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Liminality in the Nightclub: Spatiality, Gender, and Identity in Lisa See's *China Dolls*

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Abstract

In Chinatown, San Francisco the nightclubs flourished in the later part of the 1930s as it became a destination for nightlife. The nightclubs at San Francisco became a site which is new to the Chinese Americans to re-explore their identities. For others, the visit to the nightclubs became a place of escape from traditional Chinese values. For some, it is a mode to gratify Western stereotypes of Chinese culture. Lisa See's China Dolls labels three young eastern girls of different backgrounds who became dancers at the popular Forbidden City nightclub in San Francisco in the later part of 1930s. Lisa See, through the risky careers and personal conflict of the three women, proposes their new identities past them their restricted spheres and a place to accomplish the expected stereotypical Asian images from Western perspectives. It was during that time, a scuffle for the advent of modern Chinese women but mainly a contradiction for Chinese American women appeared. The space which is exotic, erotic but stereotypical of the Chinese – American nightclub represented contradictions in the identity of the Chinese – Americans. By analysing the novels of Lisa along with the life histories of the Chinese American dancing girls at the San Francisco nightclubs, as characterized in the novel of Lisa See, exemplify the irony in the identity of the Chinese Americans as shown in the clothes of Chinese American chorus girls' diffident Cheongsams outside and sensual, burlesque dresses underneath.

Keywords: nightclub; Chinatown; San Francisco; China Dolls; Lisa See; dancing girls

The recent success of the American romance comedy Crazy Rich Asians (2018), which features an all-Asian ensemble, brings up a number of topics that frequently recur in Asian American cultures, such as preconceptions about Asians and the conflict between East and West civilisations. However, in contrast to earlier this movie concentrates on Asian Americans and Asians themselves rather than inter-racial interactions, unlike Hollywood movies that use Asians or Asian Americans as supporting characters or in the setting of inter-racial relationships. Rachel Chu also transcends the boundaries of this mother-in-law and the conventional family when she persuades her traditional mother-in-law that she, a liberal Asian-American woman who follows her own passions and love interests, can be "enough" for the wealthy Nick declare that Asian Americans, who are neither entirely accepted by Asians nor Americans, can create their own strong culture and identity, making them the ideal spouse. Rachel's achievements suggest that the legitimacy of the Chinese identity is unimportant. In a similar vein, the issue of authenticity and stereotypes irritates Grace, the heroine and narrator of Lisa See's China Dolls. Grace and Rachel both advocate for reconsidering the Asian-American identity. Similar recurring issues as Crazy Rich Asians in Asian American communities are depicted in Lisa See's 2015 film China Dolls: conflicts between Eastern and Western cultures, between Asian traditions and American freedom, gender and racial differences, Asian stereotypes in American society, Orientalism, etc. Even though they aren't given enough attention, all of these topics are thoroughly covered in the literature now in publication. Scholars who study Asian Americans and the diaspora frequently concentrate on displacement and dislocation, but they devote far less attention to the ideas of place and space. However, space and place are important to analyse since they are closely linked to social conceptions of racial and gender identities. A few literary studies look with Chinatown, portraying it as either an urban setting where Asian Americans can reconstruct their identities or as a social area of legal discrimination (Xu 2015).

By examining space, gender, and identity in China Dolls, this paper seeks to further advance the study of space in Asian American literature, building on Xiaojing Zhou's study that critically analyses Chinatown as a space for Asian Americans. Three young Oriental women are described in China Dolls. China Dolls tells the story of three young Oriental women from different origins who end up dancing at the well-known Forbidden City nightclub in San Francisco in the late 1930s, which included Asian American musicians, singers, dancers, chorus lines, and magicians. Chinese girl Grace Lee was born in the United States and is growing up in the Midwest. She has a successful life and job and controls the novel's plot. Helen Fong is raised in her Chinatown traditional

Chinese courtyard. Japanese American Ruby Tom wins the title of Chinese princess at the dancing club. Lisa See suggests the San Francisco nightclub as a place for the three girls to perform the expected, stereotypical Asian images from Western perspectives as well as a place for them to re-articulate their new identities beyond the constrained spheres from their upbringing or tradition, given their precarious careers and personal conflicts. For Chinese-American women in particular, it was a paradox at the time, but it was also a struggle for the rise of modern Chinese women. The exotic, sensual, and stereotypical Chinese-American nightclub offers some liberties and symbolises the paradoxes of the Chinese-American identity. I contend that San Francisco nightclubs, as portrayed in Lisa See's book and other autobiographies of the Chinese-American dancing girls, represent the paradox of Chinese-American identities as demonstrated by the attire of Chinese-American chorus girls modest cheongsams on the outside and sensual burlesque costumes underneath.

The essay's structure is described in the paragraphs that follow. The Chinatown nightclub supports the widespread belief that nightclubs are predatory venues. The example shows how a nightclub may be a relatively open place where the dancing females can follow their own personalities, making it a place for self-reliance and creative freedom. However, this area also has its own restrictions, which are limited by both individual decisions and more general social influences. Consequently, it can be said that the nightclub is a complicated, contradictory place for the dancing females.

It is typical to view the dancing females at Chinatown nightclubs as objects of sexual desire. Their bodies and the area where they are on show are thus interpreted as commercialised, Orientalized, and fetishised. "Ethnicity, for better or worse, was always part of the act," a San Francisco Examiner reporter wrote in the 1980s. The mostly Caucasian audience's ignorance was something the performers had to put up with (Seligman 1989). To put it another way, part of what nightclubs sold was exoticism. Although the nightclub setting can be interpreted as a house of stereotypes a means of packaging racist clichés about Asians for Western consumption, a way to make Asian female bodies exotic in a sexist and racist way—it also offers a space with fewer restrictions, giving various conflicts a larger stage and space to be acted out and dramatized.

It is undeniable that the objectification of Asian women in nightclubs contributes to stereotypes. However, there's a chance that this will keep us from noticing the other opportunities the space presented. Here, nightclubs are seen as dynamic environments where performers can envision and negotiate their female identities in accordance with

their own desires. In fact, Lisa See asserts that these performers "broke the mould for what an Asian girl could or should do" in the foreword of Arthur Dong's book about the renowned nightclub Forbidden City. See's assertion is illustrated by her characters in China Dolls, each of whom forges their own Asian-American identities free from various constraints. The three major protagonists in See's book find a community in nightclubs, which helps them in their attempts to reconstruct their new identities outside of the original settings, constraints, and trauma from which they flee. Chinatown nightclubs generally have less limitations than the places the protagonists flee from, despite the prejudices and challenges. Nightclubs also transport the characters to other cities and beyond their conventional borders. Their evolving identities included geographic adaptability and mobility. Susan Stanford Friedman notes that "geographic allegorization... is not merely a figure of speech, but a central constituent of identity" (Friedman 1998, p. 23) while describing one of the positionality discourses that emphasises situational approaches. I contend that the characters' identities—which are shaped by relational, situational, and communal relationships—are fundamentally shaped by the nightclub. This essay makes the case that by examining how nightclubs affect the lives of See's main characters, works like China. For women who are marginalised, like the dancing girls, dolls can be empowering.

It has long been known that boundaries, bridges, and borderlands are "contact zones," where people of various racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, and sexual origins can interact. In other settings and situations, these interactions are frequently prohibited. Migrations, crossings, and dynamic movement are characteristics of these areas. The nightclub, by contrast, looks much more static and yet it still serves a similar function: allowing the Asian female performers to express and formulate their identities at a time when there were more restrictions and barriers through encounters that were not openly acceptable or accessible elsewhere. As a result, the nightclub functions as a transitional area that permits the blending of tradition and modernity, East and West, and self and other. Elijah Anderson describes evening public spaces as “cosmopolitan canopies . . . that offer a respite from the lingering tensions of urban life and an opportunity for diverse people to come together” (Anderson 2011, p. xiv). This idea might fit into that definition. Reuben A. Buford May challenges Anderson in his study of nightclubs in Northeast Georgia, claiming that the nightlife creates environments that more closely resemble integrated segregation (Buford May 2014). Buford May contends that the space of nightclubs further solidifies oppressive and authoritarian systems found in mainstream society by drawing on the division of nightclub patrons. The racial tensions and divisions among the club owners, dancers, and patrons in China Dolls are a reflection of the issues in

urban nightlife. According to See's book, both Anderson and May are correct: nightclubs provide more freedom and autonomy than the outside world, but they are never totally free of the preconceptions and limitations of the outside world—in fact, they take advantage of them. In this sense, the nightclub is a paradoxical modern space, similar to the Asian and Asian American chorus girls' outfits, which are revealing burlesque costumes underneath modest cheongsams.

Chinatown nightclubs, however, offer little independence and flexibility. Despite her attempts to leave her conventional courtyard and earn a living as a nightclub dancer, Helen ultimately reverts to her maternal role within her patriarchal family. Ruby finds a comparatively safe and unrestricted environment at nightclubs, especially when she is viewed as a dangerous enemy during World War II, but she is ultimately transferred to an internment camp and is unable to escape the nationalist government. Grace is arguably the most fortunate as she has left her rural upbringing and, for the most part, eventually achieves her goals. Consequently, Lisa See's portrayal of a nightclub does highlight its limitations and bounds, despite the fact that it is a rather liberated setting. As seen by the Chinese American chorus girls' modest cheongsams on the exterior and their seductive burlesque costumes on the inside, the nightclub environment is a place of paradox in modernity.

"How do you feel being billed as an Oriental performer, dancing in an Oriental Club?" is one of the nearly accusatory questions Helen's granddaughter Anne poses to Grace at the end of the book China Dolls. "Were you aware that you were reinforcing stereotypes about Asians? How could you dance at the China Doll or even put up with being referred to as a "China doll"? (pages 371–72). Grace thinks, “why do these young people make such a fuss about this? It’s not like saying Jap like Helen and Joe always said or coloured or something even worse. Or is it?” (p. 372). This claim challenges us to reconsider the problems with the self-Orientalism and stereotypes of Chinatown nightclub dancing females. Grace Lee questions the problems of self-Orientalism and East-West stereotypes in China Dolls, whereas Rachel Chu criticises the preconceptions of Chinese society by claiming her success at the end of Crazy Rich Asians.

By concentrating on the dancing girls' experience at a Chinatown nightclub, Lisa See illustrates the dynamic between stationary local locations and mobility, painting a picture of the diversity that frequently defines the immigrant experience. Instead of building the dialectic between the two, her narrative questions the Asian-American identity's binary universe between stability and mobility. Rethinking borders and locations are necessary when discussing the place-based gendered identities in her Asian

American/Asian diasporic work. In order to rethink the Asian-American literary landscape through the views of location, space, and belonging, this thesis on the Chinatown nightclub and its dancing girls advocates for a change.

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