Carrying the Chinese Child: 
The Poetics of Chinese-Filipino Identities in Women Writing

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The charm of mixed-blood just as if 
flashes through my mind – mixed with those of Spain, 
of America, of China 
and of Luzon Island where sampaguita’s fragrance 
wafts around…. and mixed-blood 
they say: are all 
beautiful

It also signifies a pluralistic kind 
of cultural background – various 
languages, widely different customs, 
behaviors, religious worshipping 
and life styles…. like people of all colors 
gathering in a big city, full of mysterious 
complex, enchanting flavor 
………..

Look! There are so many 
so many magnificent colors – red, orange, yellow, green 
grey, blue, purple…. all contained in my cup 
glistening¹

This is an excerpt from the poem “Halo-Halo” by Chinese-Filipino poet Grace Hsieh Hsing. “Halo-halo” refers to a sweet Filipino dessert, a mixed concoction containing langka pulp (jackfruit), red gelatin cubes, ear-shaped beans, monggo beans, glassy sugar palms and crushed crystals – forming a miniature iceberg with a smudge of purple ube (yam) on its peak. The halo-halo describes the multicultural heritage of the Philippines. It is a magnificent, mysterious, and enchanting blend of ingredients from Luzon,² Spain, China, and America. Hsieh Hsing has exclaimed over the variety and complexity of the flavors and colors found in
this archipelagic “container.” All the colors are “glistening,” yet the delicate scent of the sampaguita wafts around, apparent.

Chinese-Philippine literature, consisting of a mixture of languages and dialects such as zhongwen, hokkien, Filipino, and English, are of halo-halo nature. For the purpose of this paper, I define Chinese-Philippine literature as published creative works in zhongwen ( Mandarin Chinese) by Chinese-Filipino writers. A Chinese-Filipino writer is a person of Chinese descent, native-born or naturalized, and has stayed for a considerable period in the Philippines.

In this paper, I choose to focus on poetry, a powerful tool to “metaphorize, to conjure up countertropes or figures for alternative, ideologically innovative modes of being” (Shreiber: 283). I discuss selected poems of two Chinese-Filipino women writers, Lan Ling and Grace Hsieh Hsing, to determine their poetics of identity construction. Specifically, I attempt to attain the following objectives: to describe how the poets re-imagine their Chinese-Filipino identities; to examine how poetry makes reformatory use of language as a way of conceiving distinctive identities; to identify alternative modes and visions of consciousness. I draw insights from literary theorists/writers and cultural historians like Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, Herbert Gans, Benedict Anderson, Toni Morrison, and Amy Ling.

In Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari propose the concept of a minor literature in their study of Franz Kafka. A literature is considered minor because of its minority position, constructed by a minority group using a major language (16). Its three characteristics are identified as deterritorialization, political program, and collective assemblage of enunciation.

Deterritorialization pertains to the displacement of the dominant language by the minority literature that employs radical alterations and modes of expression. Due to the hybridized nature of Chinese-Philippine literature, and the interrelated, interactive complexity of its determinants, instead of deterritorialization, I propose that the literary site
of resistance be called de/culturation. De/culturation is not just deterritorialization, but a dynamic process of deterritorialization and reterritorialization. It pertains to the dislocations of cultural, political, ideological practices; the de/culturated subject-position then attempts to recover and repair its fractured identities and modes by articulating counter-discursive practices and establishing new identities and modes outside the hegemonic authorities. In a sense, it re-culturates, it reterritorializes.

Chinese-Philippine literature, geographically and historically deterritorialized in the Philippines, resides in a minority position in relation to the New Literature (新文学) of China. At the same time, it is marginalized by hegemonic practices in the context of Philippine literary traditions. The Chinese-Filipino writers make use of the Chinese language, or zhongwen, which is a major language. But zhongwen is not their “own language.” These Chinese-Filipino writers are primarily lanlang (語言), their ancestors or they themselves journeying from the seacoasts and rice fields of Fujian province to the Philippines. Banlamwei (閩南語, minnanhua in zhongwen) is their mother tongue, the regionalect of their dreams and memories. It comprises a patchwork of dialects from the different parts of the Fujian province (廈門話). Deterritorialized in the Philippines, banlamwei in its corrupted form becomes what lanlang call hokkien. It is the “paradigm for the frailties and strengths of a diasporic or nomadic consciousness” (Shreiber: 282). Whether the lanlang is at Ongpin Street or inside a private bedroom, eating noodles or playing pantintero, hokkien serves as the mutual medium of intercourse, the tongue that s/he speaks in. This language serves as a crucial thread to bind one Chinese-Filipino with another, and with the entire ethnic community. But hokkien is not a “paper language.” Zhongwen is the “paper language,” the language of the Chinese-Filipino textbooks and newspapers. Originally a vernacular language in China that has successfully dislodged wényán (文言) from its royal pedestal, zhongwen now claims the supreme position of the vehicular language. It has become the state language, the tool for propaganda, the means for commercial exchange, the language of books, and possibly, of the internet.
Socio-historical and political circumstances specify the Chinese-Filipino writers resulting in the impossibility of not writing, the impossibility of not writing in the paper language, yielding to the minor utilization of a major language, even if the language is “alien” to their tongues. This reflects and reworks an identity choice. It is zhongwen that the Chinese-Filipino writers appropriate to form, and to transform their identities. It is through the deterritorialization of this language that the writers can conceive of themselves, perceive of the social milieu and the world they reside in, and allow the readers to participate in these imaginings. The impossibility of not writing in zhongwen then becomes a necessity to establish, if not, to re-create a shared sense of belonging with a community, or a symbolic bond to assure oneself of his/her identity in relation to an imagined homeland. It could be due to cultural consciousness, or in some cases, national consciousness through literature. Perhaps only through the deterritorialized zhongwen can the writers reterritorialize, and articulate new modes of expressions and consciousness in relation to the formation of distinctive identities. At the same time, the social or communal identity can acknowledge its own “special place in the world.”

Deleuze and Guattari have encouraged the “pushing” of the deterritorialized language to what they call an intensity, or a sobriety, and not simply a symbolic reterritorialization. Accordingly, Kafka wielded the Prague German in all its “willed poverty,” revolting against metaphors, and favored instead a higher state, a new intensity, a becoming – the metamorphosis that induces Gregor to cross the threshold to “become” a beetle.

On the contrary, Chinese-Philippine literature thrives on metaphors. This is because the Chinese language comprises not of alphabet and syllables, but of pictures and sound. Each Chinese character possesses a graphic component and a phonetic component, otherwise known as ideophonographic. The Chinese character is intrinsically symbolic. Ernest Fenollosa in his study of the Chinese written character observes that “the Chinese written language has not only absorbed the poetic substance of nature and built with it a second world of metaphor, but has, through its very pictorial visibility, been able to retain its original creative poetry with far more vigor and vividness than any phonetic tongue” (149).
The Chinese-Filipino writers, aware of the built-in symbolic endowment of the
deterritorialized Chinese language, challenge the language and revolutionize it. Its *halo-halo*
specificities impel the writers to fulfill the possibility of inventing a new literary language –
the de/culturated language – through the imaginative use of Chinese written characters and
occasionally, the clever play of homonyms/homophones. It is a sifting through the piles in
the basket to look for the proper ideograms, and the sieving out of pertinent
homonyms/homophones. The primary strategy then is not merely that of symbolic
reterritorialization, for the writer pushes towards this site of de/culturation, metamorphosing
the metaphorical contructs. In other words, the creative endeavor does not confine itself to
figurative devices and elucidation, but extend to the metamorphosis of language, of
metaphors, of identities.

One evident feature of Chinese-Filipino writers is their propensity for the use of
pseudonyms. Ever since the emergence of Chinese-Filipino writings in the 1920s, the works
have been written under pseudonyms. Amy Ling in her study of Chinese-American writer
Sui Sin Far states that the “choice of pseudonym is an act of self-creation, a choice of
identity” (307). Sui Sin Far’s choice – her real name was Edith Maude Eaton – was a mask
to minimize her patronymic origin, and at the same time, a mask to unearh and display her
matronymic line.20 She chose to write about the Chinese in the United States, and her
pseudonym showed her sentimental views and political stance in favoring the despised race
of her mother.21 As Ling has said Sui Sin Far “selected a pseudonym to authenticate the
subject matter she had chosen to make her own” (310).

The use of pseudonym then is a deliberate act. It reflects the individual choice of the
writer. It is a declarative statement, a political position, possibly to demonstrate the
subjective or political views of the writer. It is also a performative act on the part of the
writer to assume a persona, a new identity in relation to his/her private vision. It is the
writer’s mode of becoming. It is a means of how the writer re-conceives of himself/herself in
relation to his/her social, political, cultural, economic or even spiritual environment.22 Or it
may serve as a disguise to cover up his/her real identity. As an actor assumes a mask to
participate in the performance or a ritual, so the writer takes on a make-believe role to
participate in the ritual of writing and communicating his/her sentiments and expressions to the reader, who in turn is either participative or critical of this ritual. Many of these Chinese-Filipino writings first appear in the literary pages of the newspapers. The imagined community therefore initially recognizes the identity of the author through the mask-name and the writings. The writer seemingly hides behind the mask, uneasy that s/he will be “found out.” The seeming concealment of the identity nevertheless delineates individuality, distinctiveness, and self-perception. The mask also provides the author with political independence, candor in expression, and unrestraint from any liability.

Is there a connection between the pseudonym and the writings, specifically the poems? If the writer chooses a particular pseudonym on the assumption that she is constructing an identity, does the signification of the pseudonym reverberate in the poems?

In referring to the speaker of the poem, I choose to use the word persona, to indicate that the poet has assumed a role, representing herself in a particular voice. The persona, set free by the creator-actor, relishes certain liberties in the imagined space. She is reflexive of the poet’s identity and the complexity of her being.

Poet Chen Wan-fen (陈万芬) published her first collection of poetry at the age of 14, entitling it The Brightness of the 14th Star (1960). Known as the Chinese Youngest Poetess, she has selected the distinctive Lan Ling (蓝玲) as her pseudonym. Lan ling (蓝玲) literally mean “blue water chestnut.” The water chestnut (also known as water nut, bull nut or water caltrop) is an aquatic plant that floats beneath the water surface. The stem is submerged and bears nut-like fruits which may either be horn-shaped, or sometimes, hard-shelled with four short spines. Water chestnuts flourish in the southern part of China, even in Fujian areas. Being edible, they are harvested and relished by the people.
Chen Wan-fen’s choice of the characters lan ling (蘭嶺) is quite unusual. “The Brightness of the 14th Star” (第十四颗星 | the fourteenth star), a poem which bears the same title as her collection, seems to make reference to the young poet herself:

Under the blue-green sky  
the gaze of starlight interweaving with one another  
is gentle  
drawing long my shadow  
But below the eyes is full of pale wisps of sighs  
full of the lengthening gloom  

The 14th star  
quietly travels through  
the ash-gray years  
the years holding the density of greyness  
The 14th starlight hovers above the blue waters of the Manila Bay  

The lock of the soul is rusty  
Feet treading on the backyard sink in the wet mud  
The last-quarter moon-like smile invariably knocks down  
a garden full of fallen leaves  
but my sorrow, can never be rubbed and crushed  

Traces of the poet’s pseudonymic identity can be found in this poem. Ling is a water chestnut, a water caltrop, which the dictionary calls a star thistle because of its spiny form. Moreover, the ideogram ling is the same one for ling xing (岭星), or diamond shape. The title of the poem can refer back to the pseudonym, suggesting that the poet is a water chestnut, a caltrop, a star, a diamond. And the brightness of the star shines so on her fourteenth year.  

The first line of the last stanza states: “The lock of the soul is rusty.” The character for soul is ling (靈) from ling hun (靈魂). The character for soul is a homophone of the water chestnut character. Therefore, Lan Ling is also a soul.  

At the same time, the poem speaks of the images of blue-green sky and blue water of Manila bay. These two images echo the designated color on her pseudonym. For Lan Ling is not just a water chestnut, a star, and a soul, she is a blue one. Is blue a symbol?
The tone of the poem is of sadness, as stated in the last line. Even the images support this tone: the lengthening shadow, the pale wisps of sighs, the starlight hovering, the rusty lock, the brownish leaves rubbed between fingers and crushed to pieces. In addition, the last line of the first stanza says, “full of lengthening gloom.” The blue green sky, and the blue waters seem to resound with this sadness. Years gone by are described as “ash-gray.” What is blue to Lan Ling? Sadness? Gloom? In another poem entitled “Blue and White”\(^{28}\) (ÃÅ»PYÔ), she declares, “Many people understood blue stands for sorrow, but is pure.”

“Blue-Colored Days” (ÃÅ¡ãªoπÑ)\(^{29}\) published in her second collection Dewy Path [ÃS, Ž] (1964), affirms the “blueness” of Lan Ling.

This is a hold of a blue-colored day
My steps move into a crystal-clear lake
I seek the wholeness of my reflection
After the birdcall passes
Some noises cease
In the sound of water, I feel lonely

Loneliness is a hold of a blue-colored day
shaking off the city dust; the sounds of the city remain outside a hand wave
In daylight and night time, I leave my footprints on the shaded road
seeing the sun, moon, stars in the heart of the lake, floating and sinking, sinking and floating

Not just once, my sleep is traced with stillness

What is stillness is a hold of a blue-colored day
I remember that stem of forget-me-not, oh and the few tiny flowers
inside my room, openly full of sentiments, fully lingering
But I only leave a phonograph record, a few flowers
The time when the scorching summer hides
I merely am tired like a blooming statue

This is a hold of a blue-colored day
My steps pass a crystal-clear lake
I seek the wholeness of my reflection
In the sound of water feeling lonely –
After the stillness, there is again a long wounded feeling.
The tone is again of lingering sadness, quiet and private, stemming from the persona’s experience of days described as “blue-colored.” She holds on to these days, wherein the loneliness of the lake, and the stillness of memories serve as companions. Despite these sentiments, the persona seems absorbed by her experience. It may be due to the depth of the emotion, as she ends her poem with: “After the stillness, there is again a long wounded feeling.”

The blueness is in the days, the memories, and the emotions. It is further echoed in the image of the forget-me-not, which connects to the poet/persona’s recollection of flowers, her room, and the phonograph record. The poem allows glimpses into these images, though many things are unsaid, stories untold. And this sense of mystery heightens the sentiments of loneliness and stillness, as if the persona stores these “blue-colored” memories, away from the prying eye of the world.

In the persona’s ritual of going to the crystal-clear lake, she seeks to capture a complete reflection of her own self in the water. The loneliness engulfs her, and the stillness opens up memories. She sees reflections of the sun, moon and stars, “floating and sinking, sinking and floating” in the lake.

The images of water and the stars, the movement of floating and sinking seem to point to the poet’s pseudonymic identity. As aforementioned, a water nut thrives on water. Floating, its leaves are spread out. Its flowers open above and then submerge to bear fruits. When these nut-like fruits ripen, they fall to the bottom of the pond. So, water nut does float and sink, like the reflection of a star appearing and dissolving in the heart of a lake.

In Lan Ling’s case, the poet has constructed an identity with her pseudonym. This identity is fleshed out in the images depicted and emotions evoked. Lan Ling seems to feel the need to allude to this identity in her poetry. There is a conscious and continual affirmation of the constructed self. But more significant, the delineation of the pseudonymic identity is not merely a metaphoric expression; for Chen Wan-fen has become Lan Ling, the
Blue Water Chestnut, which in turn metamorphoses into the Blue Caltrop, the Blue Star, the Blue Diamond, and the Blue Soul. This is the multi-becoming of the poet.

In one of Lan Ling’s later poems entitled “Rice” (.POSI) , I examine the figurative construct of the Chinese-Filipino identity. The poem begins with the persona at the riverbank, her eyes following the sacks of white rice being carried by porters from the cargo ship. Overcome with an intense feeling, she imagines:

I think of the bag
of a thousand crags and ten thousand torrents
recalling the sorrow of one grain saying farewell
to the soil which has sired it; from far away it comes
bearing the weight of the river current and
passing years

Even in the first stanza, the emotion is directly identified: sorrow. The persona likens herself to a grain of rice, saying goodbye to its place of origin. The figurative phrases “the bag of a thousand crags and ten thousand torrents” and “bearing the weight of the river current and passing years” are used to describe and intensify the depth of sorrow that persona is harboring in her heart. The images of “dusk of heavy rain” and “the dock of pink clouds, ebbed tides” contribute to create this mood.

As if the persona would not let go of the emotion, in the second stanza, she draws attention to it by first stating the heaviness of the rice borne on the shoulders, as if implying a heaviness of the spirit. Secondly, she forthrightly points to emotions, saying,

that fully-picked emotions are like pieces of pearls
fallen to and lost in the ocean floor, ten thousand fathoms deep

The emotions are pearl-like, precious and delicate. Yet these have been touti (POSI), or in English -- fully picked. The tou (POSI) character refers to more than fullness; it connotes thoroughness, penetration. The ti (POSI) character connotes picking with a pointed instrument. In other words, these emotions have been so thoroughly and penetratingly picked with a sharp point; they are pearls fallen into the waters, then
disappearing into the ocean depth. The speaker makes use of a superlative form of
numerical figure, “ten thousand fathoms” to emphasize the depth.

The persona also expresses sadness in leaving her place of birth. Pensively, she
ruminates her childhood, the time of the evening meals, her mother, and the long nights, and
asks, “How can I… capture a teardrop/as plump and ripe as a grain of rice”? She knows that
she cannot go back, that a tear, once fallen, cannot be contained or preserved in one’s palm.
These thoughts increase her despair as she cries out,

    How hard it is to believe, this bag of pitiful wind and rain
    is truly an unforgettable coming and going
    Thoughts of gloom are more intrusive than the wind and frost of foreign land
    The days are lonelier…

The heaviness of the emotions has not waned. From “the bag of a thousand crags and
ten thousand torrents” to “heavy burden,” the “sack of rice” continues to weigh in her heart,
becoming also “this bag of pitiful wind and rain.” Sorrow and heaviness are joined by gloom
and loneliness.

Yet in the midst of this emotional turbulence, she remembers her mother, how her
mother has reached out to her,

    … I imagine
    you among the cooked dishes
    and sweet lovely fruits, sitting down, urging me to use chopsticks
    but here before me is this hot steaming bowl – ah

    In those moments of loneliness, there is the mother, with her loving touch, preparing
dinner, urging her to eat. And the persona exclaims over the bowl of steaming rice – “ah!”
Prior to this, in the second stanza, the persona recalls and imagines the sweetness and
fragrance of rice being chewed. This line is succeeded by the image of the persona thinking
of her mother, in relation to the hours of childhood, the evening meals and the long nights.
The memory of the mother induces tears; yet the memory of her presence also serves to
reassure and comfort. “Sweetness” is evoked in relation to her. It is as if the mother’s love is expressed through the food, particularly the steaming bowl of rice.

Homesickness is actually the root of all other emotions in the persona’s experience -- sorrow, heaviness, gloom, and loneliness, as expressed in the final three lines: “What would you want me to do? How/does a hand hold/this lustrous crystal of homesickness”? The poem ends with the word xiang chou (xiang chou) or “homesickness,” the persona having no qualms whatsoever in declaring this feeling.

Rice is used as the central trope, evoking an amalgam of strong and poignant emotions, honestly felt and openly identified. The poem banks on rice as the original vehicle, and produces multiple tenors. It primarily signifies the migrant identity, and extends to form new metaphors and figures, the rice vehicle becoming a rice tenor and creating other vehicles. The rice trope evokes emotions of sorrow, heaviness, gloom, loneliness, homesickness and love. Rice is the sorrow of one grain saying goodbye, the heaviness of a burden, the gloom of memories, the loneliness of nights, the homesickness of a steaming bowl, the love of mother. The one-grain, “plump and ripe,” becomes a teardrop, which the persona tries to grasp; the same way she clutches on to the memories of childhood, evening meals, mother, and long nights. This one-grain is a piece from a broken string of pearls that have been swept up by the waves, scattered over the sandy floor, and concealed by corals and seaweeds. The grain finally becomes “this lustrous crystal of homesickness,” which the persona attempts to cushion in her palm, precious and poignant, as if so much sweetness and sorrow are at hand.

Rice is also described as “white as snow” in the second stanza. The irony is: it is not light, but “borne on their shoulders/like heavy burden.” This is then connected to the image of “fully-picked emotions… like pieces of pearls/fallen to and lost in the ocean floor, ten thousand fathoms deep.” The burden of emotions lies in the depth of the ocean. The rice burden further signifies “the bag of a thousand crags and ten thousand torrents” and the “bag of pitiful wind and rains.” “Crags and torrents” and “wind and rain” are images of natural forces, implying a storm-tossed life besieged by trials and hardships. The poet has made a
metaphoric leap – a metamorphic rise – linking rice to the giant and fierce forces of nature. This comparative/becoming device seems to intensify the persona’s emotional depth. Or, could this be a reference to natural contingencies beyond the control of the persona as she “bears the weight of the river current and/passing years”?

Images of lifting/carrying (¹ a), bearing/carrying (² ũ), loading/holding/containing (² ± ũ), capturing (¾ À), holding/cupping (± ·) recur. The porters on the riverbank lift and carry sacks of rice, apparently heavy burdens to people who simply act as instruments of transport. This motion is reflexive on the persona, who bears a bag on her back, too. Hers is the burden of emotions and memories, which she cannot seem to lay down. Is it because this bag is “truly an unforgettable coming and going”? A fated journey to another place? An emotional voyage to the past that in turn affects her future? This bearing/carrying suggests also an image of bent body, a concrete evidence of reterritorialization. Moreover, the persona desires to hold the lustrous crystal of grain, to capture the teardrop with her fingers, as if the crystal and the drop are treasured tokens of memories, exquisite gems of identity. Indeed this is the persona’s act of becoming, her mode of capturing. The motif of bearing/holding is further paradoxically complemented with another motif: the imagery of heavy rain, dusk, fallen pearls, and teardrop convey a sense of dropping or falling (¸¨). The latter motif heightens the tone of sadness in the poem, as if every burden borne on one’s back yields an equivalent of a drop of tear, or a torrent of rain.

The poet’s prime strategy is the intensity and range of emotions divulged in this poem. Particularly in poetry, “the poet is far more adept than the writer of learned tracts at expressing deeply felt emotion” (Connor: 73). These emotions usually reflect a symbolic bond between the individual and his/her appointed and imagined home/land, whether or not they can be considered “nationalistic.” Nevertheless, ethnicity is something that is strongly felt in the “blood, bones, and flesh” (Fishman: 63). As Fishman observes, “The metaphors of blood, bones and flesh joined by the emotive experience of tears, pain, joy and laughter produce the least transient experiences within the realm of ethnicity” (64). At the same time, the open and lavish articulation of emotions is antithetical to the Confucian tenet emphasizing on moderation in terms of feelings.
The individual concern vibrates with the story of the persona’s deep attachment to her homeland. In expressing her true sentiments, she establishes bond with her place of origin, connecting with her own past, and keeping the memories alive in her heart. The poem is an assertion of her self and her love. It is also an act of expressing deep emotions. Yet the individual story connects to other stories. There is the familial story of the individual connecting with her mother, and the love they have for each other. This story is extended to refer to the love she harbors for her native land. The mother is a comforting figure associated with origin. Through the steaming bowl of rice taken at mealtimes, and even the use of chopsticks, the culture is preserved. The individual concern then connects to the cultural background. This poem may be read within the socio-historical context of the Chinese diaspora, that the individual journey from one place to another extends to the migratory move of a group of people across the ocean.

Indeed, the migratory picture in the poem is suggestive of a Chinese venture. When Lan Ling talks of the “one grain saying farewell/to the soil which has sired it,” this individual is one out of thousands and ten thousands who have departed. This is a reference to the historic diaspora of the Chinese. Or is it about a Chinese-Filipino? Is this the specific undertaking of a Chinese-Filipino saying goodbye to the Philippines? The foreign land is not the Philippines, as it is described as a land of snow, of wind and frost. We consider the background of the writer, who was born and grew up in the Philippines. Later she moved to the United States. Lan Ling then is the Chinese-Filipino-American negotiating among three cultural spaces, in order to assert the complexity of her identity. This intricacy of the Chinese-Filipino-American experience in the poem is manifested in the form of rice as a multi-trope, as a multi-becoming. The motif of bearing/holding is a pertinent, crystal-clear feature of this experience. For diaspora is not simply a physical resettlement in a new land from a place of origin, it embodies preservation; maintenance of one’s sentimental ties with her birthplace. Rice is not just a trope for migration, but a symbolic reterritorialization, a figurative upholder of identity, a mode of becoming. The motif of bearing/holding is moreover a metaphor for one who constantly carries her sentiments and cultural past in her heart. Diaspora does not cease to be felt, it continually unfurls in the mind. That is why the
memory of the mother is equally relevant, for this is the artery to motherland, a heartland. If Kafka is said to be a gypsy who has taken away the German child from its cradle, then Lan Ling is a seafarer who has stowed away the Chinese child in the junk, and perpetually carries him/her on her back. The choice of the deterritorialized zhongwen to express her experience reflects this perpetuity.

Another poem that paints an interesting portrait of Chinese-Filipino identity and community is Grace Hsieh Hsing’s (ÁÂÄÉ Xie Xin) “Ongpin Street” (NYSE+1MYO). The initial stanza designates two spaces: Chinatown and China. Chinatown is confined to a clear-cut delineation of a territorial space – Ongpin Street.

Ongpin Street is intertwined closely with China as the persona indicates in the lines, “Whenever I think of China/I’d visit Ongpin Street.” China is envisioned in the persona’s mind – a wispy recollection of history and culture. The persona’s yearning for this nebulous thread of memory propels her to visit Ongpin Street:

I go to Ongpin Street to buy a draught of ancestral Chinese medicine that can cure root cause and symptoms alike to heal my deep-rooted base-solid homesickness I go to Ongpin Street to buy a box of lemon syrup advertised as heart purifier and heat coolant to remove my anger towards the country’s foes and home’s enmity

Ongpin Street seems to be the gateway to the past, to the ancestral tradition, to “home.” This niche in Chinatown is where the persona can shop and find herbs and syrup to assuage her strong feelings for “home.” “Home” is not a geographical location, a place of residence. It refers to a site or position of origin that the persona has established familiarity with, is in harmony with, or is comfortable in. It is a feeling, a state of mind, in which the persona possesses nostalgic contemplation for the old country. This is actually symbolic ethnicity expressed, the persona even harboring devotion and loyalty. At the same time, the persona tries to soothe her anger towards the enemies of the old country, pertaining to Japanese aggressors during World War II.
In Ongpin Street, the persona relishes her experience by eating a delicious meal and drinking oolong tea. She says,

A pair of chopsticks excels a brush  
In carrying a long line of history

..............................

A mere cup of clear tea excels a few drops of blue ink  
In pouring out a far-stretching civilization

The chopsticks and the cup of tea are cultural artifacts, signifying the preservation of a rich Chinese heritage. In experiencing this moment, the persona shows pride in the traditions of using chopsticks and drinking tea. The images depicted further provide visibility to ethnicity. The following objects or things – which are cultural patterns – are imagined to be found in Ongpin Street: ancestral medicine, lemon syrup, chopsticks, oolong tea, jumbled signs, strange faces, decadent songs, dirty streets. These symbols make possible the strengthening of the imagined bond between the persona and the ancestral culture. However, ethnicity does not simply preserve the cultural past but establish group identity.

Ongpin Street displays an imagined realm of plurals – jumbled Chinese-character signs, strange Chinese faces, decadent popular Chinese songs, and dirty Chinese-styled streets. The use of plurals bounds the district, conjuring up a social space full of shops, people, activities and directions. All these at the same time are both familiar and unfamiliar. They are familiar because they are all “Chinese.” They are nevertheless unfamiliar because they are different faces, which may not really know each other, doing different things in different shops, having different happenings, taking place in different sections of the district. They create a picture of a single community, a group identity. The repetition of the word “Ongpin Street” signifies the demarcation. The repetition of the word “Chinese” shows an emphasis, leading pointedly to the ancestry. It depicts also that the demarcation of this imagined space is “drawn by a larger culture.” This poem has made use of repetition of certain words, of certain phrases and even in the rhythmic pattern of the lines to set the boundaries, and to project a social space of plurals.
The final two lines of the poem, through the use of negation, hint at the kind of community Chinatown is – or isn’t:

Chinatown is not in China
Chinatown is not China.

The tone of these two lines varies from that of the previous stanzas. It sounds like a conviction, an irrevocable statement that a judge would pronounce in court. It sounds like the scratching lead of the cartographer’s pen, declaring that Chinatown is not found in the map of China. It is the cry of dissatisfaction, the twinge of a thwarted expectation. The use of negation in the two lines implies a set border, one that is unchangeable. Ongpin Street cannot be China; it is in the Philippines. Deterritorialized, the persona cannot venture into China, only to Ongpin Street. The trip to Ongpin Street serves as her practice of symbolically reterritorializing, a mode of salvaging her fragmented identity, a way of metamorphosing.

The characters for Chinatown -- ¤¤°ê«° -- connote a demarcation, as if the place is a fortification. Cheng («°) is the word for town, but it is also the character for city walls. The original “Chinatown” was built in 1581, by the south bank of the Pasig River. Known as the Parian, it was an enclave for Chinese business and residence. Later in 1594, Binondo, where Ongpin Street is located, was established as an alternate Chinese alcaicería (silk market), intending to provide goods and services to Manilan residents.42

The Chinatown of Grace Hsieh Hsing’s poem reverberates with concept of the original: a designated space filled with Chinese shops, apothecaries, tiendas, panciterias and other services. More than a century ago, dwelling and mobile restrictions were imposed upon the sangleyes (as the Chinese traders and sojourners were then called) by the Spanish government out of fear, wariness and hostility. Ethnic segregation in the form of Parian was therefore implemented.43 More than a century later, the Chinese-Filipino can happily go to Chinatown and roam freely around. In the poem, the persona visits Chinatown to satisfy her nostalgia for China. Ironically, her identity seems to be dependent on and restricted to this
specific territory. It is determined by the things that “I” can do in Ongpin Street: to shop, to buy, to have (a meal), to drink, to read, to look, to listen to, to step on. The ambience of the street scenes, with Chinese-looking faces, Chinese-character signs, Chinese-styled streets, Chinese songs, evokes an imagined “Chinese” enclave of cultural activities and bustles. Thus, Ongpin Street is a trope of border, of restriction. Another irony is: the persona has to resort to purchasing things in a fantasy place to attain the experiences that remind her of an inaccessible homeland. The sense of home, which is imagined, has to be bought, too.

In summary, these two Chinese-Filipino women poets – Lan Ling and Grace Hsieh Hsing – make inventive use of language, particularly the deterritorialized zhongwen, to challenge dominant practices, develop alternative modes, and re-construct their cultural distinctiveness. They furthermore employ tropes, multi-tropes and other figurative devices in their poetry to delineate the Chinese-Filipino identities. However, the strategies of these poets are not merely metaphoric. They are more significantly metamorphic deployment to project the becoming (or the multi-becoming) of the Chinese-Filipino. Metamorphic drop or rise takes place in the poems: from blue water chestnut to blue caltrop, to blue star, to blue diamond, to blue soul; from rice to teardrop, to pearl, to crystal; from rice to crags and torrents, to wind and rain; from China to Chinatown. These are re-formations of distinctive identities through the work of de/culturation performed by the poets.

In addition, the articulation of strong emotions, which is one of the main strategies of the poets, raises poetry to a high level of intensity and sobriety. The persona-identity is shaped as a bearer of sentiments and cultural past. The expressed sentiments forge and re-connect a bond with the place of origin, or with the past. The individual story in each poem vibrates to other stories that are familial, cultural, and possibly national. And the Chinese child is perpetually carried on their back.
Notes

1 Excerpt from the poem “Halo Halo.” To the Flowers, 20-21. Except otherwise indicated, all English paraphrases of poems are mine.

2 Interestingly, Grace Hsieh Hsing uses the term which Chinese traders, visitors and sojourners of the past used to call the Philippines -- Luzon.

3 I do not propose that the poems discussed here are representative depictions of Chinese-Filipino experiences, as the realities of these multi-cultural and diverse experiences cannot be contained or essentialized in a few selected poems.


5 Priscelina Patajo-Legasto appropriated the term deterritorialization to refer to “political, economic, cultural dislocations” (6). According to her, “Post-colonial... signifies a position. It is a position produced by being constructed or represented as Europe or America’s “ontological Other.” From this deterritorialized... subject-location, the “others” (now plural), are attempting to make whole their fractured/deformed identities in order to create new identities and modes of existence outside universalizing/homogenizing Eurocentric perspectives” (Introduction, 6).

6 The term hanwen (ºå) is used also to refer to zhongwen.

7 A few of the Chinese-Filipinos are from the Cantonese lineage, from the province of Guangdong. The significant number though is from Fujian.

8 George Leonard offers the term “regionalect” to refer to fangyan (è ‰ ¥) or regional speech. See Leonard, 6.

9 A kind of Filipino game (usually a children’s game) in which one tries to get pass a person with outstretched arms without letting the latter touch him/her.

10 Hokkien serves as the linguistic identity of the Chinese-Filipinos. According to Poole, “It is our native language which provides us... the means by which we are able to recognize others who share that mode of access... It provides for a basic form of intersubjectivity: those who speak the same language are those with whom we can share our experiences, our emotions, our thoughts and our jokes... It is language which provides the crucial link between the individual and the wider public spheres of work and pleasure, the media, culture and tradition, and ultimately politics” (14).

11 Deleuze and Guttari notes that the minority German population of Kafka in Prague “speaks a language cut off from the masses, like a ‘paper language’ or an artificial language...” (16).
Deleuze and Guattari refer to the tetralinguistic model of Henri Gobard based on the research of Ferguson and Gumperz. The model designates four types: vernacular, territorial language which is rural in origins; vehicular, an urban language, used in business and commercial exchanges; referential language, a language of culture; mythic language, on the horizon of cultures, like Latin now, serving a religious or spiritual function (23-24).

Deleuze and Guattari have said that “Kafka marks the impasse that bars access to writing for the Jews of Prague and turns their literature into something impossible – the impossibility of not writing, the impossibility of writing in German, the impossibility of writing otherwise. The impossibility of not writing because national consciousness, uncertain or oppressed, necessarily exists by means of literature” (16).

In the introductory part of Ethnicity (1996), editors John Hutchinson and Anthony Smith identify six features of an ethnie or an ethnic community based on Richard Schermerhorn’s definition. These features are: a common proper name, a myth of common ancestry, shared historical memories of a common past/pasts, elements of common culture, a link with a homeland, a sense of solidarity (6-7). What is interesting is the suggestion made that even if an ethnic community does exist on the physical level, yet the sense of ethnicity is often times an imagined one or an invented one. The “name” seemingly joins individuals together, identifies the collective of people as having the same origin, possessing the same blood, as some sort of a big family. Whatever common pasts they cherish in their hearts are possibly imaginary, and designated as tradition or custom, even the precious memories of their ancestral land; these are bound together by historical constructs.

The majority of Chinese-Filipino writers chose to retain the use of the original form of the Chinese written character known as fantizi (ァAァÉ雇r). Communist China has developed the simplified version known as jiantizi (²Åé¤l). Could this be a mode of interrogation against the hegemonic tradition of Communist Chinese culture, and beyond that to its progenitor, the New Culture tradition?

Poole declares that “Language is not merely a means by which we describe a world; it is a way in which we form and express our special place in the world” (22).

The graphic component denotes some kind of pictorial image while the phonetic component leads to its proper pronunciation. See A Dictionary of Chinese Symbols (Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd. 1986), 8-9.

Ming Xie notes that “ideogram”or “ideograph” is commonly used to refer to the Chinese written character. But these terms disregard its significant phonetic aspect. Other terms have been used, like pictogram, logographic, lexicographic, morphemic, morphographic, logo-syllabic, which somehow fail to describe the Chinese script, and are even misleading in designation. Ming states that Fenellosa’s “Chinese written character” is the “simplest and most precise” designation. The word ideophonographic is credited to French scholar Henri Cordier, who uses it to explain that the graphic system of the Chinese script “is not hieroglyphic, or symbolic, or syllabic, or alphabetic, or lexicographic, but ideophonographic.” Cordier ends up proposing the term “sinograms,” which Ming states is not a “happy” choice either. For more discussion of the Chinese script, see Ming Xie’s second Chapter on “Ideogram and the Idea of Poetry” in Ezra Pound and the Appropriation of Chinese Poetry. Cathay, Translation, and Imagism. (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1999), 19-50.

Amy Ling observes that the pseudonymic choice of the two Eaton sisters (Edith and Winnifred) was a “cloak to mask their patronymic and to emphasize their matronymic, and for both, even Edith, though to a lesser extent than her sister, the pen-name was a contextual construct” (307). In Winnifred’s case, because she chose to use a Japanese name, her matronymic is a complete fabrication, which one can term a “magician’s act.”

She was born in England of British father and Chinese mother, the family immigrating to America in the 1870s, and later moved to Canada.
Poole states that the identity concept suggests “a constitutive linkage between forms of subjectivity, i.e., the ways in which we conceive of ourselves, and forms of social objectivity, the patterns of social life within which we exist.” (45).

I adopt Ross Poole’s etymological description of the term “person.” He recounts that in the Etruscan era of Roman civilization, an individual assumed a “persona” or mask role to participate in rituals or highly special occasions (46-47).

I am using this term to be consistent with my point about the poet assuming a pseudonymic identity. At the same time, my point is based on Poole’s discussion of “persons” (46-54).

Toni Morrison in Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination (Cambridge: Harvard U, 1992) discloses the alternative experience of a writer reading the Africanist presence/experience in American literature. She points out that the Africanist persona is reflexive of the “white” writer; it is a self-conception of the writer’s identity. In her words, it is “an extraordinary meditation on the self; a powerful exploration of the fears and desires that reside in the writerly conscious. It is an astonishing revelation of longing, of terror, of perplexity, of shame, of magnanimity” (17). What she isolates as Africanism pertains to the paradigm of assumptions, views, perceptions, readings and misreadings of African-Americans from the Anglo-American-centered perspectives (6-7).

Chen Wan-fen (陳元芬) was born in Manila in 1946; her ancestral roots are from Jing Jiang, Fujian. She graduated from the English dept. of Far Eastern University. She later moved to the United States, attended the Iowa University’s Writers’ Workshop, and received her master’s degree in arts. Her first collection of poetry The Brightness of the 14th Star 出台的14星 (Manila: Xin Jiang Publishing, 1960). Her other works include two poetry anthology The Dew Path 出來的露 ( Manila: Blue Star Poetry Society, 1964) and Twigs of Twin Towers 翠葉與雙塔 (Manila: Blue Star Poetry Society, 1964); and an essay collection The Picnic Ground 園林遊 (Manila: Blue Star Poetry Society, 1964).


Dewy Path 出來的露 (Manila: Blue Star Poetry Society, 1964)

“Rice” 出來的露 (ÓN) by is originally published in the literary supplement of the United News of Taipei.

A reverberation of the “bent head” in Kafka’s writings. See Deleuze and Guattari, 3-8.

In Kafka’s case, the individual concern invariably connects to the commercial, economic and bureaucratic triangles (Deleuze and Guattari, 17). In the case of the Chinese-Filipino poets, the individual experience often times extends to ethnicity; and the culturally symbolic attachment to an imagined ancestral home tends to crop up in the works.

In the August 4, 2001 issue of the Quanzhou Evening News Overseas Edition, Song Yu (宋玉) of the Literary Selections from Taiwan-Hongkong 台灣香港詩選 enumerated in an essay what he has perceived to be the “aesthetic deficiency” of Chinese-Filipino poets, particularly those belonging to the Thousand Islands Poetry Group. Another point that he criticizes the Chinese-Filipino poems is: the lack of refinement. He claims this weakness lies in the poems being too explanatory and revealing, and in the direct use of abstract words like bitterness, sadness, sweetness, eternity, beauty, etc. Clearly, what Song is saying here is that the poems are too explicit in expressing emotions and sentiments, to the point of directly naming them.
Should this characteristic be considered a weakness then? I think that Chinese-Philippine literature is political, and that its politics is that of *qing* (情) or sentiments. It cannot help but be political because of the socio-historical and economic forces (the Chinese-Philippine literary appropriation of the New Literature tradition of China, China becoming communist, the Kuomintang powerful influence on the Chinese-Filipino community, etc.) that have shaped its formation. Its political nature (challenging, revolutionary or oppositional) calls for the necessity of expressing emotions, to the extent of directly or explicitly stating them. The sentiments are genuinely and earnestly felt, even if they have been rendered in words and rhythm. The Chinese-Filipino poets feel this necessity then and express so in their writings. And this directness of expressing emotions should not be viewed as a deficiency in lyricism. Instead, it is a manifestation of the poets’ reaction against hegemonic cultures that have reduced them to their minoritized position. Specifically, it is an articulation against the Confucian ideological tradition upholding emotional restraint.

Likewise the “cramped space” of Chinese-Philippine literature necessitates that each individual experience should correlate immediately to politics. As Deleuze and Guattari asserts, “The individual concern thus becomes all the more necessary, indispensable, magnified, because a whole other story is vibrating within it” (17). The individual story cannot remain as such primarily because of the historical specificity of the Chinese diaspora, and of the de/culturation that takes effect thereafter.

Milton Esman states that diaspora originally pertains to the historical exodus of the Jews from Palestine after the defeat by the Roman Empire in A.D. 70, and their dispersion all over the world. His working definition of diaspora nevertheless is “a minority ethnic group of migrant origin which maintains sentimental or material links with its land of origin” (316).

Deleuze and Guattari, 17.

Grace Hsieh Hsing (谢欣) (1948– ) was from Shanghai. She has three poetry collections: *To the Flowers* (花到）、a bilingual edition with the English translation by John Shih; *Persian Cat* (波斯猫）; and *Sitting Still in the Stone Forest* (独坐石林). Alejandro R. Roces in his introduction to *To the Flowers* calls Hsieh Hsing a “true poet – gifted with inner vision. You don’t read her poems. You experience them. I went through her book and met a great soul.”


Herbert Gans points out that the creation of a symbolic tradition requires that the cultural patterns be preserved, and in a way, are constructed as symbols. It further necessitates that these symbols be made visible to the community, and the generations that come thereafter. Their meanings should be clear to the minority group or the immigrant family (146-147).

My analytical framework follows Benedict Anderson’s concept and discussion of imagined communities in the novels of Jose Rizal, Mexican Jose Joaquin Fernandez de Lizardi, and Indonesian Mas Marco Karotodikromo. See *Imagined Communities*, 32-37.

