

The Transformative Self in Tom Cho's *Look Who's Morphing*

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要約

本稿では、中国系オーストラリア人作家であるトム・チョウの短編集 *Look Who's Morphing* (2009) を取り上げ、作家の自己表象について検討する。チョウの文学は、映画やテレビショウなどの枠組みを利用したファン・フィクションという形式を採りながら移民の体験を描くという、新しい型の「エスニック文学」である。継承文化は個人的アイデンティティの拠り所としては描かれず、むしろパロディーという形で商品化される。主人公が同一化する対象は、国境や民族の境界を越えて広がるポピュラー・カルチャーのアイコンである。また、作家は言語的断絶や名前の変更といった移民の体験を「変身」という主題に引き寄せて語ることにより、エスニシティやジェンダーに拘束されない多面的で流動的な「私」を描こうと試みる。チョウのパフォーマティブなテキストは、自己の変容を巡るゲームに読者の参加を促し、本質主義的な思考からの解放を目論んでいる。

Keywords : ethnic literature, migrant, self, transformation, commodification

Introduction

Tom Cho is an emerging Australian writer who has recently attracted critical attention for his collection of short stories, *Look Who's Morphing* (2009), which refers to popular culture extensively. Born and raised in Melbourne, he is a writer of Chinese descent, and is also known as a community artist in Footscray. The central theme of *Look Who's Morphing*, his only published book thus far, is of transformation, as the title suggests: his characters morph into heroes from movies, singers, Godzilla, robots, among others. In fact, many of his stories take the form of "fan fiction", which employs existing characters and settings borrowed from movies and TV shows and develops a different story. His stories are also part of migrant literature. His main characters are his avatar Tom and his Chinese relatives, and his stories abound in episodes based on common migrant experiences such as language learning and the generation gap. Thus, Cho integrated migrant stories and popular culture, the combination probably unknown to a body of work by Asian Australian writers to date. This diversion from conventional ethnic writing provides the possibility of expanding or altering our understanding of migrant experiences and their identity.

This paper examines how Tom Cho, a new generation writer who is highly conscious of

creative methods, transforms the migrant narrative and represents the self. His fiction, as this paper eventually shows, gives witness to a new form of migrant subjectivity in the media-saturated, consumerist society of our times.

1. Parodying migrant experiences

When reading works by ethnic Chinese writers, we should not underestimate the significance of family dining scenes, because they often offer the protagonist an opportunity to explore his/her cultural heritage. It is the space of confrontation and reconciliation, where one may eventually “discover” one’s cultural identity. Ethnic food can also fulfil the reader’s appetite for exoticism and enhance the marketability of ethnic literature.¹⁾ It is not too wrong to say that readers of ethnic writing are used to expecting a sign of otherness in dining scenes. Cho’s collection also includes several stories on dinners with relatives; the difference is that these stories play with the reader’s expectation for otherness and instead lead them in a completely different direction.

The first story, “Dinner with My Brother”, is a dialogue between the first-person narrator Tom Cho²⁾ and his brother Hank regarding the meaning of Chinese names. Hank lives in an “ultra-modern house” and treats Tom to “sweet and sour pork using the recipe passed down from generation to generation within our family” (25). This banal expression is obviously a playful reference to popular discourses emphasising Chinese culinary tradition. The dish is presented not as a symbol of cultural heritage but as a cultural construct to be consumed by readers. For Cho, prominent cultural elements are the most convenient ingredients to entertain his readers. Such secondary use distinguishes his fiction from other migrant literature.

Tom’s reflection on Chinese names focuses on the gender biases they carry. Tom hates his Chinese name, which means, “I will skip and pick clover from lush fields” (25). Similarly, his aunt has a name meaning “A very nice and intact hymen” (26). In contrast, male characters have exaggerated masculine names: “A very canny and all-powerful emperor with a loyal army of millions” or “Not only clever and lucky, but strong, handsome and patriotic too” (ibid.). Behind the playful use of ideographic Chinese names lies a gender problem that Tom/Cho has. The name that expresses his own wishes for himself is “Marlon Brando”. The writer Tom Cho is a transgender person who used to write as Natasha Cho.³⁾ Tom is not criticising gender stereotypes as such, but he is frustrated by an essentialised view of her gender imposed on him by others. In ensuing stories, unlike migrant stories of origin, Cho explores possibilities of becoming a different person by assuming various popular hero personae.

A mock migrant narrative is woven into this story. Tom’s father, a migrant from China, was instructed by an official upon his arrival in Australia to adopt an English name that is a rough translation of his Chinese name. He strongly rejected the order because the English translation of his name would be “Mr. Amazing” (26). Adopting a new name, especially through force, is a serious transition of one’s identity, but Cho does not pretend to narrate an “authentic” migrant experience

of suffering. He is again concerned with commodifying a migrant experience in a comic manner, rather than reinforcing a collective ethnic identity by representing shared experiences.

The theme of the second dinner story, "Dinner with My Grandmother", is language. Tom and his grandmother do not share a language to communicate. Tom does not speak Cantonese, his grandmother's native tongue, and she can barely speak English. Instead of authentically depicting a communication gap, Cho encourages readers to enjoy the gap. For example, when Tom praises the food his grandmother cooked "using the traditional recipe that has been passed down from generation to generation within our family" (32), she provides a completely irrelevant response in seemingly fluent French. We should not dismiss this as trivial, because such an unexpected connection effectively discloses our unconscious assumptions regarding Chinese migrants. As Cho himself writes in an essay, we should ask ourselves, "[W]hy I laugh?" (Cho, 2004, 7).

After dinner, Tom always takes Cantonese lessons from his grandmother. Against the reader's expectations, enhancing mutual understanding is not a principle concern for the writer; instead, he emphasises Cantonese as a tonal language in which "changing the tone of a word can completely alter that word's meaning" (33). The transition in meaning is related to the motif of morphing. Just as a subtle difference in tone produces a whole new meaning, Cho's protagonist finds a new aspect in himself by assuming the identities of various popular culture icons. For example, in the first part of the title story "Look Who's Morphing", Tom morphs into the "giant reptilian creature" Godzilla (131). He destroys the neighbourhood he grew up in. When he finds his mother's Chinese vegetable garden, he eats the vegetables, remembering how his "mother always loved it when [he] enjoyed her food" (132). However, he realises belatedly that blue pellets for killing snails and slugs are strewn in the garden, and vomits what he has eaten. This episode reveals Tom/Cho's yearning for physical power, a sign of masculinity, as in other stories, and his ambivalent feelings towards his parents and his childhood. In this way, transformation is an artistic approach for Cho to explore his multifaceted self.

2. Linguistic transformation

Cho is not only a writer but also a performer.⁴⁾ He inserts himself into the text, or turns himself into the text. Cho's text itself is occasionally expressly performative. For instance, the theme of language and shifting meaning presented in "Dinner with My Grandmother" is actually *performed* in "Chinese Whispers" and "A Counting Rhyme". Chinese whispers is a game in which a message is passed on from one person to the next to see how the message is transformed in the process. "Chinese Whispers" is an experimental piece that replicates this game by displaying a series of short passages, each one slightly distorted from the previous one. A passage which explains how to play Chinese whispers turns into the following: "One person whispers something to a receiver. The message is passed on until all the players turn into Chinese. The object is to see how much the people will change along the way" (68). To take another example, a brief

introduction on Elvis Presley transforms into, “I know that the white Elvis is an impersonator. Elvis Presley was born veramuch Asian. Thangyou” (72). Thus, “Chinese whispers” encourages readers to imagine themselves crossing ethnic and racial boundaries. In Cho’s fictional world, all boundaries are fluid. Moreover, appropriating Presley is a potent way of problematising cultural dominance by the West.⁵⁾ The last sentence of this work is “The message is passed on until all the players have changed along the way” (73), which is very much the message of this book: throughout the reading, the *readers* are expected to change.

“A counting rhyme” is a parody of a well-known nursery rhyme. Derogative slang and signs of Chinese culture are interwoven to produce a completely different effect from the original. A part of Cho’s version is as follows: “Eight. Mate. China plate. / Kitchen sink. Chink. / Ginger beer. Queer. / A Chinese queer. A kitchen sink of ginger beer” (78). “Kitchen sink”, which rhymes with Chink, refers to the Chinese. Likewise, “ginger beer” refers to queer. Thus, slang words and their rhyming referents are deftly incorporated into the nursery rhyme. Here, Cho is exposing his doubly marginalised position as an ethnic Chinese *and* a transgender. This is a good example of how the artist Cho performs his self, even internalising prejudiced eyes, which may well belong to the reader. He represents his self as a piece of artwork to be appreciated by his readers.

3. Fluid identity

Cho has an academic side; he incorporates cultural theories into his creation.⁶⁾ In his fiction, he even turns his academic self into a commodity to be consumed by the reader. Alice Robinson has touched upon this aspect in her review of *Look Who’s Morphing*: “Cho’s use of both ‘languages’ at the same time renders the academic equally consumable as the popular, just as it shows how the popular can be as significant as the academic in making sense of the world” (Robinson 12). Cho achieves this effect by inserting academic discourse into his text, which is replenished with popular culture references. For example, in the short story “Exorcist”, a demon-possessed aunt cites a part of Tom’s fund application in his voice. In “Today on Dr Phil”, sitting beside an aunt who flew into a rage, Tom, for a moment, calmly “intellectualise[s] about Dollard et al.’s ‘Frustration-Aggression Hypothesis’ and its subsequent behaviourist/neo-associationist reformulation by Berkowitz” (64). With such manipulation, Cho playfully degrades the assumed authoritative position of the academic. As this example shows, Cho consistently rejects authoritarianism and leaves readers the task of interpreting the meaning of his text. This is another example of performing a multifaceted self, rather than pursuing or representing a unitary self.

What Cho does in his collection is fictionalise text-reader interactions. Whereas the traditional model of reading assumes a unilateral transmission of meanings from authoritative producers such as writers, critics, and academics to the reader as John Storey explains, Michel de Certeau highlighted “textual poaching”, in which the reader “insinuates into another person’s text the ruses of pleasure and appropriation”, thus making the text “habitable” (Storey 141, Certeau xxi). Cho’s

text, written in the style of fun fiction, establishes itself by making vocal such a silent production of meanings, or what Certeau calls a “secondary production” by the reader (xiii). Cho, as a consumer/producer, commodifies his academic self, and thus, destabilises the position of an academic as an arbiter of the “correct” meaning of a text. He simultaneously invites readers to take part in the production of meaning, just as he does, rather than hunt for orthodox meanings. Therefore, those who expect an authoritarian voice in his writing are left completely bewildered.

Thus far, our analysis revealed that Cho repeatedly attempts to represent a pluralistic, fluid identity. His view of identity is hinted in the story “The Sound of Music”. The narrator “I”—Maria in the original film—has a strong desire to become Captain von Trapp, and formulates her idea of the “impressionable” self as follows:

[...] in a sense, aren't we all composites of the influences of various entities in our lives—family members, friends, lovers, certain people we watch on TV, characters we read in books, etc, etc? And surely some of these things are influential because they do appeal to our fantasies? And yet, while our fantasies allow us the pleasure of imagining who we might be, can't they also make us painfully conscious of who we currently are? (48)

This awareness runs beneath all of his stories: his morphing characters embody a composite self. Such a pluralistic self defies essentialist notions of identity which assume that parameters such as race, ethnicity, and gender are natural and fixed, and that our identities can be reduced to such parameters. Furthermore, Cho demotes cultural heritage from its prominent position in exploring migrants' identities by parodying migrant narratives, as we have observed. However, to assume that he makes little of his own cultural heritage is incorrect; rather, he employs parody as a strategy to liberate the reader's imagination from conventional frameworks of thinking.

His stories foreground the condition of man living in a consumerist society where circulating images heavily influence behaviour. “Look Who's Morphing” satirically examines this situation. A traditional principle of morphing that Tom refers to depends on tactility: “According to various myths and popular stories, morphing is sometimes accomplished via touch: ‘whatever you touch, you become’” (135, 138, 142). He becomes aware on one occasion that his morphing is lacking tactility: “I hadn't realised that morphing could be so tactile, but maybe that was what I needed to incorporate better into my morphing: touching” (135). Even so, for convenience, this rule is often replaced by a modern one which relies exclusively on vision: “Whatever you watch, you become.” According to this rule, Tom transforms into “a kind of infomercial cyborg—half-human, half-home-fitness-system” while channel surfing early-morning TV programs (135). Similarly, a happy family dinner could be modeled on a TV show: “Eating our perfect family dinner, we happily changed into the family from *The Cosby Show*” (144). Saturated in popular media which readily cross national and cultural borders, we may be changing all the time. Cho's narratives of metamorphosis are a contemporary myth representing a condition of our times, which is best described as “we are what

we watch”.

However, the necessity to transform is undoubtedly more relevant to, and keenly felt by, migrant families with non-Western cultural backgrounds. As Tom says “morphing—and its associated difficulties—was inevitable” to his family; migrants are to undergo various degrees of “morphing”, be it the language they speak, the way they dress, or how they behave. Tom’s brother Hank morphs into members of heavy metal bands, and imitates not only their looks but also their lifestyles. Tom explains to his reproachful parents that “in Australia, Hank’s morphing could possibly be considered normal behaviour for a young male” (141), and his parents are easily persuaded. Tom himself starts morphing into various celebrities upon his arrival in Australia. Certain people criticise his unrestrained Westernisation, and he is sent to a language school to take Cantonese lessons. This tug of war between cultural adaptation and the retention of inherited culture is a classic theme in migrant literature. Only Tom copes with this situation in an idiosyncratic manner: he morphs into Liberace, a popular singer known for his gaudy costumes, and becomes the most popular person in his class (139-140). In this way, confrontation is characteristically lacking in his stories, where an inherited culture seems to no longer hold critical importance.

Ethnic minorities have had to establish their space in their adopted country by representing their culture as distinct from the rest in order to claim their rights and make their experience heard by mainstream society. Therefore, it is natural that identity politics presupposes essentialised cultural differences. In fact, many hyphenated Australian writers, never free from the dynamics of identity politics, have contributed to imagining a unitary, collective cultural identity to various degrees. Cho’s fiction, which is deeply personal in the sense that it explores his desires and tastes, is a radical departure from such representations of identity. Cho shows us how slippery and evasive identity is, “a kind of moving and morphing target” (Cho, 2004, 9). He regards identity as something ever-changing, never to be pinned down or reduced to a few parameters. Indeed, his stories offer us new ways of reimagining ourselves.

Conclusion

Tom Cho has demonstrated a new awareness of migrant identity in a creative way, which is characterised by the commodification of migrant experiences on the one hand, and a substantial adoption of popular culture personae on the other. His amorphous characters represent a pluralistic and fluid self which transcends racial, ethnic, and gender boundaries. In addition, his fiction leads us to the realisation of how we are trapped in the dichotomy between inherited and adopted cultures in considering migrant identity. In these regards, his unique work makes a valuable and novel contribution to ethnic minority writing.

Cho’s sensitivity allows him to capture the ever-increasing role popular culture plays in identity formation; thus, he is able to show how visual images dominate our perception of the world and

how vicarious experiences mediated by popular media are replacing our reality. Further, his skilful manipulation of primary sources won him success in the economy of cultural production. Conversely, a sense of tactility, or a touch of reality, is missing from his fiction, as his fictional self Tom reflects. Whether Cho will be able to incorporate this touch of reality in his future work and create his own fictional universe remains to be seen.

Notes

- 1) A character in Nam Le's story "Love and Honor and Pity and Pride and Compassion and Sacrifice", a metafiction on ethnic literature, says he is "sick of ethnic lit", partly because "[i]t's full of descriptions of exotic food". Another character comments: "It's a license to bore." Le is a Vietnamese-born Australian writer, highly acclaimed for his collection of short stories *The Boat*, published in 2008. Though their styles are vastly different, Cho and Le seem to share their critical view on ethnic literature.
- 2) In many other stories, the narrator's name is also Tom Cho. For convenience, I use Tom for the fictional self, and Cho for the 'real' writer.
- 3) Tom Cho, AustLit <<http://www.austlit.edu.au/austlit/page/A12510>>.
- 4) His activities include public readings, both domestic and overseas, shooting short films in which he performs, and producing shows. See Tom Cho's homepage.
- 5) Wenche Ommundsen's comment on the cover photo of *Look Who's Morphing* is relevant: "The cover photo, which is a photo of the *real* Cho, has been manipulated (or morphed) to evoke popular cult figures like Elvis, Brando, and the Fonz from the sitcom Happy days." The photo is a graphic representation of transformation that occurs throughout the text.
- 6) For his accounts of his own work, see Cho 2004 and 2010.

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