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"Looking Back in Anger": Multiculturalism, Ethnicity and the Commodification of University Space in Ouyang Yu's *The Eastern Slope Chronicle*

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Abstract
The proposed paper attempts to investigate the nuanced layers of multiculturalism and ethnicity in Australia through the lens of the Chinese-Australian writer, Ouyang Yu. His novel, *The Eastern Slope Chronicle*, written from the perspective of a student's cooperation with the term 'postcolonial', throws a compulsive doubt on the celebration of multiculturalism. Whereas the novel deals with central 'postcolonial' questions like nationhood, political relation between countries, repatriation, violence, and immigrant identity, its unabridged and cut-and-dried presentation of the corporate packaging of terms like multicultural and postcolonial or the body of the diasporic student as the product of study and university research invites more critical thoughts on university space, the category of international student or the commodification of feelings like love, emotion and soul. In a way, it seeks the irony and economy of 'affect' in a supposedly 'postcolonial' novel.

[**Keywords**: Ouyang Yu, *Eastern Slope Chronicle,* Multiculturalism, Ethnicity, Commodification, University, Space.]

With the recent cases of terrorism or racial/ethnic tensions all over the world, the idea of successful cohabitation of different cultures in a place has encountered both tense and intense pressure. What adds to this picture is the unimaginable rise of student violence in recent times. The custodians of cultural life and exchange, where multiculturalism is celebrated, have faced a plethora of questions regarding history of violence between races, the relatively uncompromising level of ghettoization or community culture, the laws of immigration, the problem of financial destabilization and its result on the tensions in cultural nexus or the necessity of tolerance. The student violence or corporate packaging of ethnic cultures has forced us think beyond these typical symptoms of the postcolonial or the multicultural and pervade the nuanced space of student identity. The novel that I study here, Ouyang Yu's *The Eastern Slope Chronicle*, published in 2002, brings us close to these questions, and invites us think of new factors like the category of international student, university space or the diasporic body of the student as a product or case study of university research. It is quite unsettling to see such little work has been done on such a promising novel. The paper attempts to bring new quarters of thought along the symptoms of the postcolonial/multicultural, and thus asks us to evaluate this young writer's unabashed study which was rejected by nineteen publishers after its birth.

But before going directly to the text, let us try to set, if any setting is possible, the old foe of text: the context. The novel is set mostly in Australia and thus demands us some knowledge of the history of multiculturalism and Chinese settlement in Australia. Multiculturalism, broadly speaking, is cultural relativism or tolerance in a place dominated by cultural diversity. With the increasing rise in global capitalism and a gradual slackening of the transnational immigration restriction in the post-Second World War period, which saw forms of mass exodus from Yugoslav or East Africa, let alone Germany, debates on housing the immigrants became a central socio-political issue.[2] Moreover, situations like the black power campaigns in USA, the

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protest against Hanification in China, the rise of the Burakumin in Japan, the display of cultural intolerance in India and Australia have led the countries to a sincere understanding of tolerance and accessibility of different cultural settlements and performance in specific territories. Although, previously this model of cultural response had worked in USA as, to use an oft-used culinary metaphor, a 'melting pot' (that is to get adapted to and assimilated in the American culture), yet the post-1970s settlers showed more determination in retaining cultural specificity, which in turn resulted in 'coercive assimilation' or integration, leading to some policy making of cultural tolerance and a life of, to continue the culinary metaphor, the 'salad bowl'[3]. In the mid 70s, Australia declared that it adopts and affiliates multiculturalism nationally. [4] The novel projects the case of Australia, and thus helps us revise the history of multiculturalism.

The Eastern Slope Chronicle is a story of Dao Zhuang, who immigrated to Australia in result of the Tiananmen Square Massacre in 1989, because he regarded Australia "as a land of opportunity". But his romantic engagement is crushed soon, as he finds out another story to be performing there – a story of hard work, failure, strong racial discrimination, and a passive, indifferent attitude thrust upon not only by the euro-centric 'settler' gaze, but also by his own immigrant predecessors. This creates in him a deep-seated anger for Australia and he decides to go back to China, his native land, on excuse of a multinational company's market extension plan and his revisit to the Eastern Slope that the former will use in his forthcoming paper on immigration. But this postmodern China, which "looks like a mass splash of old and new things energetically mixed together" has something else in store for him. His adopted country is severely criticized by professor Zhong and his friend Mr. Ston, who invites him for a dinner and urges him to speak about Australia to his students of Red Cliff University. He is further heartbroken as his sister refuses his entry to his house. He sees his friends accommodating themselves with the allurements of the transnational world, giving up very casually any idealism or patriotic enthusiasm. In fact he understands the diabolic garb of the play between complacency and regimentation of the country as he is himself treated as a traitor to his own nation (the bar case or Minnie's accusation of him). Dejected, crushed, embittered with the sense of insecurity in his 'own' country and the shattering of his growing nostalgia, he moves back to Australia, defeated, thrown away, and helpless. Although he tries to rediscover some sense of romantic liaison in this 'passive' world with a student called Antoinette, yet only to augment his anger a bit more. He says at the end, "they never make friends with you just for otherwise. They turn you into commodities as they are commodities themselves" (P.366). So is the case of his friends, Wu and Warne, who are lost in this same, angered, painful experience of belonging.

Why is such a deep seated feeling of bitterness and dejection? Let us map the story within the history of Australian-Chinese relations in Australia over the years. It is quite well-known that it started during the early period of the nineteenth century when the Chinese villagers of the Pearl Delta River were forced to migrate to Australia on account of the search for Gold Rush. After a lot of accommodation and climactic problem, as the captain of the ships used to drop them anywhere in Australia after taking the immigration tax, they showed their skill and hard labour. When the white Australians saw that these people had started taking 'their' gold to Chinese states, immediately restrictive policies on immigration were launched, fearing that more outbursts like the Lambing Flat one can be possible.[5] In fact, when the existing Chinese, confined in business and livelihood, needed to creep in mainstream Australian cities for making their market, new policies like the White Australia Policy or the Australia First Policy were inaugurated. A total restriction on Asian immigration was imposed in result of the worldwide fear of communist revolution. Moreover, the assimilation or integration policy mostly showed symptoms of dealing with the Asian as the third world citizens, destitute who have come to rob Australia for their individual profit. It is, as Jeremy Beckett notices, a huge burden of history, and taking such steps do not suddenly liquidate that process.[6]

The trend of Asian writing in Australia, constituted by an approach of irritated compromise, leads us towards such a realization.[7] Yu says "unlike China which had an ugly façade anywhere you go that was easy to draw criticism, Australia presented a very pleasant face and surface to any visitors" (p.101). Why is this? What is Australia according to the views of an immigrant? What steps are there awaiting him? Is returning to the native land with the hope of finding one's root or contributing to one's nation a welcome step? If it's so tough living in a multicultural nation, why is the model forwarded at all? Yu's work tends to highlight these issues, relevant and repeated in their occurrence in the present world, acutely conscious of minority rights and international tolerance, and moves towards exploring something that is exceedingly disturbing – a total de-ethnicization, where the global consumerist culture cannot be afforded and the imagination of the native country can only sum up shameful fears of rejection, un-recognition and a resulting total deprivation.

Dao went Australia for his selfish profit. He knew that he has a good cause for getting a job there. He went to several professional institutions with the declaration that he was out of country because of the tyrannical, autocratic, anti-revolutionary govt. against which he has been, so he says, exhibiting his severe protest by taking part in various pro-democratic rallies and meetings and by publishing "articles promoting democracy and freedom in protest against the atrocities by the Chinese government against its own people" (p.14). He knows that in a country which holds fast to the western tenets of freedom and democracy, it will be easier to attain a permanent residency and job as well. But his early romantic fascination with and profitable opportunities in the country ceases as he finds the strong impassivity and indifference that is shown towards the immigrants. He perceives that the flag that Australia boastfully holds in the name of multiculturalism or a sense of happy existence of several cultures side by side, declaring their autonomous, unique, legendary cultures, is nothing but a covered-up projection of fragmentation and widening gap of communication, something that Smolicz's study shows in detail.[8] This is how the text probably sets a dialogue with ethnographic approach. When he goes to the national bank and is asked to name his partner if he is to open any joint bank account, he feels that essential disharmony steeped in Australian code of conduct: "I realized for the first time that Australia also has "regulations"...that was more painful to me because I had to sign my name in a social security form where the name "partner" replaces "wife"…" (p.15).

Australia never looks at him with any positive view. The hatred against the ethnic minority is so that he has to veil his Chinese identity and to adopt a foreign name in order to save him from the hateful gazes or segregations from the job interview officers; still "things did not improve fundamentally. Some of my applications were accepted but I could never pass the stage of an interview. I never knew why but the interviewers always seemed to have some questions up their sleeves that would undo you no matter how many sessions you took on job interview skills" (p. 20). And it was at the end that we come to know that the questions hurled at him were essentially a doubt about his stability or contribution to the country, as he is from a marginal community. In his angry reply he defies the racist administration of the country by this speech. The whole paragraph is worth quoting here:

> Thank you for shortlisting me in yet another one of those boring professional interviews designed to fail genius….I am fucked off by your unintelligent, computer-designed, beaurocratic questions like "how would you teach a mixed class of students" or "could you tell me what post-colonialism means". Let me tell you this: the fact that all of you sit here today, judging someone like me from a colored background, is what post-colonialism means. Unless half of you are of other colors, whether they are blue or purple or brown or scarlet I don't care, this will only be pro-colonialism. Do you think I can put up with your mediocrity like that?...Here then is to you, the bloody capitalist bait of an application to a colored genius who defies you and your idiotic system. (p.23)

This is not a sudden outburst. He did not get a job by changing even his name to a Christian one. Ultimately with all his masters' degree and other high-academic certificates, he could only end up being a salesman, giving "ads that are hidden in the margins. Ads that are written between the lines. Small ads that have big significance."(p.26). This marginal significance does also attempt to portray his social condition of unfulfillment: his wife's disillusionment with the 'suburban' life, his jobless situation widening the breach more between him and his wife's academically superior status, the latter's divorce with him, and his decision to go back to China, drooped and shamefully defeated. He seems to understand that "the opportunity seemed to exist only for the Australians and people from other countries of the British Commonwealth and not the likes of me." (p.25).[9] Gradually also his view becomes a bit lenient, but more pathetic, as he tells the university students in China that:

> Australians don't like too many Asians in their country…to overstay as economic immigrants because they consider theirs a rich country and don't want to spend too much on the poor people from the third world countries. If you are wealthy and are skilled, with heaps of money, you might consider migrating there through normal channels (p.180).

If one cannot afford that, the country gives one various gestures of leaving. One of them definitely is the narrator's experience in the Army Service interview where he was refused for the post due to some reason related to un-cleanliness. This leads us straight to a study conducted by Rita Simon and James Lynch on the public opinion towards immigrants in Australia where the tensions of coercive assimilation echoed throughout the recording.[10] The novel asks a similar question: are life and professional opportunity safe and secure in this nation, leaving apart ideas of cultural performance or linguistic independence?

Towards the middle of the book, the narration adds a significant section 'Notes on the Aussies', which seems to summarize Australia from an ethnographer's perspective: Australians "evade the responsibility of communications", are "extremely snobbish", "afraid of making a mistake" secretive in nature and fierce in relationship, and essentially "conservative" in attitude (p.166-68). The wrath is unfathomable in him as he finds the strongly dubious nature of their national image. They want to promote a self-image of cultural or social tolerance, but, the narrator observes, the white Australian people are deeply patriarchal and rigid in their kinship with other communities. He says, "The country is full of tyrants, big and small, who won't allow democracy to interfere with their own interest." (p.170). Elsewhere in analyzing the western version of administrative system and its application, Dao tells Minnie, an inquisitive student of Red Cliff university where he lectured on the Australian life, that there is a big gap between ideology and its practice in the western world. "Everything in the west is commercialized….I mean freedom and democracy. It's like hungry people who have already got their food, so why worry any more?" (p.194). It is only a way of promoting it worldwide for commercial purpose. He further says, "Western version of freedom and democracy is tempered with strict law and order" (p.194). So again what comes to us is not the case in reality. In fact, "people occupying important positions even admire the Chinese for their feudalistic practices" (p.170). They are also "suspicious" and "xenophobic". The narrator seems to be Yu himself as we find the author-poet writing downs these lines in a future publication of a collection of poems[11]:

> When I was boarding the CAAC plane for home which is
> Of course china
> I said through the arsehole of a window
> Fuck you Australia!
> You thought I'd made myself a millionaire didn't ya
> Digging for gold in your cheap sunshine
> You thought I'd wanted to get a kangaroo certificate

In order to live on the dole like a cheap unemployed fat man
You thought I'd wanted to learn your English
That called the names
That fucked, whenever it could, anybody especially us.

From here rises the sense to avoid this ongoing politics of indifference and duplicity and a wish to go back to one's native country, where the protective guardian is always supposedly ready to safeguard his/her offspring. But the central dilemma that occurs within every individual regarding the idea of repatriation is the shameful fear that "there was no hope of ever going back to China, either, because if he did he would be regarded as the poor of the poorest" (p.31)[12] . Along with it nurtures within him an instinctive desire of being rescued by his native land, which China has not been able to do. And so is an unforgiving attitude of the son towards the mother: "my feelings towards China….Were not unlike those of a son who having been expelled from home by his parents, tries to forget and forgive them and in so doing remembers them even more poignantly and less inclined to forgive" (p.20). So he returns with the intention of staying brief there.

He comes to his native place – the Eastern Slope, named after the famous Chinese poet Su Shi. This town has architectural ancientness and a typical Chinese romantic aura. But this aura is un-mystified fast as he finds himself in severe criticism from Prof. Zhong and Mr. Ston, for whom expatriation is a violation, treachery done to one's country. They order for him "a great Australian lobster" with a tone that why would anyone go to Australia if the food and other entertaining resources are available in China. In fact, Mr. Ston is so upfront about foreigners that he wishes, "if they want to make our money, they will have to make an effort to speak our language and to our ways of thinking" (p.42). Marx, Rousseau, Kennedy, three of his friends whose names were given after their considerable interest in those legendary people who are champions of scientific socialism, reason and enlightenment, are totally lost in their idealism. This present China with its history of socialist and Cultural Revolution tends to appear something different, modeled on the transnational capitalistic product. Marx works in a magazine company, whose primary expectation is to make the magazine demanding by inserting glossy and luscious pictures and topics like "divorce, crime rate and new products in the market as well as advertisements"….Otherwise the people won't buy us" (p.120). Kennedy and Rousseau own a table dancing bar. All of them know that sex industry is the booming in the world, and the govt. ban on it is only a 'sham' display. Kennedy says, "Fact is, the banners are often the people who are most interested" (p.118).

So is the depiction of disorder in the social fabric. Divorce has become the fashion of the day. All of his friends are divorcee and polygamous. The marriage prospect his sister brings for him is also a divorcee. The only difference in the social order is that this woman is a business manager and proposes him to buy a house anywhere in Australia if he agrees to listen to her orders (p.223). That turns out to be a one-night stand for them. Women have started competing with men in the professional fields as well as in the sexual affairs where he discovers himself toyed by woman. This is a world where man and woman are "species" thrown in a battle of animalistic desires (p.369).[13] The change he sees in his wife who eloped with a white Australian is nothing different from here. His sister says that how much important it is to look good and have money for a man who wants to marry a woman of upper-middle class in China. And if someone comes from any foreign country, the expectation is extreme. What adds to his heartbroken soul more is the consistently growing peasant problem in China, which, ironically, proclaims its base to have been imbued with the development of agriculture. Dao's friend Wu's father tells the same story to Wu when he was to undertake the journey to Australia (p.268). The narrator is flabbergasted in seeing the same game of duplicity in his own country as well.

This leads to a traumatic experience of repatriation. As Dao asks for a lecturer post in Red Cliff University, what he faces immediately are sarcastic remarks on a foreigner's post, salary, ability, nationality and accommodation, and racial priority. This sense of individual segregation increases more in Minnie's accusation of him: "people were telling me that you are an imposter. That you have actually got no qualifications overseas, that you have difficulty surviving there and so as a result you have come home trying to land a job to make up for the loss" (p.233). So the truth that he was eschewing desperately in Australia comes to torture him severely in his own country. The girl who impressed him much with her sound practical mind, ideological status and deep nationalistic zeal slowly moves away from him. The girl he loved during his Masters' Course in Shanghai Oriental University was more interested in settling abroad than any romantic entanglement. The girl he married went to an Australian after the divorce. And the woman he was asked to marry in China wanted to make him more of a commodity than a husband. He starts frequenting bars, and is then arrested on account of his proximity with a dancing girl that is "not allowed". Slowly it moves to an interrogation of citizenship, identity and rights. He is treated as an immigrant and repeatedly accused of as a traitor. He feels tired to the series of torturous questions ("why did you come back? Why the fuck did you want to find a job in China? Why didn't you go back and live in your stinking paradise of an Australia until you die and stink and die a thousand deaths?") and decides to leave.

This is a symptom that Kam Loiue terms 'the problem of the 'returnee''. In his article 'Returnee Scholars: Ouyang Yu, the Displaced Poet and the Sea Turtles', Louie points out that this sense of complete alienation in the metaphor of 'bastard'.[14] When Dao comes to see his dying father before his return to Australia, the father cries out, "What are you coming back for? You bastard!". According to Louie, the word 'bastard' should be taken along with its totemic significance. That he cannot settle in his paternal country nor in his adopted one highlights the lack of 'parenting' for Yu. Thus when the policemen torture him, he asserts, "I would never give Australia up for this kind of thing. The only reason why we ever wanted to stay in Australia is we love it very much and we don't want to come back to China. Not to this. Simple as that" (p.335). However, we know that this is not an assertion, but an angered justification after being thwarted away from one's primary love. And herein lies a person's de-ethnicization, a state where his existence is always mobile, unfixed and uprooted. His ethnic roots cultures and beliefs are always at stake as they tend to get shaped with time. This amply suggests the formative and formulating aspect of culture, where the question of coming back or going out is only conforming to the operation and changing ethic of culture. He has nowhere to fix his nationality upon. The narrator's wish to write a novel about his life becomes only a stamp of his existence. He finds himself fictionalized and stuck to non-entity, a metafictive text.

In a discussion with his friends, this sense of isolation penetrates as his adopted country is anatomized and insulted with. It was not difficult for him to understand that the insult was mainly rooted for him. For example, Kennedy refers to Australia as "a geographical entity" completely lacking in any big "historical events" (p.121). It reminds him of Wu's remarks on Australia's relatively little historical or cultural heritage compared to that of China. Australia is only "a black spot" for him: "What they termed history in mere two hundred years is a miscellany of crammed indiscriminate and uninspired facts that in Chinese terms could mostly be spared away" (p.52). Moreover the act of history writing is detestable as it incurs the same mistake of making history from what is available. When he watches on TV the ceremony of Christmas inaugurated by the queen of England, he wrathfully asks how hierarchical the imperialistic scheme of the West is. It snatches the monarchical regime from China away, but retains its legacy. The scar has been so that China has almost lost its annual Spring Festival that highlights the heritage of a thousand year old ancient culture.

But all this nostalgia creeps away with Dao's visit to China. Dao nowhere finds the heritage being retained well. Although he himself retains the taste of ancient Chinese poetry and the architectural beauty[15], he is surprised to see that his old friend Jin, once a great lover of poetry and literature, turns down his request for publishing some of the poems of his friend Warne. Jin's critical comment is, "People don't give a damn about poetry if you want to know the truth. Who's writing poetry these days…." Lawson's deep love for Chinese culture is nowhere in the Chinese. Perhaps after seeing the postmodern China, confused and lost in the retention of its own uniqueness, he seems to fear the unuttered-but-ongoing sector of multiculturalism in China, that he defined as "It's like what we are doing here, eating a bit of everything and if we are shitting them then that is the product" (p.110). In this world history performs through these collages.[16]

With this knowledge of truth, perhaps, dies Wu in Dao. Dao's affair with Antoinette that turns out to be a planned commoditized affair does not surprise him much because he has lost the very sense of amazement. He has become a *silenced soul* that transmits its existence to another friend-cum-alter ego Warne, who wants to go back to China only to repeat the scenario again. There is no escape from this monstrous loop. Only there are some expectations and dreams, like the one Warne dreams about the Australian infection of "lock-heart-syndrome": "For some mysterious reasons Australians are migrating overseas *en masse,* most not the places of their racial and cultural origins but to the places farthest from their origins 'as if to escape something deadly in them"' (p.386). There is nothing concrete, only playful, mobile bodies, traces, and forms, visible most in the narrator's repeated wish to deconstruct names and play with the broken words.[17] His history is the history of longing for the Five Tastes Garden or some mysterious world of comfort, solace and romantic pleasures, where human values are still retained. But what echoes everywhere is a poem by Warne, which demands citation here:

The voice
When silenced
Creeps out of finger

The words
When silenced
Constipate

The trees
When silenced
Expatriate

The heart
When silenced
Transplants" (p.390)

Thus, throughout the novel, it is the economy and irony of affect, the perversion and distortion of desires and truths, or the relatively little time and space for love that rings prominent. The novel ends with a bitter realization for Dao that his body is marked as a case study and his ethnicity an overwhelming assertion of his otherness and thus repeated examination. This realization adds a different dimension to the question of university space. The international student/immigrant is shown to be a case study, a product of grades, material for examination. Somehow, this throws a question at the politics within ethnography itself. There's no doubt that this incident will leave Dao in perpetual tension in coping with any culture at all. But what strikes us more in this tell-tale of postcolonialism is the method of university research. How far can this

form of ethnography or ethnography in general become successful in staying away from labeling a form of life? Can there be unbiased unrepresenting ethnography? And most importantly, from a different perspective, is the international student/immigrant an always already given category of ethnography?

Before concluding, I must admit that the study is bitter and somewhat biased. The text is replete with masculine syndrome and a virulent excoriation at Australian culture. It lacks a steady and cogent reflection of the mobility within the cultural aesthetic. It is understandable why there were so many rejections in its publication. It is rather an angered mind's slow realization that culture is not what has been but what we make of it; that in a country where he will be identified as Asian, and thus the Other, there is going to be problems regarding cultural root and exchange, nostalgia and presence, disillusionment and shame; that life, in short, is a tale of accommodation and return. But the purpose of this study was to bring up these issues dealt differently, project a disturbed immigrant's experience, reconsider the process of university research and most importantly bring to light a promising writer little talked of. In that sense, one can definitely consult his academic writings.

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13. Ang, Ian, "The Curse of the Smile: Ambivalence and the 'Asian' Woman in Australian Multiculturalism". *Feminist Review*. 52, and *The World Upside Down: Feminists in the Antipodes*, (1996), pp.36-49, is very inspiring in this context.
14. Louie, Kam. "Returnee Scholars: Ouyang Yu, the Displaced Poet and the Sea Turtle". *New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies*. 8.1 (2006): 1-16.
15. In spite of the consistent attachment of China to a globalized society, Dao seems to cling to the old Chinese spirit and native heritage. In the bar, he requests the table-dancing girl to sing the old Su Shi song, "The Drunken Song on the Night of the Mid-Autumn Festival" (p.326).
16. The same depiction can be found in the book, *Bitter Peaches and Plums: Two Chinese Novellas on the Recent Chinese Student Experience in Australia.* Liu Guande and Huangfu Jun. Trans. J Bruce Jacobs and Ouyang Yu. Australia: Monash Asian Institute. Monash University. 1995.
17. Wu tends to nurture a spirited taste for language deconstruction (p.132), quite similarly as Dao does in the beginning of the book.

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