

MARILYN CHIN'S *REVENGE OF THE MOONCAKE VIXEN* AS TEXTUAL SYSTEMIC DESIRING MACHINE

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ABSTRACT. Marilyn Chin's one and only novel, *Revenge of the Mooncake Vixen* (2009), presents highly fragmented narratives that revolve around the lives of three female Chinese Americans of two different generations in the process of reaching their immigrant American dreams. Such narrative characteristics prompt an analysis conducted in this article which parallels the series of maneuvers of the trio with Deleuze & Guattari's systemic procedure of *coup et flux* (cut and flow). The aim is to show that the idea of assimilating American dream with the immigrant's is a complex matter as it involves series of actions that compromise the two. The trio's mode of action, the presence of textual divine intervention in the narrative fragments, and epigraphs from classical to popular texts encourage an analysis using narrative studies, focusing mainly on plot structure. In the context of negotiating Chinese American culture, this article argues that within the frame of tale of revenge, the process of reaching the immigrant American dream undergoes a series of endless systemic procedure of *coup et flux*. The negotiation process presented via uncertainty and series of transits in the novel thus causes endlessness that leads to an idea that the dream, the happiness, would never actually reach its definite ending point; it is merely a series of transits.

Keywords: Marilyn Chin; systemic procedure; fragmented narrative; immigrant dream; cut and flow

NOVEL *REVENGE OF THE MOONCAKE VIXEN* KARYA MARILYN CHIN SEBAGAI INSTRUMEN HASRAT SISTEMIK TEKSTUAL

ABSTRAK. Novel tunggal Marilyn Chin, *Revenge of the Mooncake Vixen* (2009), menyajikan narasi yang sangat terfragmentasi, yang berkisar tentang tiga karakter perempuan Tionghoa Amerika dari dua generasi berbeda dalam proses mencapai impian imigran Amerika mereka. Ciri naratif berfragmen seperti ini menyebabkan perlunya analisis yang memaralelkan rangkaian manuver ketiga karakter tersebut dengan konsep prosedur sistemik *coup et flux* (cut and flow) yang dikemukakan Deleuze & Guattari. Tujuan pembahasan adalah untuk menunjukkan bahwa gagasan mengasimilasi impian Amerika dan impian imigran adalah masalah yang kompleks karena melibatkan serangkaian tindakan yang mengompromikan keduanya. Mode aksi ketiga karakter tersebut, adanya intervensi ilahi tekstual dalam fragmen naratif, dan epigrafi dari teks klasik hingga teks populer yang disertakan dalam novel, mendorong sebuah analisis yang menerapkan kajian naratif, yang berfokus pada struktur plot. Dalam konteks menegosiasikan budaya Tionghoa-Amerika, artikel ini berargumentasi bahwa dalam bingkai kisah balas dendam, proses pencapaian impian imigran Amerika mengalami serangkaian prosedur *coup et flux* yang sistemik dan tanpa akhir. Dengan demikian, proses negosiasi yang dihadirkan melalui ketidakpastian dan rangkaian transit dalam novel menyebabkan ketidakberakhiran yang mengarah pada gagasan bahwa mimpi dan kebahagiaan yang dikejar tidak akan pernah benar-benar mencapai titik akhir yang pasti; mereka hanyalah serangkaian transit.

Kata kunci: Marilyn Chin; prosedur sistemik; narasi terfragmentasi; impian imigran; *cut and flow*

INTRODUCTION

On reading Marilyn Chin's *Revenge of the Mooncake Vixen: A Manifesto in 41 Tales* (hereafter *Revenge*), we are dealt with the triple threat Moonie, Mei Ling, and Granny the Matriarch: Moonie with her a la Jackie Chan drunken monkey tai chi, Mei Ling with her vagina wearing the face of a roaring pink kitty cat, and Granny the Matriarch with her feather duster on one hand and cleaver on another. Dubbed as "lacking in effective irony or genuine, tone-saving humor" (Light, 2009: 51), the novel still works as a literary machine that, as Marilyn Chin herself expressed, works as "a coming-of-age immigrant tale" (Weisner, 2012: 217). The twins (Moonie and Mei Ling) and Granny take us

on glimpses of highly fragmented magic-realistic narratives on a journey of reaching their immigrant American dreams. The novel's fragmented narrative style displays events which are told in "fits and starts", combining and intertwining Chinese folktales, dream sequences, sexual encounters, and ghostly appearances in multiple point of views (Burkhardt, 2009: 54). The novel is also termed as "loosely knit series of short stories" and "[m]ultifaceted rather than linear, magical rather than literal" (Kirkus, 2009). One might relate this narrative style with the fact that Chin is known as a poet. *Revenge* is her first and only novel, and this explains the tendency of the narrative flow to be fragmented. In an interview with (Weisner, 2012a), Chin stated that one tale about Moon was previously published in an anthology, and other

characters started to build around Moon afterwards (Graham, 2014). Similar to the works of two other great names in Chinese American literature namely Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan, Chin's novel displays the trope of language innovation such as condensed poetic-like sentences in the story fragments, genre-blending (mix of fables, myths, and stories) and cross-cultural allusions to articulate sustained traumas as a residue of racism and forced assimilation on immigrant stories.

In dealing with negotiating Chinese American culture, this article aims to show the complexities of assimilating American dream with that of the immigrant. We argue that within the frame of tale of revenge, the process of reaching the twins characters' immigrant American dream—or the metaphorical Mooncake's "sweet, sweet hereafter"—undergoes a series of endless systematic procedures of *coup et flux* as proposed by Deleuze & Guattari. Its endlessness thus prompts an idea that the dream, the happiness, would never actually reach its definite ending point. It is merely a series of transits. Seen as such, the analysis thus covers the discussion on seeing the novel as textual desiring machine and focuses on the cuts and flows that bind each story fragment.

This article treats the series of events in the novel's plot as an assemblage of events. Deleuze & Guattari (1988) propose the idea that a book is an assemblage of lines and measurable speeds. By lines, they mean not only "lines of articulation or segmentarity, strata, and territories, but also lines of flight, movements of deterritorialization and destratification". Measurable speeds, on the other hand, refer to "[c]omparative rates of flow on these lines [which] produce phenomena of relative slowness and viscosity, or, on the contrary, of acceleration and rupture" (1988: 3-4).

Not very many researches have been conducted in discussing Chin's novel. A research by Slowik (2000) discusses Chin's poems along with poems written by two Japanese American poets and one Chinese American poet. Slowik highlights the fear and compulsion of looking back as the tendencies apparent in poems about Asian immigrants. There is always the need to look back to the immigrant's past, but there is also the need to leave it behind. This paradox, in Slowik's observation, prompts the complex use of imagery in the poems.

Another one by (Hsiao, 2012) dissects Chin's poem, "Broken Chord Sequence" from Chin's *Rhapsody in Plain Yellow*, focusing on the poem's aural, visual, and racial aspects. Quite in a similar tone to Slowik with regards to the poem's complexities in structure, Hsiao's observation shows that in enacting the condition of the immigrant, the lyric voice of the poem paradoxically divides the unity of the self and the other.

Different from Slowik and Hsiao, Rader (2022) observes Chin's one and only novel. And by using a more current view, Rader discusses the creative process of the novel analogically by using ecological terms. In Rader's argument, the garden, or in this case the novel, "transforms spaces as sites for growing" (2022: 245). On the whole, seeing the novel as a model for literature-as-garden, Rader theorizes the different ways the Americanization and racialization process is told in the story using cross-cultural allusions.

One research that is of relevance to this article is by Graham-Bertolini (2017), which focuses on the topic of racial shadow in Chin's novel. Graham-Bertolini sees that in *Revenge*, the trope of the Asian American racial shadow is thrown into disarray. Moreover, the narrative formula is challenging, featuring stops and breaks in the plot that not only break up the sequencing but also show how open-ended story fragments can encourage different pathways of alliance and connection for the characters themselves.

These previous studies indicate that structurally, the notable tendency in Chin's poetic work is its complexity of structure, which is prompted by the immigrant's complex background and their need to assimilate. In the novel, this manifests in the use of cross-cultural allusions, causing the stories to be fragmented (indicative by the seemingly independent short narratives in each story section) as the consequence of accommodating the rich allusions used. The stops and breaks in the plot as observed by Graham-Bertolini in a way foregrounds the analysis on Deleuze & Guattari's concept of cut and flow in this article. With this as a starting point, this article is therefore highly significant, as we ultimately offer a new insight into the discussion of the assimilation of American and the immigrant's dreams.

Ultimately, the main argument proposed in this article leads to a conclusion that the idea of assimilating American dream with the immigrant's is therefore problematic. The fact that the twins graduate from distinguished universities is just one part of that dream, leading to more complex circumstances. The novel's final part shows how the story reaches its closure and provides three different channels of endings, insinuating yet another three different transit points to continue its course.

METHOD

The analysis focuses on one literary device: plot. As an element building the plot, the narrative structure is viewed as machinic device displaying a series of inevitable cuts and flows (*coup et flux*), by adapting Deleuze & Guattari's (1988) concept of

the series of incidents in a specific way, since the way machines work is different because “the same material has different connections, different relations of movement and rest, [and it] enters different assemblages” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988: 256). Guattari, furthermore, points out that there is no individual desire, that the libido remains an indeterminate flux as long as it is not articulated trans-individually, even if, for him, this trans-individual dimension does not consist of a symbolic signifier, but arises from real relations of production that vary for each society (Sauvagnargues, 2011: 178).

The manoeuvres in the novel show that each narrative desire represented by the story fragments, each flow that brings the incident to its next point of departure (its cut), is always the result of how the characters react to what is presented in front of them. Guattari, in this context, underlines that [d]esire is not independent from a relation between hyletic fluxes and always social desiring machines, it is always relative to the social, and does not arise from a private, individual or personal dimension that one can refer back to the superstructure of mentalities and unconscious representations. If there is desire, it belongs to the regime of production, to the infrastructure, to the material plane of the effective relations of a social production (Sauvagnargues, 2011: 178).

This leaves us to understand the love-hate relationship between an individual and social coding. The concept can be taken further by looking at it through Saussurean analysis of the signifier and the signified. It works in a way that the meaning behind a concept or idea is a never-ending shapeless flow that becomes comprehensible only when a language symbol intersects with it and assigns its relationship with other symbols, resulting in a series of interconnected meanings (de Saussure, 1992). In this sense, the signified is the individual's reaction to its social coding, and the signifier is the social coding itself. We will have a look at how this mechanism of series of machinic flow of the signified and the signifier work in Chin's novel.

In *Revenge*, the twins are described to “represent both the sweet and sour of Chinese American life, honor bound to maintain their heritage, yet expected to obtain the American dream of professional and personal success” (Haggas, 2009: 34). In pointing out the significance of the twins' character, in an interview Chin commented that the twins represent the double consciousness, the yin and yang of the world (Meridians and Chin, 2002). This way, the twins will also “vivify the diverse landscape of twenty-first century America” (Weisner, 2012: 217). The metaphor applied to highlight diversity and multicultural quality of America is used to present the complex circumstantial experiences of Chinese

Americans whose tensions are determined by their Chinese tradition and American culture. Thus, the plot keeps taking the reader to view both ends of the spectrum; the presence of textual divine intervention in the narrative fragments (the Goddess of Mercy with pedometer in a modified Buddhist tale, to name one) on one end, and coming-of-age twin sisters who constantly challenge themselves to swing through their twisted Chinese American life on the other. By this, we mean that Moonie and Mei Ling, for example, try to defy their Chinese stereotype through revenge to those who see them differently, while reaching their immigrant American dream as academically high-achievers.

Insertion of Buddhist tales and fables in the story fragment that are intriguingly made relevant to the main characters' experience enables the characters to have superheroic quality. Moonie, for instance, is described as having a la Jackie Chan drunken monkey tai chi, whereas Mei Ling is described as a superhero with the shape of roaring pink kitty cat face on her vagina. Granny, on the other hand, is pictured as the Matriarch with her feather duster on one hand and cleaver on another. In the narrative structure, the tales and fables act as allusions to point out the narrator's view on the possible ways Granny and the twin could deal with their highly problematic situation being Chinese Americans. The superheroic quality of the characters brings us a similar experience as when watching Stephen Chow's *Kungfu Hustle*. We are presented with characters who are able to make maneuvers no normal beings are able to do; they are Godlike, superheroic, and it makes the novel magic-realistic.

Magic realism is commonly seen in novels dealing with individuals who are at the crossroad of traditional and contemporary worlds. In this context, Chin's debut novel is packed with issues of negotiating identity, particularly the twins'. For instance, Moonie and Mei Ling are sandwiched between their Granny's demands to behave as proper Chinese girls do and their obsession to be like the rest of Americans in reaching the immigrant American dream. The love-hate relationship between the twins and the over-protective grandmother thus can be seen as a metaphor for the complexities in dealing with twenty-first-century multicultural America. Since negotiation involves two parties, in the novel, the twins negotiate their Chinese American identity toward each other and their grandmother. This way, the narrative structure presents a dialogic exchange of narratives between Moonie and Mei Ling, and between the twins and Granny. Therefore, in the mapping of the plot, we can see the way the narrative structure works in presenting immigrants' dreams in fragmented sequences.

rhizomatic machine and assemblage. The rhizomatic machine, in Deleuze & Guattari's post-structuralist view, works through stems from which the nodes produce a new stem that potentially has another node that may produce another new stem and so forth. The growth is systemic, causing it to potentially affect the entire stem system. The cut and flow, in this case, are part of the growth process. This concept is applied to see the systemic movement (plot development) in the novel.

Aside from Deleuze & Guattari, other theoretical frameworks referred to in the discussion are those by de Saussure (1992) and Barthes & Duisit (1975). De Saussure's structuralism helps see the cuts and flows as a chain of significations, whereas Barthes & Duisit's post-structuralist view on narrative structure helps see narratives as random assemblages of events. In applying these concepts in the discussion, the following steps are taken: 1.) mapping out the cuts and flows in the 41 story fragments in 7 chapters, 2.) rationalizing the link between the fragments as a linear process, and 3.) formulating a critical view on the rationalization.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. The Mechanism of Cut and Flow in *Revenge*

According to Deleuze & Guattari, machines work in series of cuts and flow. The human body is, for instance, machinic. Here is an example of how human body works like machines: Empty stomach causes the body to have hunger sensation. Then there is desire to eat food, which is called appetite. Food is inserted through the mouth, swallowed, and it reaches the stomach. It then goes through digestion process involving the breakdown of food into smaller and smaller components, until they can be absorbed and assimilated into the body. The waste products of digestion are discharged from the anus. The series of cuts and flows of that example can be illustrated as follows:

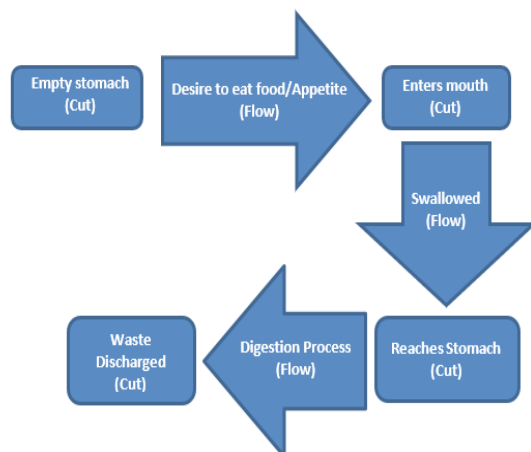


Figure 1. Series of Cuts and Flows in Eating Process

In the diagram, empty stomach is the point (node) of a static state that triggers appetite, which stems into the process of inserting the food into the mouth. The food entering the mouth is the next point (node) which stems into the process of swallowing the food, and so forth.

In response to this, series of incidents in fictional work, known as plot, work in the same mechanism. In the story, the cut is represented by the overall issue of one chapter, and the flow is represented by the story fragments that grow into the next chapter. Thus, in parallel, the cuts and flows in Chin's novel, thus, can be perceived as follows:

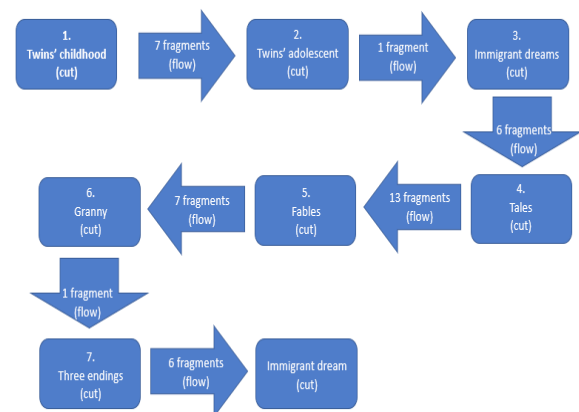


Figure 2. Series of Cuts and Flows in Chin's Novel

From the diagram we can see that the plot moves from the chapters of the twin's childhood (1), and moving to the twin's adolescent (2) that brings the story into three immigrant dreams (3), which then moves to the next two parts that present tales (4) and fables (5), and the story then moves to the story about Granny (6), and settles in the last part which presents three alternate endings (7).

The cut and flow mechanism in the diagram works this way: chapter 1 of the twins' childhood is an exposition that triggers the flow of 7 story fragments; chapter 2 on the twins' adolescence causes the flow of 1 story fragment; chapter 3 on immigrant dreams causes the flow of 6 story fragments; chapter 4 on the tales causes the flow of 13 story fragments; chapter 5 on the fables causes the flow of 7 story fragments; chapter 6 on granny causes the flow of 1 story fragment; chapter 7 on the tales causes the flow of 6 story fragments that end in its final cut, the immigrant dream. The final cut is where the *dénouement* is, despite the fact that it offers three different resolutions.

As "a valid podium for arguing important issues" (Weisner, 2012: 221), *Revenge*, like most Chinese immigrant fiction in America, is custom-made to voice out the concern over racial identity of the twenty-first-century third generation of Chinese Americans. Considering this, we need to perceive

2. *Revenge as Textual Systemic Desiring Machine*

The novel, in the context of systemic desiring machine, has to be treated like—in Chin's words—a “transformer puzzle”. It can be perceived as “an integral novel ... but if you want to take shards and pieces out to teach or to savor, that's great, too, because each piece is crafted to have its own mischief and integrity” (Weisner, 2012: 217). Its fragmented series of incidents work in a similar way as that in Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, but Chin's are denser and poem-like. Chin's novel is more like an experimentation of how far the effects can be when the characters are dealt with magic-realistic situations. In the words of Deleuze & Guattari, it is similar to putting our body's capability to the test:

[w]e know nothing about a body until we know what we can do, in other words, what its affects are, how they can or cannot enter into composition with other affects, with the affects of another body, either to destroy that body or to be destroyed by it, either to exchange actions and passions with it or to join with it in composing a more powerful body (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988: 257).

The character's maneuvers are therefore superheroic in this sense because, in the plot, they are challenged by magic-realism circumstances. The metaphors and images presented are “so terrifying that they make you laugh out of relief” (Weisner, 2012: 221). That, according to Chin, is how satire works its best.

Moonie who acts as the narrator of the first part of the novel, gives a strong start by saying:

it's a tale of revenge, obviously written from a Chinese American girl's perspective. My intentions are to veer you away from teasing and humiliating little chubby Chinese girls like myself. ... For although we are friendly neighbors, you don't really know me. You don't know the depth of my humiliation. And you don't know what I can do. You don't know what is beneath my doing (Chin, 2009: 16-17).

This expositional stage of the plot provides an indication of the level of seriousness of the predicaments faced by a Chinese American girl, and her tale helps the reader see that. The twins' predicament is not solely triggered by the social coding they receive outside their domestic domain, but also inside, from their own Granny, whom they call “the self-appointed keeper of our Chinese identity”. Generally, the relationship between the twins and their Granny can be illustrated as follows Figure 3.

Granny, who keeps the balance between the passive-aggressive twins, sees Chinese immigrants

as “sojourners, that sooner or later would improve [their] Cantonese and pack up [their] belongings, and that the Chinese from ten thousand diasporas would fly back to China like a pack of hoeward geese, back to the Middle Kingdom” (Chin: 23). The coming-of-age twins obviously think the opposite: “[e]ach step backward would mean regret “the vector goes in only one direction, the homing geese must find their new nest, the ten thousand diaspora would never coagulate” there was no way back to the Middle Kingdom” (Chin: 26). Moving forward means figuring out how they can survive in American soil. At the same time, the twins have to come to terms with the tension between the contemporary and traditional worlds.

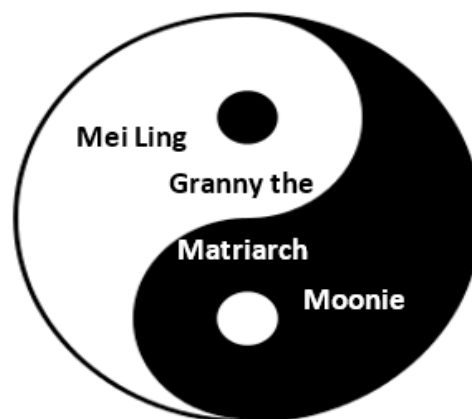


Figure 3. *The Trio in Yin and Yang Composition*

The twins face not only Granny, but each other, since “[i]n the small communist country of Wong [family], sisterhood exists only as a cheap surveillance system” (Chin: 86). They depend on each other, yet at the same time, they are against each other, which is what typically twins are. Moonie rises up and declares: “Call me Moonie Mooncake Vixen. I’ve come to seek revenge against the wrongs perpetuated against my peeps!” (Chin: 55), whereas Mei Ling manages to satisfy her “itch”, which is “unheard of in immigrant behavioral history” according to Moonie, because “[o]ne must not satisfy one’s itch. One must sit up straight, cross one’s legs, keep one’s focus on one’s homework and forge onward toward one’s future” (Chin: 87).

If we refer back to the diagram of the systematic desiring machine, we can see that the beginning provides stories of the twins' predicament in their childhood, and from that, we can see Moonie's motives for revenge. The way she is treated when she is little drives her to desire revenge:

We would grow up into beautiful, clear-skinned young women. We would become born-again Christians and get a complete makeover at the mall. We would work hard in our studies, become successful and drive little white mercedes. We would remember nothing, nada, nothing that our

grandmother taught us. We would learn nothing from our poverty, but to avoid poverty at all cost (Chin: 29).

In other words, the twins' desire is to pursue their American dream. Their immigrant dream, to be precise, their "sweet, sweet hereafter".

The second part of the novel shows the twins' life during their adolescent years. Here, Granny has her own portion of the narrative. She advises her granddaughters:

I say, go home and memorize "life, liberty, and hirsute happiness." Read *Moby Dick*. Someday, you open eyes. TRUTH not in books, stupid girl poop! ... I write names of all our grandbabies: ... I write on red paper, then burn them, make names—*poof*—all smoke. Girls, grandbabies, study hard, make happy life. No worry, demons can't kill you if they don't know your names! (Chin: 46-47)

which reflects her view on how she wants the twins to turn out, the Chinese way, emphasizing that it is of no use for Chinese girls to be knowledgeable. From the quote, we see that memorizing what is stated in the Declaration of Independence and reading *Moby Dick* are indications of being knowledgeable, which basically means that the twins have to study hard.

In her brilliant soliloquy, Moonie attests Granny by pointing out: "Why am I my sister's keeper? I'm only twelve seconds older. But I am as clean as the white line on the highway: I'm attending Stanford and Mei Ling's at Harvard, both of us on pre-med scholarship and on our ways to becoming important doctors" (Chin: 60). Here, we can see tensions between two contradictory ideologies. The signifier triggers yet another signifier, that is, the third part of the novel, which brings up three immigrant dreams. As chance has it, at this point, Mei Ling is just in time to realize that "[her] immigrant dream has turned into a suburban nightmare" (Chin: 69), which she describes as marrying a white man and have two children, a dog and some birds, that causes her to postpone graduate school and teach high school instead until her children grow up. The contrast between the immigrant dream and the suburban nightmare brings us to understand that it seems like what the twins do in pursuing their dreams is not a guarantee that the dreams could be reached. It instead takes a different turn.

The fourth and fifth parts of the novel, where we are presented with Buddhist tales and fables, underline the balancing act of how the two confronting elements (the contemporary and traditional worlds) are negotiated. Like common tales and fables, these two parts also provide moral lessons at the end of

each tale. We can see a pattern in almost every last paragraph of each tale in which the narrative brings the divine stories back to earth by juxtaposing the stories with the twins' and Granny's experiences. This part is an example of what Chin means when she says that "[t]he beauty of the last couplet of a sonnet is that one could make transformational magic in the last breath (whether poised for reversal or enlightenment)" (Weisner, 2012: 225). The last paragraph of each tale and fable is there to show the transformation. In other words, the tales and fables are provided as analogies.

The plot then moves on to the sixth part, where everything about Granny is told by everyone who knows her. Here, we are presented with the other side of the story, aside from that of the twins'. Again, this is present to balance out the story, the mediator of the yin and yang. What Granny teaches to the twins in fact brings up harmony, as can be seen from the following:

I continue with two sets of drunken monkey tai chi a la Jackie Chan, combining northern tai chi with Granny's own machinations. ... My body and soul yearn for this discipline three days a week. It's in blood and muscle memory now. I close my eyes and I assume the form. It's as natural to me as breathing.

First Mei Ling and I do the routine in unison, perfect harmony. She's on the left and I'm on the right. We continue with some gentle sticky-hands sparring.

...

I continue with a tiger-crane routine that Granny taught me when I was eight (Chin, 2009: 71). When the plot reaches its final part, three alternate endings are presented. This manifesto opens with an epigraph from Johnny Depp: "I'm not sure I'm adult yet" (Chin: 173), which means that even as the story reaches its finish line, there is no knowing whether the twins have actually reached adulthood. They may have reached their goals; Mei Ling pursues her Ph.D. in literature in Boston, Moonie works in a prestigious biotech lab in California, but the struggle remains. The struggle, the signifier, is another starting point, another cut, to the signifier, the flow that comes after it, stemming into three branches of endings.

CONCLUSION

In negotiating form and content, Chin considers this novel "a sampling of ideas and methods" (Weisner, 2012: 222), where its symmetrical or asymmetrical balance is calibrated. We can see from the narrative structure that the cuts and flows throughout the seven

parts are a process of “morphing, reappearing, and re-appropriating” (Weisner: 222). Sharing a similar tone with Ellmann (2010), we come to the conclusion that the fragmentation pictures the complexities that have to be faced by someone who attempts to connect with two opposing cultures (China and America). The maneuvers thus should be perceived as such. Divine intervention such as the appearance of the Goddess of mercy who saves a man by replacing his heart with his dog’s so that he can stay alive is a comic sketch that works as a reminder that solving a problem does not mean it stops there. It just gives way to another set of problems, which is in general one of the main ideas proposed in this novel.

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