity and disrupts mainstream analysis from the position of marginalised subcultures. The necessity of recognising such hybridity, is explicated through my fictive narration within Corinna’s own narrative where I produce a satirical version of the “Chineseness” I have been critiquing to produce a ‘bricolage’ effect. Corinna pastiches the stereotypical orientalist writing when recounting her grandfather’s experiences, “~~He said he can never forget~~, I can never forget that strange manic urgency of that Red Army...”. By placing Corinna’s first draft “sous rature”,⁹⁴ under erasure, I utilise Derrida’s⁹⁵ process of putting a sentence under erasure but keeping it within the body of the text to draw attention to the process of fictionalising that inevitably occurs as one writer appropriates another individual’s experience. Indeed, this allows me to establish a *mise-en-abyme*, as termed by André Gide⁹⁶, destabilising both Corinna’s narrative and the possibility of any representation claiming the subjective view as objective fact, revealing the

⁸⁹ Kristeva J. (1984) *Revolution in Poetic Language*

⁹⁰ Little D. *False consciousness, Louis Althusser*. Available at: <http://www-personal.umd.umich.edu/~delittle/iess%20false%20consciousness%20V2.htm>.

⁹¹ Bhabha HK. (1994) *The Location of Culture*.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Quan A. Apple-pears.

⁹⁴ Leport B. (2010) *Interpreting Derrida: Sous rature* 2010

⁹⁵ Derrida J. (1982) *Margins of Philosophy* University of Chicago Press.

⁹⁶ Ireland KR. (1983) Dark Pit of the Past: Gide's 'mise en abyme' and Natsume Sōseki's "Mon".

“fictionality” of any cohesive discourse⁹⁷.

In my concluding paragraphs, I urge young academic audiences interested in postcolonial studies to perceive “literature ... with a palpability of its own.”⁹⁸ My intended publication point is a periodical such as the *Journal of Intercultural Studies*⁹⁹, *Meanjin*¹⁰⁰ or the *Griffith Review*¹⁰¹, or as a potential reading in the University of Technology, Sydney course, *Fictocriticism*¹⁰², to confront academic audiences with the complexities of cultural analysis. I have found the oscillating process between my own ideas and the variety of research texts vital as it has engendered dialogue between my own ideas and the central questions of the last thirty years of postmodern philosophies. Indeed, the process has equated to the Bakhtinian theory of dialogue between intertextual traces within texts, a concept Julia Kristeva extends to the central process of all literature in its weaving together of disparate discourses into a complex ever shifting mosaic that resists becoming an ultimately, simplistic fixed “wall”.

In my last sentence, I return to my motif of books as intertextual motifs, but now urge readers to “dismantle The Great Wall to build their own bridges” as “the wall may disappear behind flat and fading picture postcard orientalism”. By thus insisting that a univocal wall can become polyvocal bridges, that allow for writers and readers to negotiate their own paths through the labyrinths of diasporic identity, I hope I have empowered my audience as much as I have myself through the process.

(1498 words)

⁹⁷ Kristeva J. (1984) *Revolution in Poetic Language*

⁹⁸ Ryan JRaM. (2004) *Literary Theory: An anthology*, Black well publishing

⁹⁹ (2017) *Journal of Intercultural Studies Taylor and Francis*

¹⁰⁰ (2008) *Meanjin*. Melbourne University Publishing.

¹⁰¹ (2003) *Griffith Review*. Martin Betts.

¹⁰² Jenkins DG. (2008) *Fictocriticism at the University of Technology, Sydney*.