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Diaspora, Transnational Heritage, and Poetic Interorality: Negotiating Chinese Caribbean Identity in *Song of the Boatwoman* and *The Godmother and Other Stories**

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Summary. This paper examines Chinese oral heritage and its contribution to Caribbean interorality in a diasporic context through a focus on individual lives in Meiling Jin's *Song of the Boatwoman* and Jan Lowe Shinebourne's *The Godmother and Other Stories*. Both Jin and Shinebourne illustrate that Chinese oral heritage, which is not fixed but subject to constant change, can be used in a transformative way to facilitate integration and create a sense of belonging for those participating in the Chinese diaspora in the Caribbean, which provides a new way to understand Chinese Caribbean identity. The linguistic, structural and thematic uses of Chinese oral storytelling and folk customs not only revise colonial history by retrieving the silenced stories of Chinese Caribbean people, but also integrate the Chinese as valid members of the Caribbean community by stressing their shared grounding in the plantation experience and post-independence struggles.

Zusammenfassung. Der Artikel behandelt die orale Tradition der chinesischen Diaspora und ihren Beitrag zur karibischen Interoralität, indem er individuelle Lebensgeschichten in Meiling Jins *Song of the Boatwoman* und Jan Lowe Shinebournes *The Godmother and Other Stories* in den Blick nimmt. Beide Romane veranschaulichen, dass die permanent im Wandel befindliche chinesische mündliche Überlieferung transformierend die Integration und das Zugehörigkeitsgefühl der chinesischen Diaspora in der Karibik unterstützt und so auch einen neuen Zugang zum Verständnis der chinesisch-karibischen Identität ermöglicht. Die sprachlichen, strukturellen und thematischen Verwendungsweisen der chinesischen oralen Erzählungen und Folklore ermöglichen nicht nur eine Revision der Kolonialgeschichte durch die Aufdeckung zuvor unterdrückter Geschichten der Chinesen in der Karibik, sondern sie integrieren darüber hinaus diese Chinesen und machen sie als vollwertige Mitglieder der karibischen Gemeinschaft sichtbar, indem sie als Gemeinsamkeiten die Plantagen-Erfahrung und die Mühen und Kämpfe nach Erreichen der Unabhängigkeit betonen.

1. Introduction

Oral heritage refers to the components of a culture that are transferred orally from one generation to another, such as legends, myths, folktales, historic accounts, poems, proverbs, riddles, songs, speeches, certain types of music, customs, ritual formulas, and dramatic performances. As an integral part of intangible cultural heritage, it is "constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity" (UNESCO 2003: 11). For diasporic groups, oral forms of heritage play a paradoxical role in their identity construction. On the one hand, oral heritage could be brought with diasporic groups and reshaped to preserve their ethnic identity, but on the other hand, it may cause problems for them because it could hinder their integration. Driven by the need for cultural and affective sustenance as they establish new lives in a foreign land, diasporic groups evince a tendency to retain cultural ties and practices as a way of maintaining their own heritage, which is often interpreted by the host society as a sign of arrogance and a rejection of integration, leading to misperceptions or even resentment among the mainstream population (Hoffman et al. 2014: 138). An editorial entitled "Occidental Chinese Wall", for example, appeared in a Jamaican newspaper in 1952 to accuse the Chinese in Jamaica of living in isolated and self-contained communities that existed in a parasitical relationship with other Jamaicans (cf. Lind 1958: 162–163).

However, the Chinese Caribbean experience explored in Meiling Jin's *Song of the Boatwoman* (1996) and Jan Lowe Shinebourne's *The Godmother and Other Stories* (2004) demonstrates that ethnic identity and integration within the host community are not necessarily mutually exclusive concepts. In these two collections of short stories, varied forms of Chinese oral tradition are reimagined and recreated not only to preserve the ethnic identity of Chinese Caribbean people but more importantly to facilitate their incorporation into the Caribbean community. Their presence illustrates that Chinese oral heritage has been transmitted and has become part of the creolised process of interoral communication in Caribbean culture, and it is possible for Chinese Caribbean people to maintain their ethnic identity and cultural heritage while still integrating into the host society and claiming their Caribbean identity. In other words, the hybrid identity of Chinese Caribbean people is constructed by maintaining the Chinese heritage and adapting it to make sense of life in the Caribbean to promote at least partial integration. Chinese people did not arrive in the Caribbean empty-handed. They brought with them traditions, experiences and various types of knowledge, which formed the core of their intangible heritage. The second and later generations inherited this ethnic cultural heritage but transformed these immaterial manifestations of culture in accordance with their environment, giving them new contexts and meanings to cement their stay in the Caribbean so that they could grow their local roots while preserving a distinct

identity. This paper, reading the stories in the above two books as examples of poetic interorality, that is of a writerly procedure to generate an interorality based literary text, maps the presence of Chinese diaspora orality in the Caribbean and its contribution to Caribbean interorality. Focusing specifically on two major types of oral heritage: oral storytelling and customs, the analysis shows how literature can function as an integral part of diaspora culture and how Chinese oral heritage can be used in a transformative way to facilitate integration and create a sense of belonging for those participating in the Chinese diaspora in the Caribbean. My main argument is that the two books whose signifying dynamics are informed by interorality offer a novel vision of the relationship between oral heritage and diasporic identity that can be brought to bear on the construction of both transnational heritage and identity as simultaneously deterritorialized and reterritorialized, thus leading to a revised conception of heritage in the diasporic context as hybrid, fluid and dynamic.

2. Interorality and poetic interorality

"Interorality" is a term coined by Hanétha Vété-Congolo in her discussion of Caribbean orality and its epistemological contribution to the formation of a Caribbean philosophy that concerns itself with humankind. According to Vété-Congolo (2016: 1), interorality, an inherent feature of the Caribbean speech and culture, "translates the complex phenomenological and epistemological process by which pre-existing oral texts are transmuted into new ones whose symbolic meaning and significance are intrinsically independent". The Caribbean is distinguished by the presence of a strong and vibrant oral tradition which has helped to forge a shared sense of "Caribbeanness" among its people. The Caribbean oral tradition, being complex and hybrid, incorporates diverse elements from other folklore traditions (African, Indian, Chinese, European, Amerindian, etc.), a process of hybridization and creolisation that Vété-Congolo calls interorality, and transposition is "the foremost means of interoral text production" in the Caribbean (Vété-Congolo 2016: 4). To put it differently, interorality is the systematic transposition of oral texts composed in specific cultural and geographic zones into new and distinct ones. Caribbean interorality, having multiple sources at its root, is a reinvention of new codes, diction, expressions, and tales, and the interoral texts produced by borrowing from those sources, despite sharing some of their features, generate distinctive new meanings.

Apart from being a literary process whose mode is transposition, interorality is "a philosophical approach to meaning, aesthetic, ethics and speech production in the Caribbean" and "a revealing indicator of Caribbean axiology and ontology" (Vété-Congolo 2016: 1). Being essentially dialogical and dialectical, it expands the notion of philosophy by "embracing orality as a credible and pertinent tool for considering philosophical activities" (Vété-Congolo 2016: 12). Through interorality, the Caribbean experience and con-

sciousness are inscribed in a pattern that proposes borrowing, reduplication, and combination as modes for producing meaning and addressing issues of existence. Caribbean interorality presents a metaphysical polylogism, a different system of values and speech, and a new ethics and aesthetics that promote diversity and humanity. It is also "one of the starting points of the continuum of resistance to the politics of division and nothingness" (Vété-Congolo 2016: 37). Formed in a historical context of plantation racism and colonialism, Caribbean interorality subverts established orders and norms, challenges the regime of domination, and empowers the downtrodden party.

Based on Vété-Congolo's interorality, I create the term "poetic interorality" to refer to a rich tradition in Caribbean literature that has imaginatively transcribed oral traditions of various origins into written form. A literary text is a semiotic system in which a wide range of interactions occur both within and between different systems of signification. One such system, the oral, plays a particularly significant part in the creation of meaning in Caribbean literature. The writers in the Caribbean have generally resorted to orality to produce written texts and woven diverse oral sources into their works, thus establishing interfacial-intertextual-interoral relationships between the spoken and the written word. The system of speech embodied in literary works in the Caribbean articulates a resistance to the European-imposed separation between orality and literacy, folklore and literature. As a rule, poetic interorality makes Caribbean literature which is based on speech and oral tradition a cultural space of interactions between different oral heritages, a location to challenge Eurocentrism and white supremacy, and a place to produce and participate in history.

The Chinese contribution to the Caribbean oral tradition, though rarely recognized in the academic field, is easy to identify, especially in music. In Cuba, the Chinese cornet (*suona* in Chinese), a traditional instrument used in Cantonese opera, was incorporated into conga music and assumed "the role of soloist improvising on fragments from popular melodies in the call-and-response structure of the singing" (Linares 2007: 114), making it a centrepiece of Cuban music today. Chinese musical forms such as lion dance songs and Cantonese opera have reached large audiences in Cuba. In Trinidad and Tobago, Chinese calypsonians including Chang Kai Chek, Patrick Jones, Edwin Ayoung, Anthony Chow Lin On, and Richard Chen blended Chinese folk songs into calypso music. In Jamaica, the Chinese community has been actively involved in music and theatre: Thomas Wong developed the first real dancehall sound system in the early 1950s; Byron Lee, the bandleader of the Dragonnaires, played a key role in making reggae music Jamaica's national sound; Leslie Kong, an influential reggae producer, released Bob Marley's first two recorded songs and kept recording many leading Jamaican artists including Jimmy Cliff, Desmond Dekker, and Stranger Cole throughout the 1960s; Karl Young founded Jamaica's first all-reggae radio station, IRIE FM; Easton Lee, a well-known playwright and poet who integrated Chinese oral storytelling into Jamaican folklore, pro-

duced the radio programme *Children of the Dragon* on Chinese culture (16 years running) and played a leading role in Jamaican theatre as director of the Jamaican Folk Singers and manager of the National Chorale.

The effusion of Chinese oral heritage in Caribbean culture and life has not only facilitated the acceptance of the Chinese within local communities, but also added a significant dimension to the development of Caribbean interorality. However, critics, for a very long time, have neglected the influence of the Chinese in shaping some of the distinctive traits of Caribbean interorality, especially as represented in literature. This paper is concerned with the field of poetic interorality – how meaning is created in the short stories of Jin and Shinebourne through allusions and quotations to as well as borrowing and transposition of various forms of Chinese oral tradition. With an eye to the aspects originated from Chinese oral heritage, we could construct in these short stories an interoral text which runs within them, visible at certain symptomatic points that are highly flexible and fluid in voice. The most effective reading of the interoral text is the reading that hears it. As the textual other runs parallel to the written text of a work, the interoral text needs to be written by both the author and the reader, inviting the reader to decode its meaning by hearing it and exploring its interoral semiotic potential. The interweaving of Chinese orality in a framework of Caribbean interorality, as presented in these short stories, enables the narratives to appeal to a broad audience without diminishing the integrity and uniqueness of the life experience of the Chinese Caribbean characters.

3. Oral storytelling and memory

The Chinese tradition of oral storytelling, or what Maxine Hong Kingston prefers to call “talk-story”, has been practiced and developed in China for more than 5000 years, and it remains a popular form of entertainment for Chinese people today. As a major domain of oral heritage that can be further divided into categories such as myth, family story, folktale, and legend, oral storytelling is a special and effective medium for preserving both individual and collective memory and provides a distinct and specific reality that plays an essential role in defining the identity of social groups. It is especially important in the context of the Chinese diaspora in the Caribbean, as the limited literacy of early generations of Chinese Caribbean people made oral forms the primary vehicles of communication, enculturation and societal recognition. Both Jin and Shinebourne are third-generation Chinese immigrants who were born in Guyana in a turbulent period of political instability before the country’s independence. Their works revolve around similar themes of migration, belonging, history, heritage, self-discovery and especially Chinese Caribbean identity. In *Song of the Boatwoman* and *The Godmother and Other Stories*, both authors draw upon their Chinese oral heritage for the power and diversity of its narrative forms and storytelling techniques to explore the diasporic experience of Chinese Caribbean peo-

ple, which can be discussed from linguistic, structural and thematic perspectives.

In the short stories in both books, dialogue is often written in Guyanese dialect to achieve an authentic representation of the speech of the characters: "Vic, you see my ole shurt? Is whey me ole shurt stay? All I can fine is dis one" (Jin 1996: 12); "Nothing 'bout Alexander. Say to come he' three week time, she an' daughte'. Say it nice, write nice letter" (Shinebourne 2004: 103). The dialect is transcribed with orthographic changes in the dialogue to render a pure, authentic and unmediated Caribbeanness. In addition to the use of dialect in rendering dialogue, the authors also integrate folk expressions into the narrative. In Jin's "Victoria", the story is narrated in modified dialect in the Chinese tradition of family stories, a tradition that can be traced back to the Yellow Emperor (2711–2598 BCE):

> This story begin in Rose Hall, Berbice. A scream broke the night – cut it in two and wake up the neighbours to the fact that Victoria was in the world. What was a nice Chiney girl doing with a name like Victoria? It was still the days of the Empire, that is why. They call she Victoria, in honour of that fat English Queen that once ruled the waves. Victoria Wong-a-tim, born 1909.
> […]
> When Victoria was 16, Alice got married to a Mister Chin. They moved away to Georgetown and opened a grocer shop, calling it Cho Chin. They took Victoria with them, putting her to work at the counter because she could handle people good good (Jin 1996: 7).

Here, grammatical mistakes are maintained deliberately to make the written language read/sound like a direct transcription of an oral telling of family stories. Although the dialect in the narration is modified to be closer to Standard English to make it accessible to people outside the Caribbean, the author has broadened the range of dialect in literature by incorporating the syntax, lexicon, and expressive techniques of oral storytelling into her narrative. In doing so, she not only conveys the oral and aural quality of Guyanese English speech but also maximizes the flexibility of folk creation and the potential of dialect for literary uses. The dialect narrative, imparting a sense of Caribbean authenticity, is combined with the Chinese oral tradition of family stories to create a Caribbean consciousness and to give a faithful representation of Chinese Caribbean life in literature.

Although not all the stories in the two books are written in dialect or folk speech, they are all affected by oral tradition and have a connection with voice. The words in them live beyond the page, full of rhythm, intonation, sound, image, metaphor, and lyrical drama, giving the narratives a dynamic and elastic quality of speech and music. One not only reads the works, but hears them. This orality of narrative voice is obvious in the opening scene of Shinebourne's "Hopscotch":

> Each morning a bottle of milk appears at the front door, like a gift. The milkman comes and goes without a word, as silent as the draught pouring through the sliver of a gap under the front door. Milk and draught concentrate into one idea: hot sun, melting ice cream, Carmen, Dell, and everyone like bees swarming round the ice cream churn.
>
> "My turn! My turn!"
>
> "Salt the ice! Turn the churn!"
>
> The ice is grating and breaking and crushing between the wooden tub and metal urn.
>
> "Keep it freezing!"
>
> Turning, taking turns, racing to be first to eat the cold ice cream with the fresh nutmeg and vanilla.
>
> "Who turn the most?"
>
> "Me, me, I turn the most!"
>
> Cold was the luxury. Solid ice cream chewed and swallowed like food, drinks filled to the rim, ice-cold glasses to cool hot hands, ice chewed to chill and numb your teeth and tongue, to cool the sun (Shinebourne 2004: 53).

This excerpt has the resonance of oral tradition. It is filled with various types of rhyme, which might be influenced by Chinese *quyi* (story-telling/singing) and *xiqu* (traditional opera), two narrative genres containing large portions of rhymed verse developed from poetry into performance text. Rhymed verses are conspicuous in Chinese oral tradition because rhyming is made easy by the fact that the Chinese language has a huge number of syllables, each of which can be expressed by many written characters with different meanings, with still more characters sharing the same rhymes. Rhyming story-telling/singing long played a crucial role in Chinese popular culture, and the practice is still vibrant in many places in China today. As important forms of cultural heritage, *quyi* and *xiqu* are often enthusiastically maintained and promoted by overseas Chinese communities. Both Jin and Shinebourne use rhyming lines throughout their works, demonstrating the influence of these two Chinese oral storytelling genres. Another prominent feature of *quyi* and *xiqu* is the use of both the immediate repetition and intermittent repetition of words, phrases and sentences, which contributes to the oral quality of the above excerpt. For example, "churn", "turn", "ice", "cool", "ice cream", "turn the most", and "My turn!" are repeated many times. The rhymed and rhythmic language evokes the memory of a happy and carefree childhood in Guyana, revealing the narrator Sylvia's longing for her Caribbean home despite her more than ten-year exile in England. Shinebourne uses rhyme and repetition to weave the sentences, which amplifies the texture of the story.

Chinese *xiqu* also influences the verbal architecture of "Hopscotch", whose narrative is structured in dramatic form. The story, written mostly in dialogue, contains three acts arranged in a chronological order. Even the correspondence between Sylvia and her childhood friends is arranged like dialogue:

Dear Sylvia,
That is cultural imperialism….

Dear Dell,
No, it is failure to appreciate the difference…

Dear Sylvia,
How can you say that. These people are publishers…

Dear Dell,
You exaggerate their importance… (Shinebourne 2004: 55; italics in the original).

The dramatic structure, strengthening the voices of the characters, increases the conflicts and tensions between Sylvia and her friends Carmen and Dell as they grow apart because of their different political stances after Guyana obtained its independence.

Family stories, being significant part of the cultural heritage of Chinese diasporic groups, recount the historical events experienced by these people from a subjective and personal viewpoint. As the oral testimonies of history, family stories could be viewed as examples of "the genre of the subaltern giving witness to oppression, to a less oppressed other" (Spivak 1998: 7). "Victoria", told in this storytelling tradition, offers an oral history of Chinese people's migration, settlement and survival in colonial Caribbean landscapes:

> Victoria grandfather, Ho A-yin, come over from China to work for Lainsi up at Kamuni creek. Lainsi pay the passage from China and, in return, they work for him in the charcoal pit. If any of the boys wanted to leave, Lainsi would kill them and throw them in the pit. All except Ho. He escape. He walk through the bush day and night, day and night, until he come to the Demerara. Then he tie a goobi round he head and jump in. Lot of Chiney men die like this trying to escape. Police used to see them and shoot. That is why you get the saying, a Chinee is a Chinee, just shoot any damn goobi. But not Ho. He defy Lainsi and the police, the bush and the Demerara. He arrive in Georgetown wet like a rat and with a hole in he behind from the gun shot. He went to work for Lee in the grocery shop and then moved down to New Amsterdam (Jin 1996: 7).

Victoria's grandfather arrived in the Caribbean with the first wave of immigration from China. The earliest recorded attempt at introducing Chinese immigrants into the Caribbean region was in 1806, when 200 Chinese labourers were shipped to Trinidad (Look Lai 1998: 22). Between the 1840s and 1880s, close to 125,000 Chinese labourers were landed in Cuba, about 15,000 in British Guiana, and just under 3,000 in Trinidad and Jamaica (Hu-Dehart 2005: 82; Look Lai 2005: 54). These early Chinese immigrants, mainly from China's southeastern Guangdong Province, were indentured labourers brought in to replace black slaves after the abolition of slavery. In addi-

tion to the economic reasons for their recruitment, Chinese labourers were introduced to serve "as a potential buffer class between the whites and the blacks" due to the fear created by the Haitian revolution (Look Lai 2005: 56). In the last twenty years of the nineteenth century, the Chinese in the region gradually evolved from agricultural labourers to small- and large-scale traders. With the arrival of the second wave of Chinese immigrants – primarily free, voluntary small traders or merchants – between the late nineteenth century and the 1940s, the retail trade in the Caribbean became largely monopolized by the Chinese. The second wave brought about 7,000 Chinese to Jamaica and Trinidad (Look Lai 2005: 54) and spread Chinese immigrants throughout the Caribbean (Hu-DeHart and López 2008: 15). The socioeconomic position of the Chinese was viewed by the black and Indian majorities as distanced from the common interests or experiences of other Caribbean people, making the Chinese victims of "frequent displays of racial resentment and ethnic stereotyping" (Shaw 1985: 77). However, the Chinese diasporic experience has never been given any place in official histories, and in Afro- and Indo-Caribbean literature, such as in the works of Alfred Mendes, Samuel Selvon, Sylvia Wynter, V. S. Naipaul, and Elizabeth Nunez, the Chinese are generally represented as outsiders in the stereotypical role of a linguistically deficient shopkeeper who seeks nothing but profits, exploits other Caribbean people and often bears the nickname "Mr Chin".

As Lee-Loy (2010: 70) tells us, Caribbean nationalism and national identity have been grounded in a narrative of anticolonial oppression that has emerged from the history of slavery, which thus links Caribbean identity to a struggle against exploitation that began on the plantation, and the erasure of Chinese Caribbean people's grounding in the plantation experience has played a critical role in presenting Chineseness as other to Caribbeanness in Caribbean literary works. Therefore, the family story in "Victoria" not only serves as a counter-narrative to resist historical amnesia and literary distortion but also functions as a strategy to authenticate the Caribbean aspect of Chinese diasporic people's hybrid identity. Diasporic subjects, according to Ang (2011: 86), "are uprooted but cannot remain completely rootless" and "displaced but always face the task of replacing themselves". Jin's depiction of the brutality, oppression and extreme hardship suffered by early Chinese immigrants in indentureship reveals that Chinese Caribbean people do in fact have shared roots in the plantation experience and a shared colonial history with blacks and Indians, giving the Chinese a legitimate claim to Caribbeanness, especially during the period of heightened nationalist politics that both authors experienced in their youth as the region moved towards independence. This common colonial experience is also reflected in the name of the female protagonist, Victoria, which was given to the Chinese girl "in honour of that fat English Queen" (Jin 1996: 7). By restoring the Chinese to Caribbean colonial history and revising the distorted literary representation of them, Jin justifies the integral place of the Chinese in the Caribbean community.

The family story continues in another short story by Jin, "Short Fuse", which could be read as a sequel to "Victoria". The story focuses on Chinese diasporic people's shared experience in the Caribbean's post-independence life and participation in the large-scale post-World War II migration by telling the life story of Gladys, "a middle-aged Chinese woman" who migrated to England to escape the political turbulence and violence of Guyana in the 1960s: "Black against East Indian and we Chiney in between. Gawd. Things proper bad" (Jin 1996: 78, 84). The greater Chinese Caribbean community, in addition to incorporating class, regional and generational differences extending back to the nineteenth century, includes those who embarked on secondary migrations to other countries in the second half of the twentieth century. Although Caribbean migration and immigration to the "Mother Country" have been frequently represented in writings by authors such as Samuel Selvon, V. S. Naipaul, Caryl Phillips, and Andrea Levy, the stories of the large group of Chinese Caribbean immigrants to Britain remained virtually unknown until the 1980s, when Chinese Caribbean diasporic writers started to publish literary works revealing their experiences. In addition to Jin and Shinebourne, these writers include Willi Chen, Kerry Young, and Hannah Lowe, but their voices are still largely neglected by literary critics.

Gladys, in "Short Fuse", has moved to England with her two sons; her husband Sidney has stayed in Guyana. Her five-year stay there is degrading and painful: she finds only low-paying jobs, works day and night without a weekend, moves frequently due to housing discrimination, and feels that "[i]n this country, even the dog more important than we" (Jin 1996: 84). Like black and Indian Caribbean immigrants, Chinese Caribbean people face racism, prejudice, and hostility in Britain: "She knew the look that said: no coloureds, no children, no animals, and bore each insult, each act of hostility, as a mark of her exile" (Jin 1996: 79). The space designated for all Caribbean people in Britain, whether black, Indian, or Chinese, is a coloured one or, more specifically, a black one. Chinese Caribbean people, treated as the black other, suffer similar social exclusion and inequality. Gladys feels a profound sense of fear and insecurity, which is embodied by her neighbour's dog. A constant threat to her life, the dog "would growl or bark" at the sight of her and attacks her whenever the gate is open, representing the hostilities she endures from white English people: "She and the dog were enemies. It is possible that her neighbour, Mr. Phillips, was the real enemy" (Jin 1996: 77).

The secondary migration of Chinese from one diasporic location to another raises new questions about their identity. Its patterns inform choices concerning food, home and culture. The food Gladys desires is food associated with Guyana, such as mango and black pudding. Her Guyanese cuisine is infused with Chinese accents, which makes the landlady declare angrily that she "must stop cooking this sort of food or leave" (Jin 1996: 80). Thus, she waits until lunch time to make black pudding out of "the mixture of rice, blood and herbs" so that "the smell of garlic, blood and herbs will mingle with the smell of the other residents' cooking" (Jin 1996: 82). Her

desire for mango and Guyanese black pudding indicates her intense urge to return home. Despite the bloodbath and violence described in her husband's letter, she still decides to "get herself and her sons home within the year, whatever the government, or the situation back there" (Jin 1996: 81). The home she dreams of returning to is Guyana rather than China. Gladys embodies the complex, multifaceted identities of Chinese Caribbean people in the British nation. Being simultaneously a Guyanese exile living in London and a participant in the Chinese diaspora, she has a blended cultural heritage and ambivalent identifications with many places around the world. The experience of remigration strengthens her fragmented and hybrid consciousness while increasing her feeling of Caribbeanness and sense of belonging to the Caribbean community.

Another form of Chinese oral storytelling used by the two authors is legends about encounters with ghosts, demons, animal spirits or supernatural beings, both good and evil, of which China has a long history. Based on this type of oral storytelling, a Chinese literary genre called strange tales (*zhiguai* in Chinese) was developed in the third century. Several of the short stories collected in *Song of the Boatwoman* are written in this tradition, establishing a link to Chinese heritage. In the title story, the Western Lake in H- refers to the West Lake of Hangzhou, a place famous for its many love legends, the most well-known being "The Legend of the White Snake", a romance story between a man and a snake-turned-lady. As a cultural icon of heterosexual love and romance, the lake is rewritten as a place of emotional attachment and commitment between women. The ghost boatwoman the narrator encounters on the lake, a model of female loyalty and bonding, is a "woman poet" who tells stories (Jin 1996: 43). "The Three-Breasted Woman" is a love story between a mortal woman and a three-breasted woman with supernatural power who can "live to perhaps six hundred years old" and is "trained to weave [memories] like a carpet and call them up when necessary" (Jin 1996: 56, 59). These two stories not only dismantle heterosexual normativity in Chinese strange tales but also highlight the crucial role of women as storytellers in the Chinese oral tradition. As Jin's poem *Grandmother Ho* suggests, women are keepers of oral tradition, memory and cultural heritage: "My granny was a chinawoman / […] I wish I had paid attention then / To her memories / (for she had plenty of memories); / […] I see her in my mother sometimes, / I see her now in me" (Jin 1985: 79).

"The Tall Shadow", a short story rich with metaphorical reverberations, recreates Chinese legends about mythic figures to explore the Caribbeanness of the post-independence Chinese Caribbean experience. Although Jin does not specify the ethnic background of the female protagonist Maralyn and only notes that she has a "mixed ancestry" (Jin 2007 [1996]: 22), it is indicated through the depictions of her facial features and aspirations that she has some Chinese blood: Maralyn wishes to migrate to New York, but when she dreams of her life there, she sees herself "sipping tea from a China cup and wearing a dress made of pure silk" (Jin 1996: 27). Maralyn's life experience reflects the dire social and economic conditions the Carib-

bean islands were still trapped in after independence. Her parents are not married because her father already has a wife. Her family is very poor, so she has to stand "all day in the market selling roti" but can only "clear fifteen dollars a day" (Jin 1996: 21, 23). She wants to "lift herself out of this grinding poverty, this small, stinking world and go abroad" (Jin 1996: 26). This is a feeling shared by many Caribbean people and resulted in their large-scale migration to the United Kingdom, the United States, and Canada after World War II. An old man with supernatural power sends his shadow to bring Maralyn to his house by hypnotizing her, and she is eventually trapped in a mirror by the old man, who "used to be the old judge at the court house" (Jin 1996: 29). The old man here represents the legacy of colonialism that has trapped the Caribbean in Western values, norms and structures that have maintained the privileged cultural construction of whiteness and prevented the national coherence of Caribbean countries. This story, which is a revised form of the Chinese oral strange tale, foregrounds the hybridity of Chinese Caribbean identity and heritage. It also justifies the legitimacy of Chinese Caribbean identity by showing Chinese immigrants' shared experience of post-war Caribbean life and by connecting this experience with a Chinese legacy.

Both Jin and Shinebourne use the Chinese tradition of oral storytelling to engage with Chinese Caribbean people who are negated or misrepresented in textual records and to save many lesser-known historical elements from oblivion: the arrival and suffering of the Chinese as indentured labourers in the Caribbean in the nineteenth century, their general move out of indentureship and into the retail trade at the end of this century, their difficulties and insecure situation in the Caribbean after independence, and the secondary migration of many of them to other places. These short stories, tapping the aural potential of written words to enhance the aesthetic value and signifying capacity of the interoral texts within them, restore Chinese diasporic memory for the purpose of not only retrieving their shared roots in the colonial and postcolonial experience but also emphasizing the Caribbean aspect of their hybrid identity, demonstrating that Chinese cultural heritage is not contradictory to Caribbeanness and could facilitate rather than impede Chinese diasporic incorporation into the Caribbean community.

4. Folk customs across borders

Folk customs are transmitted orally from one generation to another and therefore can be viewed in a broad way as part of oral heritage. In the course of migration, diasporas come in contact with different ethnic groups. In such circumstances, they often maintain the distinctive customs of their homeland as part of their ethnic identity but may occasionally alter a few details of the original customs and adopt additional customs from other ethnic groups. The customs Chinese people brought to the Caribbean, while pro-

viding a link to their heritage, are constantly reshaped in a transformative way to adapt to the new environment. Rather than isolating them from the local society, these customs may have helped them blend into the Caribbean community. Chinese culinary customs, for instance, have influenced Caribbean cuisine. Traditional Chinese dishes such as chow mein (noodles cooked with shredded chicken in stock), pow (small pork dumplings), and pickled mixed vegetables are now enjoyed throughout the Caribbean (Houston 2005: 20–21).

In the short stories of Jin and Shinebourne, the Chinese shop is represented as a space for participants in the Chinese diaspora to retain and in many cases modify their Chinese customs and cultural practices. Because for most of the twentieth century the Chinese were perceived as dominating retail sales in the Caribbean, the Chinese shop has a conspicuous presence in Caribbean fictional landscapes. However, in both popular media and fictional works written by Afro- and Indo-Caribbean writers, the Chinese shop is frequently portrayed as a space of the alien and outsider. A newspaper article published in Jamaica in 1913, for instance, complained that native traders were being forced to sell out their shops to the Chinese and called upon authorities to take measures to "let Jamaicans feel that Jamaica is still their home, and strangers will not be allowed to elbow them out of what is theirs by right" (cf. Lind 1958: 156). In the mainstream fictional works that are part of this discourse, the Chinese shop is often depicted "as a site of exploitation against which members of the nation struggle" (Lee Loy 2007: 3). In contrast, in Jin's and Shinebourne's works, Chinese customs are used to transform the Chinese shop into a space of cross-cultural exchange and interdependency.

In "Victoria", the female protagonist's father Wong retains the Chinese practice of trusting goods, a long-standing custom in China due to the fact that the copper coins used in ancient China were too heavy to carry and silver ingot was too valuable to use as petty cash. Unlike the stereotypical depiction of Chinese shopkeepers as greedy money-grabbers, Wong is portrayed as a generous man who helps the black and Indian labourers by giving them credit: "sugar price in Europe had gone down and Big Manager had cut they pay by sixpence. There was one big grumbling on the estate, you had only fo stand in the shop to hear it. Wong responded by giving more credit and hoping that things would improve" (Jin 1996: 10). The traditional practice of trusting goods, common among Chinese shopkeepers at home and abroad, establishes the relation between the Chinese and local people as one of mutual trust and recognition. For the locals, the Chinese shop is a place of security and warmth where people of various ethnic backgrounds can come together, overcoming their cultural differences, to share their private lives, producing a sense of community. In this sense, the Chinese shop can be viewed as a "discursive space of the 'Creole'" where the Caribbean identity is developed or performed through dynamic multicultural exchanges (Hintzen 2002: 92). The Chinese custom of giving credit, by facilitating the daily interactions in the shop and the acceptance

of the Chinese by the local people, plays an active role in this transformation of the Chinese shop space into a Caribbean space. The Chinese shopkeepers thus find space for themselves in the Caribbean by tying their fate to that of the local community. Eventually, Wong has to close the shop because "The sugar economy was deep in depression and Wong himself was too soft-hearted and allowed credit where he shouldn't have" (Jin 1996: 10). The custom of trusting goods places Wong in a financially vulnerable position and reveals his low status in a chain of profit-making, since, as Lee-Loy (2010: 111) puts it, a shopkeeper "is responsible to pay the merchant for the goods regardless of whether his or her customers pay off their debts", shattering the conventional image of Chinese shopkeepers as oppressors and exploiters. Jin also overturns the trope of the Chinese shop "as a site of power for the Chinese" (Lee-Loy 2010: 111) by establishing it as a place of drudgery and imprisonment: both Wong and his son David, having to work "from five in the morning to ten at night everyday" (Jin 1996: 11), are depicted as slaves and hard labourers in the shop, serving black and Indian customers in the early mornings, late evenings, and weekends when they are not working. By constructing the image of the Chinese shopkeeper as one who suffers the forces of exploitation and oppression together with other Caribbeans, the author further validates the belonging of the Chinese to this "imagined" Caribbean community.

As mentioned above, the Chinese presence in fictional Caribbean landscapes is predominantly male, with Chinese females being almost invisible in Caribbean literature. Both Jin and Shinebourne, retrieving the silenced female Chinese Caribbean voice in their works, underscore the role of females as major preservers of Chinese customs. In "The Berbice Marriage Match", Shinebourne writes about how two matriarchal Chinese households in British Guiana, the Choy family and the Li family, follow the Chinese matchmaking custom to establish a marriage alliance. The matriarchs of the two families, Mrs. Choy and Mrs. Li, perform their cultural heritage by preserving and adapting Chinese customs and traditions. Mrs. Choy "was dressed in black silk pajamas and silk sandals, and her hair was swept back in a bun" (Shinebourne 2004: 109), a traditional style for married Chinese women. Mrs. Li, a "petite Chinese woman" "raised by Catholic nuns, without any Chinese customs" and thinking herself "too Creole", is obsessed with the idea of being "a genuine Chinese" (Shinebourne 2004: 107, 109) and strives to reaffirm her suppressed heritage: "she listen[s] regularly to the public lectures on Chinese culture held at the Chinese Association", gives her daughters "lecture after lecture about the meaning of being Chinese" (Shinebourne 2004: 107), sets up a marriage match for her eldest daughter Ruth with Alexander from the Choy family, and plans to arrange matchmaking for her other three daughters as well. When Mrs. Li and her daughters visited the Choy family, "the two matriarchs bowed very deeply to each other and their offspring were compelled to follow suit" (Shinebourne 2004: 112). After the two families had "a Chinese meal" together, their matchmaker "Elizabeth helped complete the formality of agreeing the dowry, the

financial contribution each side would make to the wedding expenses and a consultation with a Chinese fortune-teller to set the best date for the wedding" (Shinebourne 2004: 109, 112).

The transnational movement and diasporic experience have altered gender relations in the Chinese Caribbean community. In the Li and Choy families, the patriarchs are absent, and it is the mothers who act as the breadwinners and heads of the households. Moreover, in Georgetown, it is the women who are vigorous members of the Chinese Association and full participants in its activities. The author thus overturns patriarchal norms by showing that Chinese women in the Caribbean hold important economic and social roles in maintaining families and communities. They are active preservers of Chinese customs, values, and traditional spaces while also being adaptive and open to changes. The marriage customs, for example, are modified by the women in response to their new environment. They stress that "it was the Chinese custom for the mother to negotiate" (Shinebourne 2004: 103), although in the Chinese tradition, it is the father who conducts marriage negotiations. What further revises the patriarchal marriage tradition is that the Li family, the prospective wife's side, takes the initiative to propose a marriage to and visit the Choy family, the prospective groom's side, and the two mothers are ready to call off the match if the couple do not like each other after they meet. The resulting marriage between Ruth and Alexander, rather than being forced, is one of mutual respect and love, with Alexander declaring that "Ruth was the only girl he was going to marry" and Ruth thinking that Alexander "could be the best husband she would get" (Shinebourne 2004: 111). The short story makes it clear that women in a diasporic context maintain their heritage in a dynamic way by constantly modifying it in accordance with the new culture and their own experiences. In this process, their gender roles and self-concepts are quite often altered. As Bhachu (1993: 101) notes, migrant women are "active negotiators of the cultural values that they choose to accept" as well as "cultural entrepreneurs who are actively engaging with their cultural frameworks, whilst continuously transforming them". Their negotiations, based on customs and heritage, not only help them and their families adjust to life in a foreign land but also sustain and reproduce their ethno-cultural identities inspired by their countries of origin. In the process of negotiation, different cultures encounter each other, producing a border zone or a space of betweenness where, as Hall (1992: 310–314) argues, hybrid states of mind and living emerge. The lived experience of Chinese Caribbean women presented in "The Berbice Marriage Match" provides new insight into the functions of customs and heritage in the formation of what social and cultural theorists have similarly termed hybrid identities (Gilroy 1993: 2; Hall 1991: 34; Bhabha 1994: 219).

Another noticeable representation of Chinese customs is in Jin's "Song of the Boatwoman", a story based on the unique practice of self-combing (*zishu* in Chinese) in the Pearl River Delta of China (where most Chinese immigrants in the Caribbean came from), though the author does not men-

tion the term directly. The custom of self-combing is a form of female celibacy that can be traced back to the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644 CE) (Ji 2014: 160). According to local tradition, unmarried women in this region wear long braids, while married women wear their hair up in a bun. Historically, many women, in order to avoid arranged marriage and be independent, became self-combed women or, in Janice Stockard's words, "sworn spinsters" (Stockard 1989: 70), by undergoing special rituals and fixing their hair in a bun. After taking the vow of self-combing, these women could never get married or engage in any form of sexual behaviour. If they broke the vow, they would be punished by being burned or drowned. Many of them lived together and worked in factories to support themselves. Sometimes two self-combed women would join together in an oath of sisterhood called the golden orchid oath (*jinlanqi* in Chinese), which is equivalent to the vow of marriage. Although this custom has gradually faded since the founding of New China, there are still self-combed women living in Guangdong Province today.

The story "Song of the Boatwoman" is set in Hangzhou, a city in East China, though the custom of self-combing, confined to the Pearl River Delta, has never appeared there. In choosing this setting, the author extends local memory to a national level, since Hangzhou is an ancient capital famous for its "many temples and pavilions" (Jin 1996: 31), important symbols of Chinese culture, and the city's noted West Lake is a national cultural icon giving rise to many legends and poems. The female protagonist Xiao Huang works in a silk factory together with many other girls to gain economic independence and stability. Her close friend Zhe Hua reveals to her that many girls in the factory, including herself, have sworn "a vow never to marry or die" to avoid being tied "to a husband like a dog to a fence, or an ox to the yoke" (Jin 1996: 33). The practice of self-combing by these women is a radical rebellion against patriarchal marriage in a society where a married woman, viewed as the property of her husband's family, has to toil to serve him and her in-laws. When Zhe Hua proposes that they join a sisterhood by swearing eternal friendship, Xiao Huang feels hesitant, but her encounter with the boatwoman, the ghost of a self-combed woman who drowned herself in the lake, makes her realize what she really wants is to swear the vow with Zhe Hua and "try the house in Zhong Shan Lane" (Jin 1996: 42), where sworn sisters live as couples. She agrees to take the vow not to avoid an unhappy heterosexual marriage but because she feels a passion for Zhe Hua. Self-combed women such as Xiao Huang and Zhe Hua, while striving for gender equality, maintain control of their own bodies, identities, and sexual choices. Their stance against conventional marriage leads to a cultural pluralism based on their community's eventual acceptance of their lifestyle, agency and identity, thus transforming the cultural models in their community. Jin's fictional representation of self-combed women, though not directly linked to the Caribbean, connects the Chinese heritage with their Caribbean presence and sheds light on the unconventional Chinese Caribbean female characters created by both authors, including the two deter-

mined and strong-willed mothers in "The Berbice Marriage Match" and the independent and rebellious heroine in "Victoria" who, having "a kind of wildness" (Jin 1996: 9), rejects marriage and eventually opens her own business in Trinidad. These Chinese Caribbean females have preserved the custom of self-combing by retaining the essentials of its spirit – independence, firmness, defiance and self-realization, which in turn facilitate their adaptation and integration in the Caribbean.

5. Conclusion

Identity is constructed through local or lived experiences that are informed by one's cultural context and relationships with others. Rather than exhibiting a disembodied and abstract notion of identity, Jin and Shinebourne focus on concrete individual subjectivities whose shifting and multidimensional nature offers profound insight into the dynamic relation between the diaspora experience and cultural heritage. In other words, the two authors explore, through the private consciousness of individuals, how oral forms of Chinese heritage might be adapted to produce interoral texts in literary works to articulate and give meaning to Chinese diasporic identities in foreign domains. The personal dimension in the fiction of Jin and Shinebourne is revisionary not only because it reconstructs the colonial experience by writing the legacy of the Chinese diaspora, especially the female Chinese Caribbean experience, back into Caribbean history but also because it dismantles the stereotyped image of the Chinese as outsiders in Caribbean literary landscapes by emphasizing their shared grounding in the plantation experience and post-independence struggles. Oral heritage, as their texts demonstrate, is not fixed or geographically constrained but can move transnationally and be constantly modified in response to the new environment. It not only links diasporic migrants to their home country but may also be used to establish a relationship with their adopted country and thus facilitate their incorporation into the local community.

Notes

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