

Lily Wong, *Transpacific Attachments: Sex Work, Media Networks, and Affective Histories of Chineseness*

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In this book, Lily Wong reconfigures the meaning of Chineseness through a close scrutiny of the portrayal of the figure of the sex worker in popular media. From literature to film to new media, Wong analyzes the representations of the sex worker in the US, China, and Sinophone communities from the early twentieth century to the present. Due to the significant impact that the figure of the sex worker has on the construction of culture and community, Wong investigates the ways in which a transpacific analysis of media depictions of the sex worker refute the diaspora-based paradigm of Chineseness as a timeless and homogenous ethnic or cultural signifier. Rather, as Wong argues, a transpacific analysis demonstrates Chineseness as an “affective product” that is deterritorialized, historically situated, shifting, and malleable. This transpacific perspective, as Wong ascertains, underscores not only the significant, underexplored role the Asian Pacific has played in shaping the “global,” but also the vital part erotic and gendered representations and sex work play in imagining a global community.

In the book, through examining the sex worker as an “affective laborer,” Wong proposes a study of affect that “examines the ways kinships adhere to objects of affection, surface at historical junctures, and reorient configurations of identity” (7). In so doing, Wong intends to employ a “transpacifically networked history of shifting affective structures,” rather than a national, ethnic, and linguistic approach, to examine identity (7). Wong builds on previous researchers and argues that affect, as “a politics of emotional mobilization,” displays “the workings of social meanings” and exhibits the ways “conceptions operate within identifiable social structures” and “move across, push against, and even, at moments, exceed them” (8).

Wong defines Chineseness as an “affective product” created by the intersecting imaginations of Chinese character within transpacific ideological networks. Wong argues that the Chinese sex worker has provided a site on which discourses and representations of the figure construct and reconfigure the meaning of Chineseness. As she ascertains, the figure of the sex worker is malleable and liminal, producing a proliferation of discourse that destabilizes the “discursive borders between bodies and the various collectivities they compose” (16). As such, Wong maintains that the material labor of

the sex worker, as a production of affect, precipitates “imaginaries of shared identities” (16) and reshapes the meaning of Chineseness.

The book consists of three parts. The first part discusses the construction of Chineseness as a sign of backwardness by the Chinese reformers and the portrayal of Chinese women as sex workers in the US legal frame in the early twentieth century. The depiction of Chinese moral degeneracy and biological hazards legitimized the US civilizing expansion abroad and the persecution of Chinese immigrants in the US. Through a scrutiny of the representations of the Chinese sex worker figure, Wong argues that “Pacific Crossing” is an affective structure that appropriates and challenges the US and Chinese nationalistic sentiments.

Chapter 1 examines the portrayal of the Chinese sex work figure in two texts, respectively written by a Chinese American and US Chinatown poets. Wong argues that the representations of the figure call into question the dichotomy between national and bio-ethnic kinship concepts, advancing a “Pacific Crossing” that transcends the polarized US and Chinese nationalistic ideologies. Chapter 2 examines the ways in which the sex worker figure is performed by Anna May Wong in the US Hollywood and Ruan Lingyu in Shanghai. Through a careful scrutiny of these two performers’ performances, Wong argues that the emotional responses generated by the performances transcended national boundaries and crossed the Pacific Ocean, thereby challenging the sanctity of the “nation” as the mere site for collective belonging.

The second part discusses the ways in which the sex worker figure, during the Cold War, is transformed into a transnational expression that rejects the nation-state as a dominant identity signifier. Chapter 3 examines how the sex worker figure is constructed in the Hong Kong and Singapore film Studio, Shaw Brothers. Through investigating the same-sex desires performed by courtesans, Wong argues that the figure is turned into a defiant icon that debunks the Chinese nationalist and ethnic binds and advances a Sinophonic “affective structure” that rejects both the heteronormative home, family, and nation and the ideal of cultural and nation-state loyalty. Chapter 4 explores the ways in which the sex worker figure is portrayed by a Taiwan novelist. The sex worker figure is rebellious in employing curse words and unofficial dialects to retort at the authorities, manifesting a transpacific, translingual, and transnational Sinophonic “affective structure” that rejects Chinese orthodoxy at the end of the Cold War.

The third part introduces the paradigm of “dwelling” to capture both the “affect” of emotional attachments to memories and the structure of home, house, and residence. Wong argues that “dwelling” pinpoints the relationship between place and identity that is in constant flux, challenging neoliberal logics of progress that depicts China as a “rising global power.” Chapter 5 investigates the ways in which a Taiwanese film and an Asian American documentary portray mainland Chinese immigrant brides who are trafficked out of China. Wong focuses on the labor of the heroines in exchanging their bodies for state-sanctioned family institutions in Taiwan and the US. In so doing, the heroines appropriate Chineseness on their bodies against the “flows of transnational capital” to redirect the flow of neoliberal capital (157). Wong argues that dwelling, as a volatile “affective structure,” provides space for individual agency (157).

Wong applies the methodology of literary analysis to representations of the sex worker figure in popular literature and films. The literary works Wong chooses to deconstruct in the book were either written by Chinese immigrants as precursors of Asian American literature or performed in movies in the US, Taiwan, and mainland

China. She focuses on these literary texts and performances because they have been popular in the US, China, and Sinophone communities from the early twentieth century until the present.

This book reconfigures the definition of Chineseness as a historically situated and shifting concept, through a diachronic, literary analysis of depictions of the sex worker figure in transnational literature. In so doing, this book contributes to transpacific studies, Asian American studies, media studies, and Chinese studies, and can be found interesting to scholars in Sinophone studies, Chinese studies, queer studies, and Asian American studies. The volume of jargon in the book can be prohibitive to readers from fields other than literature. Though the title and theme of the book seem to be about the sex worker, the sex worker turns out to be only a vehicle to the real theme of redefining Chineseness. As a result, the voice of the sex worker is silenced. The agency of the sex workers is muted. The gap between the representations and lived realities of the sex worker is never filled.

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