

Mapping Identity in Chinatown: A Spatial Critique of Yan Gelling's *The Lost Daughter of Happiness* 唐人街的身份图谱： 严歌苓《扶桑》的空间叙事批评

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Abstract Investigations of Chinatown in Chinese American literature have typically adhered to two fixed paradigms: it is portrayed either as an oppressed ghetto or as a nostalgia-laden cultural enclave. Grounded in classical spatial criticism, this paper integrates recent insights from the sensory turn and decolonial space studies to re-examine Chinatown. Although existing scholarship on Yan Geling's *The Lost Daughter of Happiness* (2001) has extensively addressed its feminist and narrative dimensions, its underlying spatial logic remains underexplored. The novel foregrounds three interrelated dynamics—the urban discipline imposed upon immigrants, their embodied sensory resistance, and the ongoing negotiation of hybrid identity. This paper argues that Yan constructs a nuanced model of spatial belonging, illuminating how immigrants inhabit and reshape their environment through sensory experiences, cultural practices, and mobility across contested boundaries. Ultimately, this study explores identity formation amid spatial oppression, everyday acts of resistance, and the reconstruction of self-identity in contemporary contexts, foregrounding the complex negotiation of cultural belonging and identity among Chinese immigrants.

Keywords Spatial criticism; Chinese American literature; Chinatown; Cultural identity

1. Introduction

Chinatown has often been read in Chinese American literary studies as a site of inter-generational conflict and cultural translation. This tendency is especially evident in canonical representations of Chinatown in twentieth-century Chinese American fictions, such as *The Flower Drum Song* (1957) and *Bone* (1993). Yan Gelling's *The Lost Daughter of Happiness* (2001), however, demands a different critical lens. Rather than treating Chinatown merely as a backdrop of suffering, the novel radically reconfigures it into a dynamic “third space” in which the violent logic of spatial

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production collides with the embodied sensory experiences of the Chinese community. This collision reveals a complex process of negotiation: while dominant disciplinary regimes inscribe themselves onto immigrant bodies, immigrants simultaneously forge alternative modes of belonging by disrupting and remaking spatial norms from within.

This tension is embodied in Fusang, a young Chinese woman sold into prostitution in nineteenth-century America, inhabiting a cage-like room within a Chinatown brothel. Like many early Chinese immigrants who arrived in pursuit of economic survival, Fusang is subjected to both institutional discipline and pervasive social exclusion. Her narrative of subjugation is juxtaposed with figures such as Da Yong; a Chinese gangster whose actions exemplify grassroots forms of spatial resistance against enclosing power structures. The novel further introduces a parallel narrative focalized through a fifth-generation Chinese American girl who reflects on Fusing's story while navigating her own identity crisis. Together, these intertwined narratives illuminate how racialized subjects inhabit, contest, and reshape spatial regimes. Chinatown thus emerges not only as a site of marginalization but also as a cultural enclave in which fragmented diasporic identities are continuously rearticulated.

Existing scholarship on *The Lost Daughter of Happiness* has largely concentrated on two critical trajectories. Some studies (Iwasaki, 2025; Fang, 2024; Liu, 2024) adopt narratological approaches to scrutinize the novel's cross-cultural narrative construction. These scholars predominantly argue that Yan employs a detached narrative voice to deconstruct the Orientalist gaze, thereby exposing the stereotypes imposed on the Chinese community. However, while these analyses effectively decode the textual construction of the "Other," they often treat the "gaze" as a purely discursive phenomenon, overlooking the material enforcement of such exclusion through the physical segregation of Chinatown. Parallel to this, other scholars (Ma, 2022; Zhou, 2019) foreground the novel's feminist dimensions. Focusing on the protagonist Fusang, they examine how the female body becomes a site of suffering and resistance under the dual oppression of Chinese patriarchy and American racism. Yet, these feminist readings tend to analyze the immigrant body in isolation. By focusing solely on somatic suffering, they frequently neglect the environmental context and the sensory practices—how these bodies move, feel, and resist within the specific spatiality of Chinatown. Consequently, while offering valuable insights into narrative form and gender politics, current studies remain limited. They fail to capture the organic relationship between spatial materiality and embodied experience, a nexus crucial to understanding how diasporic identity is negotiated. In Yan's narrative, Chinatown is not merely a passive backdrop for these feminist or postcolonial dramas; it is an active agent. By foregrounding spatial critique, this study reconfigures

existing interpretations of Yan's feminist and postcolonial concerns, demonstrating how patriarchal and colonial forces are materialized through urban space, and how decolonial resistance is, in turn, spatially enacted.

The theoretical framework of this study is grounded in Henri Lefebvre's (1991) and Edward Soja's (1996) theories of the production of space, brought into dialogue with Michel Foucault's (1977) analysis of disciplinary power. While Foucault's framework illuminates Chinatown as an oppressive "conceived space" structured by surveillance and segregation, this study extends spatial analysis into the sensory domain to examine how this space is actualized and contested through embodied experience. Rather than treating the "sensory turn" (Pink, 2015) as a separate or supplementary methodology, we position sensory experience as the constitutive mechanism of Lefebvre's "lived space". In this view, Homi Bhabha's (1991) "third space" is not merely a discursive abstraction but is materially grounded in the atmospheric and corporeal realities of the enclave. Sensory representations in Yan Geling's narrative—manifested through music, visual symbolic imagery, and embodied practices—mediate the physical sensing and social reconfiguration of space. By operationalizing spatial theory through a sensory perspective, this article demonstrates the ambivalent status of Chinatown: it is both a Foucauldian site of discipline and a hybridized field of becoming, a tension resolved through the sensory negotiation of its diasporic inhabitants. Thus, the retention of cultural sensory texture is precisely what transforms the static geometry of control into a dynamic, lived counter-space. Guided by these concerns, this article addresses three central research questions: How does the spatial organization of Chinatown function as a mechanism of post-colonial and patriarchal discipline? In what ways do sensory representations enable Chinese immigrants to enact decolonial forms of resistance? How does such spatial resistance facilitate the emergence of a hybrid Chinese American identity? The article is structured accordingly. The first section examines the spatial violence imposed on Chinese Americans through legal exclusion and public stereotyping. The second examines how Yan evokes traditional Chinese cultural elements as a form of spatial and sensory resistance. The final section explores how these practices contribute to the reconfiguration of diasporic identity within a hybrid "third space." Ultimately, this study invites readers to reconsider Chinatown not merely as a site of displacement but as a generative space in which diasporic subjectivity is continuously reimagined.

2. Spatial Politics: Power and Discipline

In the late 19th century, the first Asian immigrants to the United States formed early Chinese American communities, notably in San Francisco. These enclaves, later known as Chinatowns,

emerged as seemingly autonomous spaces, yet they were in fact shaped by and subjected to the power dynamics of the dominant society. This section examines how Chinatown, as a spatial construct, enacted disciplinary power and how the Chinese American community, as a collective, was subjected to both structural and symbolic control.

Chinatown cannot be taken merely as a physical enclave, because its existence is deeply intertwined with the exercise of public power over urban space. As a racialized representation of space, Chinatown was shaped by exclusionary urban policies and white supremacist discourses. Henri Lefebvre underscores the inherently political nature of space, affirming that “thanks to the operation of power, practical space is the bearer of norms and constraints. It does not merely express power—it proceeds to repress in the name of power” (Lefebvre, 1991). At the turn of the twentieth century, San Francisco’s Chinatown was home to 1,200 people per acre. The extreme overcrowding, resulting from exclusionary legal and social mechanisms, reveals how urban planning became a tool of spatial violence and segregation.

At the beginning of the novel, Yan Geling portrays Chinatown as a maze of basements, narrow alleys, and brothels—a spatial configuration that vividly illustrates Lefebvre’s concept of space as a repressive tool of power. Prostitutes live in rooms so small that they can barely accommodate a bed, a table, and two chairs, allowing only “four steps” of walking space. These spaces are infested with unidentified bugs and filled with a foul odor; the furniture is broken and filthy, and the smoke-blackened walls contribute to a pervasive sense of decay. The room is connected to a so-called “bathroom,” which contains only a potty and a basin for washing, separated from the main room by a thin curtain. This oppressive spatial condition is not confined to brothels. Small restaurants and underground gambling houses throughout Chinatown are similarly cramped and deteriorated. These settings are not merely depictions of poverty but function as reminders of the spatial codification enforced by white supremacist ideologies. Chinese immigrants were pushed to the periphery of urban life and confined to minimal, overcrowded spaces—conditions that correspond to what Edward Soja terms “first space,” in which physical structures are shaped and constrained by dominant social and political forces. In this context, the spatial constraints imposed upon Chinatown reinforce a deliberately racialized form of urban engineering aimed at marginalizing Chinese American immigrants.

The spatial marginalization of Chinatown operates under a Foucauldian logic of heterotopia. Heterotopia, as Foucault defines it, refers to a “space of otherness” that is simultaneously real and symbolic, included yet excluded. Through legal instruments such as zoning or restrictive regulations, Chinese immigrants had already been physically expelled to the periphery of the city;

yet public discourse further constructed their living environment as a site of disease, criminality, and moral corruption. This portrayal fueled xenophobic sentiment, escalating into interracial violence during the peak of anti-Chinese movements.

The novel exposes the dual structure of oppression inherent in this spatial violence. On the macro level, institutional mechanisms systematically exclude Chinese immigrants from public life. For instance, in 1870, the San Francisco Board of Supervisors enacted an ordinance banning the use of carrying poles on city sidewalks. The ordinance stipulated that “no person upon any sidewalk shall carry a basket or baskets, bag or bags, suspended from or attached to poles across or upon the shoulder” (Chen, 2000). Yan integrates this historical reality into her novel, depicting a scene in which a Chinese laundryman, carrying clean clothes on a pole, is warned by a doorman: “If you don’t get out of here soon, you are going to run into the cops.” The laundryman answers: “It is much better now; they aren’t going after guys with carrying poles anymore” (Yan, 2001, pp. 180-181)¹. This moment underscores the absurdity of racialized legal constraints that turned ordinary acts into criminal offenses, further reinforcing Chinese immigrants’ subordinate status.

On a micro level, the novel illustrates how daily social interactions reinforce spatial discipline. In one scene, as a white man and his family pass through Chinatown, he orders Fusang and her friend to hide. At that time, Fu Sang understood: “Proper white devil women shouldn’t lay eyes on girls like them. They were permitted to exist, but not at the same time and place as the women in the carriage. They were supposed to leave the world clean for such women” (Yan, 2001, p. 37). The insidious logic of this spatial exclusion is perfectly captured in the command to “leave the world clean.” This was not a matter of simple physical separation, but a practice enforcing a fiction of moral and racial purity, and Chinese bodies had possibilities to contaminate this purity. It is ridiculous and lacks evidence to support this claim. But through such preposterous daily humiliations, far more than through legal statutes, immigrants were rendered invisible, their dignity eroded, and their marginalization naturalized. However, white individuals can freely enter Chinatown, often to commit crimes or loot stores, and Chinese residents have no means to seek white police assistance, yet they themselves are constantly monitored and their movements restricted (Yan, 2001, p. 40). This imbalance reflects what Edward Said states: the West constructs Chinatown as the antithesis of order and hygiene, a racialized space meant to justify exclusion and

¹ **A Note on Text and Translation:** This essay primarily analyzes the English translation of *The Lost Daughter of Happiness* (Cathy Silber, Trans., 2001) to engage with its reception in the Anglophone spatial context. However, cognizant that translation inevitably involves linguistic reconfiguration, I have cross-referenced key passages with the Chinese original (扶桑, 中国华侨出版社, 1996). For passages where the analysis relies on specific sensory imagery and metaphorical nuances, the original Chinese text is provided for comparison. Standard narrative dialogues that serve purely plot-driven functions are cited in English only.

containment (Ashcroft & Ahluwalia, 2001).

Operating within a spatial regime imposed by white hegemonic power, the physical confinement of Chinese immigrants functioned as a disciplinary mechanism that systematically effaced individual subjectivities. Denied access to professional spheres and excluded from mainstream social life, Chinese bodies became legible to the dominant society solely through the homogenizing discourse of the “coolie,” which is a racialized laboring figure devoid of agency or interiority. This imposed identity is socially and spatially constructed because the spatial exclusion ensures that the Chinese American presence could only be recognized within the boundaries of Chinatown, their confined enclave. As Bowman (2010) notes, within the white supremacist order, only “first world intellectuals” were deemed worthy of having individual names. Elaine Kim (2006) also argues that early Chinese immigrants, denied access to mainstream professions, were forced into service roles such as laundry workers, restaurant waiters, and domestic laborers. The mainstream society’s malicious ostracism sought to erase the individuality of Chinese Americans and reinforce their position at the bottom of the social hierarchy. In Yan’s work, their means of livelihood revolve around railroad construction, restaurant work, and laundry services. Unlike white men, they lack ambition; even when exploited by their employers, they accept it as long as they receive their wages. Even Da Yong, who holds a certain status in both white and Chinese communities, is only involved in illicit activities to make a living, like human trafficking and opium smuggling, let alone ordinary people who lack the courage to resist. The coolie’s role symbolizes early immigrants’ self-perception, illustrating how the material order established by white society profoundly shapes their sense of identity. This also reflects that those in power sustain spatial and social divisions through control over production and reproduction, thereby consolidating their authority (Soja, 2005).

In the enclosed physical space of Chinatown, the dominant white society constructed a hidden mechanism of power through exclusion, segregation, and punishment, thereby solidifying white supremacy. The Chinese immigrants, subjected to this disciplinary framework, internalized a hierarchical order in which they occupied the lowest position of the social structure. Foucault (1999) states that discipline does not merely regulate the body; it shapes the mind. It also means transforming the soul, conditioning subjects to accept their subjugation. This transformation is evident in the psychological impact of racialized discourse on the Chinese immigrants in Yan’s novel. Over time, they come to perceive themselves as an inherently marginalized group, relegated to the margins of society and excluded from the American Dream. Yan’s depiction of Chinatown ultimately underscores the tragic irony of Chinese immigrants’ aspirations. The promise of prosperity and upward mobility is systematically dismantled within the racialized spatial order of

American cities. Most of the novel's characters, like their historical counterparts, suffer the disillusionment of the American Dream. They may spend their whole lives trapped within an urban "prison" designed for them.

3. Symbolic Practices: Cultural Resistance

Although Chinatown is subject to the control of white authority, it is not merely a site of subjugation. Instead, it is also a space of potential resistance. This resistance can be understood through the concept of "counter-space" (Soja, 2005). Drawing on Lefebvre, Soja argues that a fundamental conflict exists between the conceived space—the dominant, abstract idea of a place—and the lived space, which is the felt experience of its inhabitants. For nineteenth-century Chinatown, the conceived space was an invention of white supremacist discourse. It was imagined as a racialized ghetto and a site of filth and criminality. However, through daily cultural practices and symbolic sensory rituals, Chinese immigrants produced a lived space of resilience and shared memory. This active lived space has become a "counter-space" that directly challenges the official narrative. Here, residents can subvert the identities imposed upon them.

Building on this foundation, this section then invites readers to see Chinatown in a new way. While Chinatown does function as a passive victim of racial segregation, it is also an evolving space of strong cultural vitality. Through embodied practices such as the performance of traditional rituals and elements, the rhythm of old Chinese songs, the wearing of ethnic costumes, and the maintenance of Chinese traditions, these visual and auditory images that Yan described have assembled what can be described as a "symbolic matrix" full of Oriental heterogeneity. Initially, this place was designed to limit and exclude them. However, Chinese Americans demonstrated their own agency in this regard. Their symbolic activities broke through the boundaries set by white planners. They transformed Chinatown from a contained area into a site of quiet resistance.

At the heart of this symbolic matrix are diverse cultural elements. They include the game of mahjong, Cantonese opera, two ounces of pickled duck tongue, the ivory silk mandarin jackets and pants, traditional instruments like the huqin, and even the humble chopstick. Far from being mere tokens of nostalgia, these items collectively form an immersive, multi-sensory environment. "Everyday experience is multi-sensual," (Rodaway, 1994), and within a hostile landscape, these non-visual senses become a primary medium for cultural resilience. Although the homeland is geographically distant, the constant performance and sensory experience of these symbols make it feel spatially and affectively present.

This multi-sensory experience connects directly to nostalgia rooted in shared memories and

imagination of the homeland, so it is not just about looking retrospectively. These symbolic practices are rooted in the lived emotional experiences of immigrants. Moreover, these actions participate in a broader cultural resistance that challenges dominant spatial hierarchies. Within Chinatown, the deliberate performance of cultural tradition resists the imposed spatial narrative of marginalization and racialized control. Therefore, these symbolic activities lead to the formation of Chinatown's "counter-space." This space gradually weakens the dominant white cultural perspective. By simply gathering these objects, people change the nature of the space and create their own sensory landscapes in this enclave, which is more familiar to them (Howes & Classen, 2014). A place originally meant for suppression becomes a stage for resistance. The performance of the musical *Shepherd Su Wu* clearly shows this transformative power. The narrative recalls the moment when Da Yong instructs his fellow musicians to play this rhythm:

Fusang started to play. The tune was like a gut, winding through everyone there. Everyone's body swayed like Fusang's, even the ones brimming with whiskey. [...] The first time through the song, the whites all had the same fishlike expression on their faces: pursed lips and sad eyes. The second time through, some of them started jerking as if trying to shake off a spell. They started to realize they were being tricked. What was behind this strange and soulful tune? The Chinamen were using it to gain the upper hand, because the sound was matchless; nothing could drown it out. [...] The whites sensed the Chinese were winning. 扶桑就吹起苏武牧羊来。音调像一根肠子，弯绕着穿过每个人。每个人身子都像扶桑那样浪起来，连那边涨满酒的身子。[...] 第一遍曲时，洋人那边全是一副脸：掀合的嘴唇与悲哀的眼使他们有了鱼类的面孔。第二遍曲，他们中的一部分人开始动弹，如同要摆脱符咒。这些人开始悟到自己受了愚弄：这样奇怪的、招魂般的吹奏是什么？这些黄面孔就用这东西占了上风，因为这声音没有对手，它不能被其他声音淹没。[...] 洋人感到黄面孔们在赢。

(Yan, 2001, pp. 162–163)

It becomes increasingly clear that the performance is more than mere music. It is a subtle yet potent act of resistance within the racialized space of the Chinese American community. Sound is pervasive and cannot be contained as easily as physical objects; it can break through the walls erected by the dominant space and contribute to the formation of counter-space. The ancient melody, centered on the themes of exile, loyalty, and homesickness, mirrors the emotional reality of Chinese immigrants who are physically displaced and culturally marginalized. This shared auditory experience serves to galvanize the community, reinforcing a collective imagination that stands in direct opposition to the daily humiliations imposed by a hostile society. The cowbell effect in *Shepherd Su Wu* evokes collective memories of traditional endurance, stirring dissatisfaction

among the displaced with the oppression they have endured, while also reviving a sense of national cohesion that may have faded over time.

The auditory experience itself, as described in the novel with vivid detail about the reactions of both the white audience and the performers, transforms the space it inhabits. When the white onlookers hear the melody, they are initially confused, begin to swear, and order the Chinese to stop. However, the sound of the music overpowers their voices, and in the end, the white audience is forced to give in and reluctantly appreciate the performance. It appears that the position of power has shifted at this moment. The Chinese Americans appear to break free from control and spatial constraints, at least for the duration of this musical performance. What was previously a degraded or surveilled location becoming, even if temporarily, a “counter-space” imbued with collective memory and emotional resonance. It becomes an acoustic territory defined not by the white visual gaze, but by a shared Chinese auditory memory. The rules of this space are temporarily rewritten. To a certain extent, this site exemplifies the notion of lived space as a site of subversion, where sensory experience becomes a tool for empowering minority communities. The melancholic tones of the huqin and the symbolic reference to Su Wu’s loyalty to the Han empire revive a sense of traditional Chinese character that had been diluted by systemic exclusion. In this sense, the ancient melody surpasses the temporal limits of the oppressive space. It builds a bridge across time, allowing the immigrant community to move beyond their painful present and enter a collective, historical timeline. The characters are no longer merely “coolies” bearing the brunt of discrimination, but individuals armed with a cultural heritage passed down through generations—a heritage that enables them to express their true feelings. Their resilience against the oppressive space gains historical weight and emotional strength. In this way, the performance interrupts the dominant spatial order imposed by white power and reclaims symbolic agency for the marginalized.

The emotional and physical impact of the tune illustrates how cultural memory and embodied practice intersect. Lefebvre (1976) once argued that “social practice presupposes the use of the body”, and this idea is clearly presented in the way that Chinese immigrants preserve their traditional body symbols, which constitute a visual image. For instance, male immigrants often retain their queues despite facing racial epithets such as “yellow rats.” In their view, these queues are not only aesthetic features but function as “spiritual umbilical cords” that symbolically connect them to their homeland. This choice reflects a meaningful act of resistance against the main authority that sets Western values and demands cultural assimilation. The Western public often interprets the queue as a symbol of savagery or ignorance, thereby failing to understand its emotional and cultural significance. While the dominant society mocks the queue to claim cultural

superiority, for Chinese immigrants, wearing it is more than defiance. It seems like a proud and deliberate expression of their civilization. In this way, it becomes a method of preserving cultural heritage against systemic marginalization. In this contested space, power relations are dynamic and constantly evolving. The Chinese community seeks to challenge the imposed hierarchy and gradually reshape the discourse of their cultural representation.

Yet cultural resistance is not confined to music and bodily appearance. It also appears in daily interactions, especially in moments of direct contact with colonial power. Chinese Americans are not passive recipients of Western impositions and ideological values. Instead, they develop subtle, almost unnoticeable forms of resistance in their own ways. One such case is illustrated in a narrative involving the so-called “Rescue Society.” When Fusang is brought to the hospital, missionaries immediately intervene by discarding her red silk shirt, a garment laden with cultural significance, and replacing it with attire they deem more “civilized,” pure, and white. The narrative provides a vivid account of this moment:

One day you changed out of the baggy white sackcloth into your own form-fitting wrinkled red satin blouse. Chris walked in the door and was terrified by the stark red. Instead of the chair in the corner, he headed straight toward you, as if in a dream. [...] The old missionary named Mary appeared in the doorway. You and Chris were standing beside the bed. She understood what was happening better than you and Chris did. She was appalled. ‘How could you whore here?’ she asked, ‘How could you seduce a child?’ [...] She tossed the sackcloth at you and said, ‘That red thing you’re wearing is a filthy sin.’ The red blouse was crumpled up and thrown in the trash.

有天你把宽大的白麻布衬衣脱了，换上你自己皱巴巴的红绸衫。绸衫烂红如醉，紧贴你的肌肤。克里斯进门就被这兀突的红色怔住，竟没有走向墙角那方正的椅子，而是直接走向你，脚步带些梦。[...] 名叫玛丽的年长女干事出现在门口。此刻克里斯与你站在床前。她明白了你和克里斯都没明白的那件重大事情。她说这是绝不允许的一件事情，在这片宅地上，绝不允许这样齷齪和邪恶的事情。怎么可以在这里贩娼？她说，怎么可以引诱一个没成年的孩子？[...] 她将白麻布衬衣扔在你身上，然后说，你身上的红衫子看去就肮脏邪恶。红衫子被团作一团扔进垃圾堆。

(Yan, 2001, pp.124–125)

This intervention serves not only as an attempt to enforce a dress code but also as a broader strategy of cultural emasculation and Foucauldian disciplinary control. The missionaries’ disgust toward the red blouse, which is rich in symbolic meaning, reveals more than a matter of individual taste. In their Western Christian worldview, the color “red” signifies sin and illicit passion, making the garment a “filthy sin” that must be purged. For Fusang, however, the red silk evokes its Chinese

cultural meaning of vitality and luck, and she wants to use this visual attack to show her identity in this space. Thus, the missionaries' attempt to replace it with a "pure" white sackcloth is a direct assault on her civilization and tradition. Also, it can be seen as an effort to discipline and "civilize" her body by erasing her cultural markers bodily and visually, making Fusang succumb to their "privileged and purifying culture" in this space. By discarding the symbolic garment, the colonial forces seek to impose a homogenized, racially charged notion of civility that is often antithetical to the immigrants' voluntary cultural practices. Ironically, however, the targeting of these cultural elements often has the opposite effect: they become more significant to those who wear them, turning into powerful emblems of collective cultural resistance. This insistence on preserving traditional markers of identity is echoed vividly in the character of Fusang, whose determination to wear the red silk cloth constitutes a profound act of reappropriating her own bodily space. Through these embodied practices, she asserts a cultural continuity that defies the erasure attempted by colonial and racial forces.

The struggle against cultural erasure is not limited to direct interactions with authority. Yan also challenges dominant cultural narratives by reconfiguring Chinese masculinity within the spatial dynamics of Chinatown. In the spatial construction of Chinatown, Chinese men have long been confined to a stereotyped image—submissive, effeminate, and racially inferior. This image is not only a product of Western colonial discourse but is also reinforced through the spatial order that renders them invisible within both dominant and marginal spaces. However, the figure of Da Yong emerges as a challenge to the encoded stereotype that the Chinese male community sheepishly obeys the spatial order in their tiny habitat. Da Yong's bodily presence, dress, and actions do not conform to the docile image imposed on Chinese men. His appearance disrupts the so-called peace established by the authorities in the designated space. He presents himself as a mediator and moves freely between Chinatown and the outside world, occupying a liminal position that bridges the fixed spatial binary between the ethnic enclave and the dominant society. This liminality becomes the source of his power to resist: belonging fully to neither the white world nor the Chinese community, he can navigate and manipulate the rules of both to his advantage. He turns his marginality into a strategic asset. By crossing spatial boundaries, he destabilizes the normative view of Chinese masculinity confined to the margins. This mobility, therefore, not only serves as a direct challenge to the spatial confinement imposed on other Chinese immigrants but also as a strong resistance within the space, as well as the very boundaries of the space itself.

Da Yong is not simply a character but a symbol of cultural resistance, embodying a form of Chinese masculinity that others in this space lack. According to Yan's description, Da Yong is

depicted with a thick queue, decorated with lavish jeweled rings, and carrying a row of exquisite daggers at his waist. Those visual symbols, even when displayed inadvertently, are enough to unsettle and disarm the foreign gaze. This turns his body into a mobile territory of power. He doesn't need to be in a specific space to have authority; he carries his authority with him, and it reshapes the social dynamics of any site he enters, making his body an active spatial production of power.

To construct Da Yong, Yan Geling draws on the complex hero prototype of Chinese classical literature, most notably the outlaw heroes of *Water Margin* (1524). This allows her to create a figure of deep moral ambiguity. His criminality is undeniable because he traffics in human lives and attacks the police. Yet, it is precisely this position outside the established law that enables his role as the community's protector, allowing him to avenge Chinese laborers and negotiate with white society on his own terms. As such, he not only enacts resistance individually but also leads the Chinese laborers, who suffer unjust treatment in their workplace, in a strike to regain their deserved pay, symbolizing a collective attempt to renegotiate the spatial power relations of the entire community. Here, Da Yong is attempting to construct an alternative, Chinese spatial order within Chinatown. It should be a diasporic *liang shan* governed by a chivalric code of brotherhood and justice. When he leads the strike, he is not asking for inclusion in the American system; he is imposing a Chinese sense of "yi" (righteousness) onto the space. This reframes his actions from simple resistance to a form of new space-building. By constructing this dual image, Yan subverts the conventional Western portrayal of Chinese men as passive or cowardly. Instead, Da Yong is assertive, clever, and resilient. He is not afraid to challenge the mechanisms of power. His efforts to preserve traditional Chinese masculinity are both a form of defiance and an attempt to subvert the spatial order. In doing so, he unsettles the boundaries of power and repositions who holds authority in the space.

In Chinatown, the forms of resistance vary: the song "Shepherd Su Wu," the persistence of cultural visual signs on the body, and the reshaping of masculine identity. However, the underlying theme is one of continuity and resilience. Despite the relentless pressures of colonial modernity and racial subjugation, Chinese immigrants have continuously found ways to challenge imposed values and resist subaltern positioning. The sensory experiences in the novel function not merely as atmospheric details, but as active spatial mechanisms that transform Chinatown from a site of confinement into a lived "counter-space."

Their strategies of symbolic and multisensory resistance have transformed daily practices into powerful acts of defiance, becoming part of the lived experiences of Chinatown and reasserting subjectivity in a hostile environment. The multifaceted nature of this resistance underscores a

critical insight: cultural symbols are far more than nostalgic reminders of homeland memories and golden days. They are dynamic tools of empowerment. Chinatown here transcends its physical and political meanings, embodying the pride of the Chinese community in preserving its cultural heritage. By engaging in symbolic practices that draw upon the rich heritage of their homeland, Chinese immigrants not only preserve the memory of their cultural origins but also articulate a defiant counter-narrative to the forces that seek to repress them. This process of cultural negotiation is both a means of survival and a powerful act of resistance against oppressive power structures within this space.

4. Identity Formation: Dynamic Reconfiguration

In the previous section, we discussed how daily symbols of Chinese culture and sensory experiences of the immigrants enable acts of cultural resistance. These acts arise in the face of systemic oppression and racialized violence embedded in spatial practices. Such symbols can destabilize the lines of power asserted in space. However, the reconstruction of identity within diasporic communities is often fraught with tension between resistance and assimilation. Although cultural symbols offer moments of empowerment, individual immigrants must continually negotiate and adjust their positions. They face multiple pressures and persistent anxiety imposed by dominant hierarchies. This section explores how Chinese immigrants form their cultural identity within diasporic and confined urban spaces. Situated between a homeland they have left behind and a host country that marginalizes them, they inhabit a cultural enclave that serves as both a refuge and a contested space, functioning like a “third space.” How do they form and perform their identity in such a liminal zone? And how do they find balance when cultural limitations converge to shape their subjectivity in a diasporic context?

The theoretical foundation for understanding Chinatown begins with Homi Bhabha’s notion of the “third space” (1991), a discursive and liminal sphere where the binary logic of colonial power breaks down. Building on this, Edward Soja (2005) spatializes the concept as “thirdspace”—a real, lived social space where the physical and the imagined collide and are creatively reconfigured.¹ However, to imbue this framework with a decolonial critique, we argue that if spatial critical theory remains at the purely discursive level, it risks becoming an abstraction. A decolonial approach, therefore, requires that any analysis of space be grounded in the embodied experiences of its inhabitants and be accountable to the history of the land itself (Ramírez, 2018). Therefore, we utilize classical spatial theory to comprehend the processes of cultural negotiation, while

¹ Edward Soja first introduced the concept of “thirdspace” in *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (1996). This term is distinct from Homi Bhabha’s notion of the “third space”. Accordingly, the different spelling is retained throughout this study.

simultaneously employing a decolonial lens to understand the conditions under which this negotiation takes place. This means analyzing how immigrants, living on what is historically “stolen land,” forge their hybrid identities and sense of spatial belonging not just through abstract discourse, but through tangible and fraught spatial practices. Only through this synthesis can we fully grasp Chinatown’s role as a site of hybrid renewal.

Yan’s novel provides a compelling narrative exploration of identity formation within diasporic space, transforming Chinatown into a metaphorical “third space” where immigrant subjectivities are shaped, tested, and redefined. While the previous section focused on the symbolic resistance of early immigrants, this section explores how that historical legacy is reactivated in the present. Yan’s novel posits that the cultural resilience forged in the past does not disappear; instead, it becomes a crucial symbolic resource for future generations. Through the shifting perspective between a fifth-generation narrator and historical immigrant records, the novel reveals changing strategies of cultural negotiation. Early immigrants endured explicit exclusion and racialized violence. Contemporary figures contend with more covert pressures, including implicit bias and social stereotyping. In response, they adopt pragmatic modes of adaptation to the space: “we show up in our only Western suit, looking people in the eye, spouting good English, and get the job” (Yan, 2001, p. 154). These acts of self-adaptation reflect not surrender but a tactical integration. However, this creates a spiritual void for them as they lose their motivation to work hard. They start to question the meaning of working in America and being accepted by society because all these acts rely on abandoning their roots and adopting a new cultural paradigm. This crisis of meaning is what compels the narrator to turn back to the symbolic archive of her ancestors’ resistance for answers.

Nevertheless, their identification with Chinatown persists, as shown by communal living patterns and shared feelings of insecurity: “We too crowd into cramped, shabby apartments... a sense of safety a matter of everyone feeling equally unsafe... we begin, step by cautious step, to break out into non-Chinese territory” (Yan, 2001, p. 153). This dual positionality, which is between external mobility and internal cohesion, illustrates Bhabha’s idea of identity formed in the “third space”, a liminal zone full of hybridity and contradiction. In contrast to their ancestors, who were often forced to assimilate through low-status labor and cultural erasure, the current generation of immigrants no longer experiences the same level of imposed humiliation. However, they still struggle with a sense of cultural and identity dislocation. Even though they can survive in the host country, the host culture isolates them spiritually. Chinatown offers them comfort among other Chinese immigrants who face the same identity confusion. In this liminal state, Chinatown serves as both a refuge and a site of resistance. It offers solidarity within the community while also challenging rigid structures

of spatial exclusion imposed by the dominant society. Through such practices, immigrants reshape the meaning of place, allowing the marginalized to claim agency within and beyond dominant spaces (Soja, 2005).

The novel further develops the discussion of identity reconstruction through the narrator's personal search for her roots. The narrator, in trying to tell Fusang's story, expresses a key concern of the immigrant experience: "I just want to look for my roots, in stories about working and studying and getting along with non-Chinese, stories about whether the moon over a foreign land is rounder than the moon back home" (Yan, 2001, p. 155). She holds this opinion because, as she says, "when we take in the towering skyscrapers and big streets and think, so fucking what? A cynical seer begins in our eyes and takes over our whole disposition: so, this is the position fifth-generation immigrants are fighting for?" (Yan, 2001, p. 154). This strong statement captures the essence of diasporic identity, illustrating how immigrants continually navigate the tension between their cultural roots and new experiences. It is precisely the modern emptiness in the new society that makes the symbolic acts of the past so vital. After pursuing dreams in a new land with modern skylines and unfamiliar values, the narrator begins to question the meaning of such aspirations and then turns toward a search for cultural roots in order to gain spiritual satisfaction. Yet this is not a simple return to tradition. Rather, it marks the emergence of the "third space"—a hybrid cultural zone where identity is formed through the negotiation between past and present, home and host cultures. And when she says, "so fucking what?", the significance of this vernacular, cynical tone cannot be overstated. It marks a distinct break from the more poetic or historical language used to describe the era of Fusang. This tonal shift can be seen as a feature of the hybrid, third-space identity, which is a more Americanized voice that persistently searches for its Chinese roots.

The narrator's reflection—"So this is the position fifth-generation immigrants are fighting for?"—reveals a crisis of meaning that goes beyond material survival. Unlike earlier generations who were busy with economic survival, this generation confronts deeper existential questions. By looking back at history to find existential value in a new country, they reconstruct a different identity. They neither reject the new nor cling to the old; rather, they merge the two. This hybrid process resists binary thinking because it is not a matter of black or white. The diasporic subject is neither fully assimilated nor entirely rooted in tradition. Instead, identity is constantly re-formed in the interstitial space, which allows the immigrant both to critique dominant cultural values and to transform inherited narratives. It is within this Third Space that cultural meaning is made, unmade, and remade. Identity is built through the encounter and negotiation of differences. This process creates mixed traits that transcend binary classifications. The lived and inner reflections of

immigrants reveal that authentic identity depends neither on strict adherence to past ethnic values nor on passive assimilation into the host culture. Instead, it emerges from negotiating a position within the Third Space.

From this perspective, Chinatown is not merely a static ethnic enclave rooted in the past. It is a vibrant and dynamic space for identity formation. It offers both new and long-established immigrants a space to engage with the values of mainstream society while also challenging the binary between center and margin. In this space, the clear boundary of identity becomes blurred. At the end of the novel, Yan Geling vividly illustrates this dynamic. Fusang and the fifth-generation narrator, despite enduring much hardship, ultimately choose to remain in the United States. More notably, they have grown accustomed to their fluid identity in this foreign country. This choice can be seen as a testament to the “third space,” which surpasses the binary choices of returning to the homeland or total assimilation. They establish their place within this open and dialogic space. Chinatown also functions as a hub of cultural exchange. Non-Chinese individuals come to its restaurants and readily adopt cultural practices such as using chopsticks. This reflects a refusal to close cultural boundaries. Its changing nature highlights the deeper significance of Chinatown: not merely a refuge for immigrants, but an ongoing “third space” of hybrid identity construction and intercultural negotiation.

5. Conclusion

This spatial reading of Yan Geling’s *The Lost Daughter of Happiness* (2001) reveals Chinatown not only as a site of control but also as a “third space” where culture is created. It also reveals how diasporic identity is actively negotiated, not passively inherited. Chinatown, therefore, serves as a living testament to the cultural resilience and adaptability of immigrant communities in the face of mainstream society. Although it has historically been considered a racialized space under mandatory rules and exclusionary policies, Chinatown breaks these imposed boundaries, turning them into opportunities for cultural reinvention and providing a space for immigrants to reflect on their identities.

This study first observed how institutional power constrained Chinatown. It examined the ways in which these forces push immigrants to the periphery of the social hierarchy. As a result, immigrants become disillusioned with their initial aspirations. The study then turned to Yan Geling’s literary reconstruction of Chinatown. It showed how Yan establishes this space through the manipulation of cultural symbols and sensory experiences. This reconstruction functions as a form of resistance against spatial and discursive domination. Ultimately, it examined how this

resistance, combined with the disorientation caused by cultural displacement and diasporic life, led to an identity crisis. In response, immigrants seek a “third space,” where hybridity and fluidity can be articulated. By placing space at the center of the analysis, this study moves beyond established feminist and narratological approaches. It reveals the material and symbolic ground where identity struggles unfold.

In an era of intensified globalization and cultural flux, the survival strategies of Chinatown suggest a broader, more universal insight: true identity confidence does not derive from the elimination of differences, but from their creative negotiation. Diasporic subjectivities are continuously rearticulated within the fissures of space, where embodied sensory experiences act as potent mechanisms to destabilize the rigid limits of exclusion and subvert hegemonic power dynamics. Yan Geling’s writing exemplifies this process. Her work serves as a cultural mediator, bridging historical memory and contemporary identity struggles. Read through this spatial-sensory lens, Yan Geling’s novel offers a vital corrective to earlier models of Chinese American identity that were often confined to a binary of assimilation versus resistance. Instead, the novel proposes a model of sensory inhabitation, where diasporic identity is forged through the creative and resilient reconstruction of contested spaces.

In essence, *The Lost Daughter of Happiness* (2001) encourages a rethinking of Chinatown narratives and identity formation. It presents identity not as a fixed essence, but as an ongoing process shaped by spatial, cultural, and historical forces. Yan Geling’s spatial narrative does more than map the geography of Chinatown. It maps the very soul of a hybrid Chinese American identity in the process of formation.

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