Beyond Romance: Identity Metaphors in Sino-West Interracial Romances

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Abstract Using *Pavilion of Women* and *Mr. Ma & Son* (二马) as primary case studies, this article examines identity awareness in Chinese and Western interracial romances. It finds that both Chinese and Western writers tend to emphasize the historical dynamic of a strong West and weak East, but with distinct approaches. Western literature typically portrays Western characters as masculine, strong, and dominant. Conversely, Chinese works often depict Eastern characters as weak and dominated, exhibiting feminine traits due to their failure to "conquer" the West. Many authors, conscious of the national identity implications in this pattern, attempt to deconstruct it in their works. Consequently, interracial romance becomes an arena for exploring racial identity and national status. This article argues that both Chinese and Western interracial romances frequently serve as metaphorical representations of identity construction, where authors attempt to build self-image and self-identity through the portrayal and definition of the other.

Keywords identity; interracial romance; masculinity; metaphor; nation

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Introduction

Interracial romance has been a long-existing theme in both Chinese and Western literature. With the forced opening of China at the end of the 19th century, the exchanges between the two cultures became more frequent, providing new

materials and perspectives for literary creation. Interracial romance became an increasingly popular topic, though it was not solely a love story between men and women. Instead, it often metaphorically represented the East-West dichotomy. In Western works, white men were usually portrayed as the enlightener, the savior, or the conqueror. On the other hand, Chinese authors tended to depict the Chinese as the weak in the face of the West. In short, interracial romances highlighted the definition of Western masculinity through the portrayal of Chinese men and women as the inferior. Such relationships implied the connotations of gender, race, and identity in terms of the power dynamic between the dominant and the subordinate, the conqueror and the conquered.

While scholarly attention to this topic is considerable, existing studies often remain confined to specific media, genres, or case analyses. This article aims to construct a broader comparative framework. It integrates Western canonical and popular romances, Chinese modernist fiction, Sinophone and diasporic writing, and contemporary film and television to trace the consistent metaphorization of Sino-Western identities across diverse textual forms. Moving beyond the identification of common tropes, this study also highlights the "Chinese man-Western woman" configuration as a notable cultural taboo. It examines how this taboo relates to the construction and anxiety of national masculinity in both Western and Chinese contexts, a dimension that merits deeper exploration.

By investigating the prevailing patterns and underlying logics in Sino-Western interracial romances, this study aims to demonstrate how these narrative templates and prohibitions function as cultural metaphors, and how they articulate the deep-seated perceptions and preoccupations of writers and their societies regarding the "self" and the "other," thereby acting as a crucial mechanism for reflecting, reinforcing, and at times, reconstructing national identity.

To achieve this, the article employs a comparative imagological approach, analyzing literary and cultural texts as arenas where national images are produced and contested. The analysis begins with a close reading of two pivotal case studies: Pearl S. Buck's *Pavilion of Women* (1946) and Lao She's *Mr. Ma & Son* (1929). These works were selected for three principal reasons: first, their central plots revolve around Sino-Western interracial romance, offering rich ground for analyzing metaphors of gender, race, and nationality; second, both authors possessed profound bicultural exposure, granting them a nuanced, comparative perspective on the clashes and convergences between Chinese and Western societies; third, writing in the turbulent twentieth century, each sought, from the distinctive vantage point of the cultural "spectator," to use East-West comparison as a means of national critique

and enlightenment.

Following this focused analysis, the scope expands to survey a wider array of scenarios (including fictions, plays, and films) to delineate a dominant pattern and observe its subsequent deconstruction in later works. Finally, it is necessary to clarify the expanded scope of "Sino-West" as used in this study. While focusing on Chinese-Western dynamics, the analysis also touches upon representations of Japan, Korea, and colonial Vietnam, as well as overseas diasporic communities. Therefore, "Sino" in this context encompasses both China proper and global Sinophone communities, while "West" includes not only Western Europe and the United States but also broader colonial situations.

Western Writers: Conquest, Salvation, and Enlightenment of the East

It is a common practice in the West to explore the complex interplay between race, gender, and identity through literature, and interracial romances, in particular, constitute an essential way for Western societies to construct and imagine their relationships with the world. For a long time, Westerners have viewed themselves as superior to the East which is often depicted as the "weak and gentle 'other'" (Chen 80).[1] In Western texts, China is often portrayed as a nation that lags behind the West and needs to be saved and enlightened by advanced Western civilization. Such unequal Sino-West relationships in interracial romances are often represented by white men in dominant positions, playing the roles of conquerors, saviors, and enlighteners, while Chinese are depicted as weak and subordinate. In contrast to the feminized Chinese men, white Western men are presented as strong and masculine, with an abundance of charm, when interacting with Chinese women.

This section examines Pearl S. Buck's 1946 novel *Pavilion of Women* as a case study to explore Western writers' metaphors for the Sino-West relationship in interracial romance. Buck, an American writer who lived in China for nearly 40 years (1892-1934), was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1932 for her novel *The Good Earth* and later the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1938. Set in 1940s China, *Pavilion of Women* depicts Madame Wu's changing feelings for André, emphasizing the emotional subjugation of Chinese women to white men. It also portrays the spiritual awakening and transformation of Madame Wu and others, thus

1 At first, China seemed to be a model for the West; however, with the rise of Western nations, it gradually became a target of criticism. Imagologically, the image of China in Western society shifted from "utopian" to "ideological", implying changes in the perceived identities of both sides. *Mili: A Chinese Fairy Tale* is indicative of this shift, with the author attempting to use Eastern culture to transform Western society, thereby pioneering the shaping of East-West identities through gender and race (Horace 32-44).

highlighting the West's enlightenment of old China.

In *Pavilion of Women*, André is portrayed as a masculine Westerner who has a profound impact on the Wu family. His tall stature and thick voice are the initial impressions made on them, and his "hairy body", a sign of masculinity in the eyes of Westerners (Cornell 148-149), furthers his image as an Eastern conqueror. Madame Wu's attitude towards this white Westerner undergoes a complex process of surprise, acceptance, and admiration. She is initially taken aback by his physical appearance and voice, but later discards her preconceived notions of foreigners and gradually becomes attached to André. She is drawn to him not only for his masculine physicality but also for his deep and broad spiritual world, which ultimately leads to a strong spiritual connection between the two. This is further emphasized when André's accidental death causes Madame Wu to realize that she has always loved this Western man, something that is repeatedly confirmed in the text. Evidently, André holds great charm for Madame Wu, both physically and spiritually, highlighting the masculinity of white men.

While emphasizing the masculine persona of the white man, the novel also obscures the masculinity of Chinese men. In contrast to André, Mr. Wu, the husband of Madame Wu, takes on a more subservient role. Ironically, it is only after André's reminder that Madame Wu realizes that she detests her husband. When Jasmine labels Mr. Wu as "noble", Madame Wu responds with,

> "What do you mean by noble?" Madame Wu asked. She would never have used the word noble for Mr. Wu. Impetuous, impatient, willful, stupid, good-natured sometimes, selfish always—these were all possible words for him, but not noble. (Buck 222)

Contrasting the traditional image of masculine dominance in China's patriarchal society, Mr. Wu never displays any masculine characteristics when in the presence of Madame Wu. Instead, it is Madame Wu who exhibits such masculine traits as dominance, decisiveness, directness, and strength, while Mr. Wu exhibits more feminine traits, including submission, indecision, insincerity, and a lack of willpower. This reversal of the traditional power dynamic has resulted in Madame Wu becoming the *de facto* head of the family.

The manifestation of masculinity is evident in André, whereas in Mr. Wu's case, it is concealed and replaced by submissive femininity. According to Pu, in mainstream Western literature, Chinese men are typically stereotyped as "utterly lacking in masculinity, weak, without courage and creativity, not active

enough, lacking in self-confidence and vitality" (241).[1] As such, Mr. Wu, as the representative of Chinese men in the novel, is feminized and presents an image of submissiveness, indecision, hypocrisy, and weak will, in contrast to the white man. Ultimately, Madame Wu chooses to escape from the Chinese man in favor of the white Western man.

It is evident from Pearl Buck's writing that the dominating relationship between Madame Wu and Mr. Wu presents a reversal of the traditional patriarchal system, thus highlighting the masculinity of Western men and the lack thereof among their Chinese counterparts. In general, Chinese men, Chinese women, and Western men exhibit a sequentially rising trend in masculinity, with the Chinese man represented by Mr. Wu showing more femininity than masculinity, and the Chinese woman represented by Madame Wu being dominated by the masculine white man. Consequently, it is reasonable to assume that the Chinese man has lost out to the white man in Pearl Buck's writing, as Madame Wu's spirit involuntarily chooses André.

Pearl Buck highlights the identity of Westerners as the enlighteners and saviors of the East in many of her works. In *East Wind: West Wind* (1930), Buck examines the inconsistencies, conflicts, and fusion between Chinese and Western cultures, and the ancient East is portrayed as ignorant, while the West is synonymous with advancement and civilization, symbolizing the direction of human progress. In *The Hidden Flower* (1952), she presents the interracial romance between a Japanese girl (Josui Sakai) and an American soldier (Allen Kennedy), and in *The New Year* (1968), a Korean girl (Kim Soonya) and an American soldier (Christopher Winters). The similar plot designs of both works demonstrate the unequal status and position of the East and the West, suggesting the domination of the latter over the former.

A similar thematic development occurs in *Pavilion of Women*. Madame Wu, once a devoted practitioner of tradition, experiences a profound liberation of the soul after meeting André. His influence proves transformative, and his death serves as a watershed moment that symbolically completes her enlightenment. The final scene between them, alone at his passing, unfolds as a silent yet deeply significant spiritual rite.

> He was neither foreign nor a priest to her now. He was the only being she had ever met whom she worshiped. Old Gentleman had taught her much. But Old Gentleman had feared many things. Brother André feared no one. He

1 All the English translations from the Chinese sources, unless otherwise specified, are made by the present author.

> feared neither life nor death […]
>
> Suddenly she recognized him. "You whom I love!" she murmured in profound astonishment.
>
> This recognition she made, and in the instant she accepted it she felt her whole being change. Although she did not move, her body tingled, her blood stung her heart, and her brain was clear. Her whole frame grew light and strong. She lifted her head and looked about the room. The four walls stood, but she felt free and whole […]
>
> "André." She said his name to him in a low clear voice, and never again would she call him brother. "You live in me. I will do my utmost to preserve your life." The moment she had said these words peace welled up in her being. It was so profound, so quieting, so contenting, that for the first time in her life she knew that never before had she known what peace was. Standing motionless in the bare room before his shell, she felt happy. (Buck 210-211)

This ritual not only marks the completion of Madame Wu's personal intellectual enlightenment but also metaphorically represents the internalization process of an ancient civilization when confronted with the impact of a foreign culture. By this point, André's physical presence—specifically marked as a foreign missionary—has vanished, yet under Madame Wu's gaze and understanding, he transcends into a pure symbol of civilization— "He was neither foreign nor a priest to her now. He was the only being she had ever met whom she worshiped." Unlike the Old Gentleman who revered many traditional taboos, André embodies a fearless, rational, and transcendent spiritual force that stands above life and death. Madame Wu's renewed "recognition" of him in the face of death is, in essence, an acknowledgment and acceptance of the nature of this spiritual power. Her murmured words in utter astonishment ("You whom I love!") reach far beyond romantic affection. This "love" should rather be interpreted as cultural longing, identification, and convergence. What she represents—an ancient Chinese civilization in a state of hardship and searching—encounters its true interlocutor and finds the long-desired path and answers. The resulting realization brings a full-bodied shock: the freedom, tranquility, and happiness she feels stem precisely from having found a spiritual home and a temporary relief from historical anxiety. Her vow to the deceased—"You live in me. I will do my utmost to preserve your life."—clearly shows that although André's physical life has ended, the ideas and spirit he carried will be accepted and passed on, gaining new life within the soil of another civilization.

Furthermore, André also has a far-reaching impact on those around Madame Wu: he awakens the dormant consciousness of Chiuming, the concubine of Mr. Wu, and emboldens her to challenge the oppressive family and patriarchal society; additionally, he inspires his student Fengmo, the third son of the Wu family, to journey abroad and broaden his horizons, subsequently returning to found a school, which profoundly alters the spirituality of local people.

The Wu family in Buck's novel represents the traditional, antiquated, and backward social system and way of life in old China. Before André appears, the family follows a set framework, where each member functions like a cog in a machine with little independence. However, the arrival of André breaks this status quo. He is not just an individual, but a saintly figure, a symbol of Western saintliness and wisdom. André states, "I have no name of my own"; "I have been given the name of André"; "I have no country; wherever I am is my home"; "I speak many languages to be able to converse with all people" (Buck 114-115). This image is remarkably similar to the old cosmopolitan scientist in "The Fugitive" (亡命) by Chinese writer Ba Jin. Having the entire world as his home and all its inhabitants as his family and compatriots, the scientist strives for the achievement of a "common world" without any boundaries of nationality. Similarly, André represents a collective image of the West. A craftsman whom André helps calls him a "foreign saint". Indeed, Pearl Buck's André is an ideal image of a Western saint who is nameless and borderless, speaks to people of different languages, and strives to promote universal values.

Focusing on Sino-West interracial romances, Young reveals that the heroines ultimately choose to embrace the independent and liberal Western cultures that their heroes introduce them to rather than the regressive Chinese culture they initially represent (522). This point is well illustrated in *Pavilion of Women*, where André's entry into the Wu family compound—a place where no foreigners have ever come before—is like a spark that brings about a series of changes, both inside and outside the family. This marks a significant shift from the Wu family's previous "uncivilized" and "unenlightened" state. In fact, although André does not appear to have done anything substantial, the consequences of his arrival are immense. This is more than just André's enlightenment and salvation of a single traditional Chinese family; it is a symbol of the West's invasion and enlightenment of closed China, representing the conquest and dismantling of the backward Chinese civilization by its advanced Western counterpart. In this sense, André's entry into the Wu family alludes to the unequal power and status of China and the West.

Chinese Writers: The Weak Before the West

Lao She's *Mr. Ma & Son* was written during his stay in the UK (1924-1929) and first serialized in *Fiction Monthly* (小 说 月 报) in 1926. The novel examines the Chinese people and culture in the context of the UK. By comparing the two societies, Lao She attempts to shape the UK into a model society for China to follow while conveying his perception of the inferiority of the Chinese people. Like Pearl Buck, he also illustrates the unequal Sino-West relationship through interracial relationships, but in a different way. Rather than highlight the West's conquest, salvation, and enlightenment of the East, he instead portrays the failure of Chinese men in "conquering" British women. The Sino-UK romance and the underlying identity metaphors in his novel also offer a window to probe into the author's views and reflections on the identities of both peoples.

Lao She arranges for Mr. Ma and his son, Ma Wei, to woo Mrs. and Miss Wendell, yet both attempts end in failure. Mrs. Wendell's ideal companion is "the kind of hero who could wrestle tigers, and stomp wild elephants" (Lao, *Mr. Ma & Son* 61), while Miss Wendell's ideal romantic partner is the protagonist of a movie that portrays an English swashbuckler "whipping over a dozen stub-nosed yellow-faced Chinese" (Lao, *Mr. Ma & Son* 87). Miss Wendell initially harbors contempt for Ma Wei; however, when he knocks the provocative Paul to the ground in the restaurant, her attitude towards him shifts from contempt to admiration. This shift can be attributed to her "hero worship": Ma Wei has become "the embodiment of masculinity, a red-blooded hero—a warrior" in her eyes—a representation of strength that transcends national borders. As the novel suggests, this reverence for masculinity, a characteristic of British nationhood, is reflected in the belief that British women should only be paired with the powerful. As such, this serves as a tangible example of British admiration for masculinity.

The hero-worship mentality of the Wendells is not an isolated case but rather a typical one in Western society, as observed by Chinese writer Zhu Ziqing (89). When Huang Juesi traveled to the UK and visited the Chinese Art Exhibition in London, he found the throne of Qianlong, an emperor of China's Qing Dynasty, to be an essential item. People were drawn to its presence, not for its craftsmanship but rather due to its connection to the emperor—a testament to the West's worship of great men and heroes (Huang 24). Lao She believes that the reasons for such hero worship in Western society could be attributed to their identification with power and masculinity, which is lacking in Chinese society.

The British society depicted in the novel is rife with racial prejudice and

misconceptions about China, despite Ma Wei's display of power in his fight with Paul. This is because China is generally perceived as a weak country. When Paul observes Ma Wei and an English girl seated together in the restaurant, he perceives it as a potential threat from a foreign male to a white woman and thus menacingly proclaims, "Remember what Englishmen's fists are like!"

Similarly, in Marguerite Duras' novel *The Lover*, the heroine is aware of the futility of her relationship due to the racial divide: "This is because he's a Chinese, because he's not a white man." (51) The same fate is shared by Ma Wei's long-suppressed attachment to Miss Wendell, which is ultimately hindered by her Englishness. When Ma Wei appears as a hero in front of Miss Wendell, he captures her admiration, but her impulse is soon dispelled by her realization that their union is "impossible!" Despite their mutual affection, Mr. Ma and Mrs. Wendell experience similar frustrations as well. Even though both cherish good feelings for each other, they eventually give up the relationship. They are forced to accept the impossibility of their relationship, as understood by both their friends and relatives, as well as by Wendell herself. In addition, Lao She also has Mrs. Wendell as his spokesperson to express his views on Sino-British interracial relationships.

> It's not all that odd for English men to marry foreign women […] people look askance a bit but they don't find it necessarily revolting; but for an English woman to marry a foreigner— that's another thing altogether! You know, Mr. Ma, the English are an extremely proud race; they may feel disdain towards English women who marry foreigners, but they harbor nothing but utter outrage for foreigners who marry their women! […] the English aren't any different on this, they find nothing more mortifying than a foreigner laying a hand on their women! (Lao, Mr. Ma & Son 521-522)

Mrs. Wendell clarifies the attitude towards interracial relationships in British society at the time. That is, the "British male-foreign female" model could go unimpeded, but the "British female-foreign male" model becomes a social taboo.

Anne Witchard notes that prejudice and discrimination against the Chinese in Britain at the beginning of the twentieth century were such that the union of white women with Asian men was seen as a "cheapening" act, which caused discontent and protests in British society (67). Shen argues that although Western civilization, like an attractive and haughty young woman, is desired by males in the writings of modern Chinese authors, it is not as readily available as Eastern women in the minds of Western men, instead embodying a superiority mentality (103). This point

is also reflected in *Mr. Ma & Son* where both Mr. Ma and his son were unsuccessful in their pursuit of English women. Mrs. Wendell believes this to be a result of social prejudice and public opinion, as although there is no class divide between Mr. Ma and her, there is considerable racial prejudice. However, there is an underlying cause, namely, national identity. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the British Empire presented itself on the international stage as the pinnacle of capitalist power and "the empire on which the sun never sets", embodying masculinity if placed in the "man-woman" binary. China, however, had been defeated in multiple battles since the Opium War and had suffered from the invasion and division of the powers led by Britain. This led to the destruction of the illusion of heavenly power among the domestic ruling class and the public, as well as the image of a weak country as the "sick man of East Asia" in the international arena, representing more of a subjugated and subordinate image and conveying a sense of femininity. Therefore, against the backdrop of reality, Chinese men's conquest of white women through Sino-British interracial romance was seen as a social taboo, unacceptable to Western culture.

Beyond Romance: Identity Awareness in Interracial Romances

Freud (437) contends that writers are, to some extent, daydreamers and that their literature reflects their innermost and often hidden fantasies. With this in mind, interracial romance in literature can be seen as a reflection of the writer's preconceived notions, as well as the collective imagination of the local society, in regard to the relationship between their own country and foreign counterparts. The Sino-Western interracial romances created by authors such as Pearl Buck and Lao She serve as metaphors for how these authors, and the societies in which they live, view one another.

The Westerners have long held the belief that their peoples and cultures are superior to the non-Western peoples and cultures (Said 40; Doyle 1), and that the latter needs the guidance and enlightenment of the former (Marchetti 2-3). Such a mentality also fully manifests itself in literature. It is a typical pattern in Western romance novels to feature a white hero and an East Asian heroine (Young 520). According to Cheng (15), Asiatic femininity is characterized by its ornamental and decorative nature, and such a feature sparks intense debates regarding the distinctions between excrescence and essence, the peripheral and the central, as well as femininity and masculinity. In *Pavilion of Women*, the Westerner is presented as a conqueror and enlightener of China, thereby highlighting Western masculinity and obscuring the masculinity of Chinese men. In fact, such a "dominator-dominated"

relationship between the Westerner, represented by André, and the Chinese reveals both the man-woman and Sino-West dichotomies. In the former, the patriarchal relationship manifests as male dominance and female subordination, while in the latter, it is depicted as a dominant position for the Western nation and a subordinate and submissive role for the Chinese nation, which must be enlightened and saved. Consequently, the Western nation is portrayed as masculine, while the Chinese nation is feminized (Mackerras 268).

Pearl Buck's attitude towards the relationship and status of Eastern and Western cultures changes following the circumstances of her own life and the international environment. Initially, she respected Eastern culture and advocated for racial and cultural equality, with no superior Western view of Easterners, and did not pander to Western readers' aesthetic sensibilities. However, she eventually relinquished her admiration for Eastern culture, realizing that without the help of the West, the Eastern culture's awakening and progress would be unattainable. Consequently, she came to believe that only the West could save Eastern culture. This transformation can be seen in her works from different periods. In *East Wind: West Wind*, she used male characters to symbolize Eastern culture and female characters to symbolize Western culture; yet in *Pavilion of Women*, she started to use female characters to represent Eastern culture and male characters to represent Western culture. In *The Hidden Flower* and *The New Year*, she examined another two countries in the East—Korea and Japan—but consistently employed the model of "Asian woman-Western man" to symbolize the unequal relationship between Eastern and Western cultures, and the subjugation of the East by the West.

Buck is not an isolated case, and such a creative mindset and pattern are also commonly found in other works of Western literature. Doyle, for instance, identifies this tendency in Victorian literature, noting that "almost all of the romances were between British men and indigenous women" (1). This phenomenon is also evidenced in the later literature. Richard Mason's *The World of Suzie Wong* (1957) is an example of such an interracial romance, depicting the relationship between Robert, a British painter, and Suzie Wong, a Chinese girl. With Robert's help, Suzie overcomes her struggles, and following Robert's success, she experiences the life of an English socialite, demonstrating the transformation from "ugly duckling to white swan". Similarly, in James Clavell's *Tai Pan* (1966), May-may, Dirk Struan's Chinese mistress, is represented as a slave-like figure, attempting to please Struan in every way possible. This includes her attempts to dress as a European to attract Struan's attention, which only serves to elicit his resentment. From the ornamentalism's perspective, Susie Wong and May-may, despite being living

individuals, are "living objects" (Cheng 3), with their oriental clothing serving as symbols of their oriental identity. The change in their attires metaphorically signifies the vanishing of Orientalism and the accompanying Oriental identity they embody. As the West only comes to understand its own self when juxtaposed against the East (Kubin 47), with the absence of Eastern coordinates for comparison, the white male characters in the novel find themselves unable to validate their own identity and maintain a sense of superiority.

Many Chinese writers are also aware of the interracial romance in Western literature which reinforces the historical reality of Western strength and Eastern weakness. In Zhou Shoujuan's "The Falling Flower" (落　花　怨), the heroine, Miss Huang, is portrayed as a talented and beautiful woman who is subject to discrimination due to her Chinese identity, leading to a tragic conclusion to her love for a young Englishman. This story serves more as a social fable that is characterized by a strong sense of national anxiety, rather than as a romantic interracial tale. Similarly, Yu Dafu, another modern Chinese writer, expresses his sexual bitterness as a result of the racial discrimination he faces as a "citizen of a weak nation", crying out "Motherland, Motherland! You are the reason for my death!" and "Get prosperous! Be strong!" The plot design of the interracial romance in *Mr. Ma & Son* also reflects this same kind of concern.

Lao She attempts to place Chinese people in a Western context, reflecting on Chinese society and national character from the contrast between Chinese and Western cultures, with the hope that the development of China into a powerful modern nation will eliminate discrimination and prejudice against Chinese people. Consequently, he displays a strong sense of national identity in designing the romantic relationships of his characters. He clarifies that this novel is intended to compare Chinese and British society, and that all characters are symbolic and represent something (*How Do I Write Novels* 12). With regard to the love affairs of Mr. Ma and his son, he notes,

> The most dangerous interpolation could be those love affairs, which could make *Mr. Ma & Son* something like *Liu Dong Wai Shi*. However, upon beginning my writing, I decided to focus on the task at hand, using these plots as an opportunity to highlight the national stereotypes and personalities of the characters rather than allowing the romance to unfold freely. (Lao, *How Do I Write Novels* 14)

The extensive remark made by Mrs. Wendell when turning down Mr. Ma's proposal

on the Sino-British interracial relationship sheds light on the complicated reality of intertwined gender, race, and power dynamics, which are reflective of racial prejudice and identity metaphors. It is clear that Mr. Ma's and Ma Wei's setbacks in their pursuit of English women are intentional on the author's part, displaying the stereotypes of English society about China while also warning the nation to strive for improvement, thus reconstructing the East-West identity and relationship.

Comparatively, both Chinese and Western writers allude to a powerful West and a weak China, but in different ways. While Western authors tend to stress the subjugation of Chinese women by Western men, Chinese authors center on Chinese men's incompetency in subjugating Western women, as well as the subjugation of Chinese women by Western men.

In contrast to the accepted "Western man-Chinese woman" model, the "Chinese man-Western woman" model has often been taboo.[1] The Chinese American writer Sui Sin Far (aka Edith Eaton) explores this issue in "The Story of One White Woman Who Married a Chinese" and its sequel, "Her Chinese Husband". In the story, Minnie, a white woman, marries a Chinese man named Liu Kanghi, only for Liu to succumb to an untimely death despite his positive qualities. Although Sui Sin Far is a "self-oriented" writer who "keeps the spirit pure and healthy," the story ultimately remains constrained by this taboo. Similarly, in Lin Yutang's *The Chinatown Family* (1936), the Chinese man Yiko (Frederick) marries Sing Toy, an American girl, despite his family's objections, yet he does not become the conqueror of the white woman. Instead, Sing Toy ultimately throws herself into the arms of a white man, Sandy Bull, and Yiko is reduced to the status of a clown.

It appears to be a social taboo for Chinese men to possess Western women, yet it is common for Chinese women to be attracted to and consumed by Western men. For instance, in Wei Hui's *Shanghai Baby* (上海宝贝, 1999), the heroine

1 Set in colonial Vietnam, Duras' *The Lover* seems to be an exception, telling the story of a white French girl and her Chinese lover. However, the Chinese lover is portrayed as timid and weak, particularly in the sexual relationship. Upon saving the white girl, her family expresses resentment and shame. When the girl leaves him, the Chinese lover indicates that he will always love her. In contrast, the heroine does not weep when leaving her Chinese lover, as "he was Chinese and one oughtn't to weep for that kind of lover" (111). It is evident that the Chinese lover, who is physically male, displays feminine traits in stark contrast to the white girl, who exudes masculine traits. This is further highlighted in comparison with the white male, as the two brothers of the white girl are described as "strong", while the Chinese lover is likened to "the carrion you find in the desert" (57). Consequently, this "white girl-Chinese man" model, although ostensibly a rebellion against taboos, serves as evidence for the "Western/strong/masculinity-Oriental/weak/femininity" dichotomy.

CoCo has a Chinese boyfriend who is portrayed as sexually impotent, while her German boyfriend, Mark, is masculine, tall, robust, rigorous, and sexually powerful. CoCo's despair over her Chinese boyfriend's sexual impotence is compensated for and satisfied by Mark. Similarly, in Wang Anyi's *I Love Bill* (我爱比尔 , 2000), the character A'san only engages in relationships with Western men. More similar cases can also be found in the works by Eileen Chang, Zha Jianying, and Bai Xiangyong, to name but a few.

The observed pattern is likewise prevalent within Western film and television media: the "white male-Asian female" model is used unhindered and even becomes the norm, while the "Asian male-white female" model is considered taboo, and Asian men are often portrayed as castrated eunuchs and other figures to emphasize white masculinity (Wong 25-26). To sum up, those stories are all framed in a dichotomy of Oriental/woman/weak seller versus Western/man/strong buyer, whereby the metaphor of individual and national identity is evident.

Many writers are well aware of the narrative tradition in Western interracial romances to construct Sino-West relations and identity based on gender and race. While alluding to the historical reality of a "strong West and weak East," some writers, primarily from the "conquered" East, also endeavor to deconstruct this "Orientalized" mode of romance and reconstruct the power and identity of the East. Giacomo Puccini's *Madame Butterfly*, for instance, serves as an exemplary illustration of the Orientalized representation of the East in literature, and has had a lasting influence on subsequent creations in two distinct routes. One is represented by *Miss Saigon* (1989) which follows in the footsteps of Puccini's work, recounting the tragedy of a Vietnamese girl abandoned by her white lover. The other is represented by Chinese-American writer David Henry Hwang's play, *M. Butterfly* (1988), which subverts the Orientalized narrative pattern through counterpoint writing.

In response to the strong metaphor of race and identity in *Madame Butterfly*, Hwang adapted the play *M. Butterfly* from the life of a Peking Opera actor. The story begins with an operatic performance of *Madame Butterfly* and focuses on the experience of Rene Gallimard, a French diplomat to China, who falls in love with the Beijing opera singer Song Liling. It contains a deliberate intertextual writing and deconstruction of *Madame Butterfly* in the context of both gender and identity. Hwang first blurs the gender identity by changing "Madame" into "M" (which can be understood as either Monsieur or Madame). In the story, the "actress" who infatuates Gallimard is actually a man, similar to Balzac's short story "Saragine" in which the perfect goddess with whom the protagonist is infatuated reveals

"herself" to be a man masquerading as a woman. Furthermore, in *M. Butterfly*, "she" conquers the white man in "her" own way, and unlike Cho-Cho-San who identifies with and upholds Western values, "she" engages in espionage and serves the cause of "her" people. Contrary to the traditional pattern of white men manipulating Eastern women's emotions, Gallimard has instead become a plaything in "her" hands. Such counterpoint writing clearly expresses Hwang's dissatisfaction with and deconstruction of the racial identity and power status metaphors used in Western interracial romances. Moreover, *Fusang* (*The Lost Daughter of Happiness* in English, 1996) by Yan Geling, *K* (1999) by Hong Ying, and many other works also show similar resistance to the Orientalized and ornamentalized narrative in Western literature.

Such deconstruction is also evident in screen works. In *Grief Over the Yellow River* (黄河绝恋, 1999), for instance, the heroine An Jie's heroic sacrifice to protect the American soldier Owen deconstructs the model where the white man acts as the savior, and is a new attempt to construct a Chinese image. Similarly, *The Bewitching Braid* (大辫子的诱惑, 1995) also demonstrates resistance to the Orientalized narrative in Western films.

These deconstruction and resistance efforts further illustrate that an increasing awareness of racial identity, which is metaphorically embedded in narratives of interracial romance, is developing.

Interracial Romance as A Metaphor for National Identity

The tension between "race" and "gender" as a metaphor for identity has been pervasive in narratives, with allusions to the East-West relationship reflecting the authors' reflections on this issue and forming certain stereotypes. As stereotype gives access to "identity" (Bhabha 320), these works also serve as a medium to narrate and represent the East-West national identity.

Interracial gender relations can be metaphorical of other power relations (Bhabha 320; McClintock 14). Millett further posits that gender relations are political in relation to races and are a relationship of domination and subordination (24-25). Anne Anlin Cheng's concept of "ornamentalism" critically examines the intertwined existence of the Oriental and the ornamental, suggesting that Asian females often straddle the boundary between being perceived as individuals and objects. She argues that throughout history, the ornament has consistently been connected to, and at times equated with, the Oriental and Asiatic (Cheng 15). Moreover, she emphasizes that:

> […] the ornament and especially the ornamentality of the Asiatic continue to provide a charged site for the modernists, precisely because the ornament triggers the fluctuation between essence and supplement, depth and surface, utility and decoration, interiority and exteriority, organicity and the inorganic, femininity and masculinity, and finally, Western discipline and Oriental excess. (Cheng 16)

The man-woman dichotomy often portrays men as strong, dominant, and conquerors, while women are seen as weak, dominated, and subjugated. The power dynamics between the East and the West mirror the gendered power dynamics, with the East often portrayed as feminine, symbolizing weakness and ornamentation, while the West is depicted as more masculine, embodying strength, dominance, and conquest. Yang shares similar views and argues that the hierarchical and gendered relationship in interracial romances symbolizes the civilized, masculine self in the West in opposition to the untamed, feminine Chinese other (1). In other words, the depiction of the East serves as a point of reference to position the West, and interracial gender relations not only reflect individual identities but also highlight the racial and national identities of both sides.

Women are the last colony in the world (Kubin 46). The possession of foreign women is equivalent to the possession of foreign land (Jiang 43), and the possession of white women in Sino-West gender relations implies the subjugation of white society as a whole (Hoppenstand 174). Under patriarchal consciousness, it can be seen that romantic relations symbolize the subjugation of women by men, and in interracial romances, women are often viewed as symbols or properties, and the subjugation of women implies the subjugation of their nations, lands, and properties.

Kondo argues that if the Orient is a woman, then women are also the Orient, thus emphasizing the simultaneity and inextricability of gender from the domination systems of geography, colonialism, and race (25). In this sense, the possession of Eastern women by Western men becomes a metaphor for the West's conquest of Eastern countries, which is in line with Westerners' national psychology of being strong and therefore acceptable and deserved. This is evidenced by the above-discussed "white man-oriental woman" pattern common in Western literature.

However, the union of Western women with Eastern men implies the subjugation of Western women to Eastern men, in which Eastern men are in the dominant position while Western women are subordinate and ornamental. This contradicts Westerners' sense of national superiority and shatters their deeply ingrained image as conquerors, making it destined to be rejected by their own

society. From this viewpoint, it is not difficult to understand the inevitability of the frustration suffered by Mr. Ma and his son in their pursuit of English women. Moreover, this is also reflected in Western literature. For instance, *Pavilion of Women*, while seeking to illustrate the subjugation of Chinese women to Western men, prohibits the love affair between Fengmo, the third son of the Wu family, and Margaret, a white girl; similarly, *Tai Pan* on the one hand highlights the identity of white men as conquerors, and on the other hand simultaneously criticizes the white prostitute Mary for serving Chinese officials.

From an imagological viewpoint, the image of a foreign country not only reveals a society's understanding and imagination of that country but also reflects the author's mindset and attitudes. The self and the other reflect each other, and the representation of the other can be seen as a self-narrative in a sense (Leerssen 22; Pageaux 157). Behind the artificially created Sino-West dichotomy, there is the West's intention to reflect and construct its own identity through the image of China, and conversely, China also mirrors itself through the image of the West.

In essence, interracial romance is not only concerned with the relationship between two sexes but also with the dominant relationship between those involved in the story and the relationship between the nations they represent. When viewed from this perspective, we can easily recognize the metaphor for national identity underlying the pre-determined male-female relationship.

Conclusion

There are so many interracial romances in both Chinese and Western literature, with complex and diverse structures and plots, that it is impossible to summarize the patterns of these texts under a specific framework. However, this article argues that the plot settings of these romances exhibit a certain regularity.[1] In either Western or Chinese writings on interracial romance, China and the West are frequently controlled and represented by dominant frameworks, in which both sides are aware of the intertwined issues of gender, race and identity beyond romance and present them directly or indirectly, consciously or unconsciously, in the Sino-West binary structure.

The dominance of the West over the East is often reflected in interracial romantic relationships through literary reproduction when the West's economic, political, and military power dominates (Zhou 150). However, while recognizing

1 There also exist other patterns of interracial romances. Xu Xu (徐 訏), a modern Chinese writer, for example, tends to use interracial romantic fantasies to advance the social ideals of equality and love for all.

the reflective function of literary creation, it is also important to acknowledge the power of literature to react, for literature is both a symbol of history and a resistance to that history (Pageaux 128). The normalization of the "Western man-Chinese woman" model and the taboo of the "Chinese man-Western woman" model are new manifestations of Western discourse and colonization of the East. It is the awareness of the crucial role of literature in constructing the national identity that has led many writers from the East to use it as a tool for deconstructing the Oriental narratives in Western literature. Interracial romances present readers with not only emotional entanglements but also the construction and reflection of national identities, as viewed through the lens of East-West relations. Consequently, it is safe to conclude that these works are highly informative regarding the construction of national identities.

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