

Study of Chinese American Living Space in *Bone* in the Perspective of Spatial Politics

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Abstract: *Bone*, the debut novel of Chinese American novelist Fae Myenne Ng, narrates a story of three generations of Chinese Americans in pursuit of living space and identity. It shows the similar identity dilemmas and living dilemmas of each generation. Also, there are different attempts from each generation. This paper explores the living space of Chinese-Americans and their own choice in *Bone* from a spatial-political perspective based on existing studies of Chinese-American literature. Through the different spaces, it analyzes how the living space of the Chinese-American family, and even the entire Chinese-American community, is squeezed in the novel, and how the author reconstructs a new living space for Chinese-Americans by describing the different paths of the next generation. The issues of cultural collision and living space presented in *Bone* inspire how the next generation of Chinese-Americans can move towards diversity and a human community.

Keywords: Fae Myenne Ng, Living Space, Spatial Politics, Chinese American Literature.

1. Introduction

Fae Myenne Ng, born on December 2, 1956, in San Francisco, is a Chinese American author, known for her highly acclaimed first novel *Bone* (1993), a finalist for the 1994 PEN Faulkner Award, and her second novel *Steer Toward Rock* (2008), winner of a 2008 American Book Award.

Ng's father emigrated from Guangzhou, China, in 1940 as a "paper son" to a legal Chinese immigrant living in San Francisco. Ng grew up in San Francisco's Chinatown and spoke Cantonese at home.[1] Her novels and short stories, all set in San Francisco's Chinatown, reflect her own experience as well as her parents' lives in Chinatown. Growing up among old Chinese bachelors, who ended up not being able to return home due to the immigration laws that limited the reentry of Chinese laborers, Ng was keenly aware of the adverse impact on the Chinese of US immigration law and miscegenation laws.[2] From political spaces to linguistic spaces, Chinese people have consistently been marginalized, confined to a corner where they struggle to achieve identity recognition and inner coherence. Ng acknowledges that her stories about Chinese immigrants, old Chinese bachelors, and her experiences in Chinatown are her way of repaying her own "emotional debt" for her father's sacrificing journey. Ng through the novels reexamines the history of Chinese immigrants in a manner that connects the immigrant past to renewed social and economic exclusion experienced by recent immigrants. Her depiction of Chinatown and the confined living spaces of Chinese Americans unveils a fragment of real history.

The term "Space" is summarized in the Concise Encyclopedia Britannica briefly.[3] Space is the boundless three-dimensional extent in which objects and events have relative position and direction.

Since the Enlightenment, the dominant conception of space in the history of Western modernity has been that of an empty, homogeneous container. This notion originates from Newtonian classical physics and its theory of absolute space, which posits space as a static, neutral backdrop---merely a setting for events, devoid of any inherent social or cultural

significance. Within this paradigm, space is reduced to a physical entity, subordinate to linear temporal narratives and serving the grand narrative of historical progress. However, this instrumentalized understanding of space obscures the complex power relations, cultural meanings, and social practices embedded within space itself.

By the 1990s, with the acceleration of globalization and the rise of postmodern thought, interdisciplinary research on "space" emerged, fundamentally challenging this traditional view of space and time. During this period, space was no longer seen as a passive container but was redefined as a dynamic text imbued with cultural, political, and social significance. This shift marked the occurrence of the "spatial turn," liberating space from the shadow of time and establishing it as an independent object of study and a central focus of theoretical discourse. Henri Lefebvre, in *The Production of Space*, argued that space is a product of social relations, a field where power, capital, and cultural practices intersect.[4] His theory provided a new paradigm for spatial research, transforming space from a concern exclusive to geography or architecture into a key topic in sociology, anthropology, literary studies, and even philosophy.

Against the backdrop of the "spatial turn," the development of spatial theory spurred the rise of spatial-geographical discourse as a counterpoint to temporal discourse. Traditional historical narratives, often centered on linear time, emphasize progress and causality, while spatial-geographical discourse highlights the heterogeneity, multiplicity, and fluidity of space. For instance, Edward Soja's theory of "Third space" seeks to transcend binary oppositions by viewing space as a hybrid, open process that encompasses both materiality and symbolic and social dimensions. Doreen Massey further emphasizes the multiplicity of spatial narratives, arguing that space is shaped by diverse social relations and power structures, inherently marked by inequality and dynamism.[5]

This transformation in the conception of space has not only reshaped academic understanding but also profoundly influenced how we approach real-world issues such as globalization, urbanization, and migration. In the context of globalization, space is no longer fixed or enclosed but fluid

and networked. For example, the movement of transnational migrants disrupts traditional notions of national borders, creating new "translocal spaces." The juxtaposition of slums, marginalized communities, and high-end residential areas in urban development reveals the power inequalities inherent in the production of space. In the postmodern context, spatial research further illuminates how space becomes a crucial site for identity formation, cultural memory, and political struggle.

In summary, the rise of spatial theory and the advent of the "spatial turn" represent not only a critique of traditional views of space and time but also a reconfiguration of modernity's narrative. Space has transformed from an empty container into a text rich with meaning, and from a subordinate of time into an independent discursive system. This shift has not only enriched academic research but also provided new perspectives for understanding the complexity and diversity of contemporary society.

Spatial politics, a vital branch of spatial theory, focuses on the complex interplay between space and power. It investigates how space is shaped by political power and, in turn, how it reacts to the reproduction of power. Central to spatial politics are questions such as: How do the production and distribution of space reflect social inequalities? How does power discipline individuals and groups through spatial planning, boundary demarcation, and regional control? And how do marginalized communities resist dominant power structures through spatial practices? Doreen Massey, on the other hand, emphasized the multiplicity and openness of space, critiquing the homogenizing narratives imposed by power.[5] Spatial politics not only addresses macro-level issues like state governance and global spatial restructuring but also explores micro-level everyday spaces, uncovering how power permeates scales such as the home, community, and the body. Through its critical analysis of the relationship between space and power, spatial politics provides an essential theoretical framework for understanding social justice, identity politics, and cultural conflicts.

2. The Writing of Chinese American Living Space in *Bone*

Lefebvre argued that the state is a highly violent and oppressive political space through which the ruling class exercises its power, embodying the authority and intense control of power. Within this political space, power sustains its vested interests and authority by means of strict hierarchical management, segregation, confinement, or through invasion and occupation of space.[4] Space is not only physical, but also a product of social relations and rights. In such a political space, minorities and vulnerable groups are naturally manipulated by power. Chinese Americans will undoubtedly be caught in the predicament of survival and feel the alienation of being outside.

Through a multi-dimensional spatial narrative, Wu Huiming in *Bone* profoundly depicts the living space and spiritual struggles of Chinese-American immigrants in American society.

The first is the confinement and marginalization of physical space.

In Ng's *Bone*, Chinatown is depicted as a closed enclave, symbolizing the geographic marginalization of Chinese immigrants in American society.[6]

This space is not only physically segregated, but also socially and culturally excluded." Dense apartment buildings,

crowded stores, and crisscrossing clotheslines"[6] constitute the visual symbols of Chinatown, which not only reflect the spatial constraints, but also metaphorically represent the marginalized position of Chinese immigrants in mainstream society. For example, the cheap apartment where the Leon family lives is described as "peeling siding and infested with cockroaches"[6], which not only reveals their state of poverty, but also hints at the reality of Chinese immigrants being squeezed into the cracks of the city. Chinatown has become a space of the "invisible other", where Chinese immigrants are ignored or even forgotten by mainstream society, and their existence is compressed into a small and closed area, unable to integrate into the broader social space.

In the enclosed space of Chinatown, power maintains its control through many forms of disciplinary means. Daily police patrols and ICE raids constitute regularized spatial surveillance, acts that not only monitor the bodies of Chinese immigrants, but also continually question the legitimacy of their identities. The violence of such spatial disciplining makes Chinese immigrants live in a constant state of unease and fear, with their freedom of movement severely curtailed and their spirituality under immense pressure. Their living space is not only confined, but also "be ruled".

The confinement of their living space not only restricts their physical freedom, but also profoundly affects their spiritual world, making them always in a state of "otherness" in American society.

Secondly, there is the oppression of spiritual space. In the state of confinement of physical space, the corresponding spiritual space also suffers from deep oppression. This oppression is not only reflected in the physical restrictions, but also in the psychological and identity dilemmas. For many Chinese immigrants, coming to the U.S. as a new living space does not mean that they have gained true freedom and equality, but instead they are burdened with "original sin"-that is, "illegitimate" identity. On the contrary, they are burdened with "original sin" - that is, "illegitimate" identity. This "original sin" does not stem from their own faults, but from the complex interweaving of history, law and social structure.

The phenomenon of "paper children" is a concentrated manifestation of this "original sin". As a "slot racket" for Chinese to enter the U.S., the history of paper births can be traced back to the 1880s. At that time, some Chinese immigrants began using false documents to help their non-biological children in China enter the United States.[2] This phenomenon was further developed in 1898 when the Gold case was decided. This case solidified the jus soli principle of U.S. nationality law, which states that children born in the U.S. to foreigners automatically become U.S. citizens. This principle provided legal support for Chinese Americans to obtain an identity and bring their families to the United States, but it also spawned more identity fraud.

The Great San Francisco Earthquake of 1906 and the fire it caused destroyed INS records, an unforeseen event that provided an opportunity for more Chinese to enter the U.S. using the "paper child" status. Due to the lack of records, a significant number of ethnic Chinese falsely claimed that they were born in the United States to obtain legal status. This phenomenon has evolved into a systematic operation: each time a Chinese person returns to the United States from China, he or she declares that he or she has a son in order to sell the son's name so that some people can enter the United States by paying money. This operation not only reflects the Chinese people's wisdom to survive in the cracks of the law, but also

reveals their helplessness and struggle under systemic oppression.

In the novel, Leon's image epitomizes this phenomenon of "paper sons". "Grandpa Liang is only the paper father of Leon, and he helps him enter the United States by recognizing Leon as his son. But it came at a cost. Every time Leon talks about it, his eyes widen as if he is hearing that number for the first time: 'Five thousand dollars.'" [6] This detail not only reveals the falsity of Leon's identity, but also reflects the great price Chinese immigrants pay in their quest for a better life. Leon's "false identity" symbolizes the Chinese immigrant's survival in the midst of the law. He lives in constant fear that his documents may be uncovered, not only because of the legal risks, but also because of the social discrimination and rejection of "illegal" status. This institutional suspension confines ethnic Chinese in an illegal gray space, making it impossible for them to fully integrate into American society, but also unable to get rid of the anxiety and uncertainty of their identity. This oppression of mental space is far more profound and lasting than the confinement of physical space.

Finally, there is the tearing of cultural space. In Ng's *Bone*, the tearing of cultural space is shown as the fierce struggle between tradition and assimilation that Chinese immigrant families face in American society.

The awareness and demand for cultural survival space is deeply rooted in the hearts of the first and second generation immigrants. Chinatown, as a gathering place for Chinese, transformed from a geographical space to a cultural symbol, symbolizing the resilience and resistance of Chinese immigrants. Chinatown is not only the physical space where Chinese immigrants live, but also the spiritual space of their cultural identity and historical memory. Laila's tracing reveals the multiple meanings of this space: it is both a refuge for Chinese immigrants and a barrier between them and the mainstream society; it is both a place of preservation of traditional culture and a bearer of assimilation pressure.

The third-generation immigrants, on the other hand, who grew up in a foreign environment, are caught in the tearing of cultural space.

The intergenerational conflict in the family space is the most intuitive manifestation of the cultural tear. In the novel, the family, as a microscopic cultural field, becomes the frontline of the battle between tradition and assimilation. The juxtaposition of the shrine and the Christmas tree in the family, the exchange of Cantonese and English, these seemingly mundane daily details, in fact, symbolize the split of cultural identity. The shrine symbolizes the adherence to ancestors and traditional culture, while the Christmas tree represents the acceptance and assimilation of Western culture. The coexistence of the two in the same space is both a compromise and a conflict. The use of Cantonese and English further highlights the cultural divide between generations: the older generation insists on using Cantonese to maintain their cultural roots, while the younger generation prefers to use English in order to integrate into mainstream society. This choice of language is not only a means of communication, but also a declaration of cultural identity. Anna's tragedy is an extreme manifestation of this cultural tear. She chose to commit suicide by jumping from a building because of her refusal of an arranged marriage, an act that is not only a strong rebellion against the traditional concept of family, but also a silent accusation of cultural oppression. The "vertical space" where her body falls becomes a cruel metaphor for traditional cultural oppression. Vertical space symbolizes the

hierarchical structure of power and oppression, and Anna's fall is a complete denial of this structure. Her death is not only a personal tragedy, but also a microcosm of the struggle of the entire Chinese immigrant community in the cultural gap. This tearing of cultural survival space is not only the individual plight of Chinese immigrants, but also the common fate of the entire immigrant community in the context of globalization.

3. Different Choices for Each Generation Facing the Dilemma of Living Space

Each generation of immigrants faces a similar existential space, but the journeys of the three generations are different. The first two generations of immigrants, represented by Grandpa Leung and Leon, face more struggles for physical and spiritual space. The third generation, represented by the three sisters, on the other hand, is more troubled by cultural space. For the first generation of immigrants, their choice is a compromise of survival and a clinging to tradition. Grandpa Leung, who has suffered all his life and traveled to the West to seek gold [6], is a victim of the Chinese Exclusion Act and chooses to stoically and silently seek a foothold for himself under the harsh restrictions. At the same time, Grandpa Leung holds on to his cultural space in order to fight against the encroachment of a heterogeneous society. Grandpa Liang counts on his paper son, Leon, to help him return to his homeland. However, when Leon travels to look for his bones, he is told that they cannot be found, and "to make more space" [6] ultimately turns out to be an unfulfilled wish.

Second-generation immigrants, represented by Leon, obtained their American identity through the illegal means of "paper births," but this status has not given them a true sense of belonging. They are seen as "permanent outsiders," neither fully accepted by mainstream American society nor able to return to the Chinese traditions that their fathers and grandfathers adhered to. Leon's forged identity symbolizes the survival of second-generation immigrants in a legal limbo, living in fear that his documents may be uncovered, an institutional suspension that confines his mental space in an illegal gray zone. In the dichotomy of "American" and "Chinese", Leon is caught in a profound identity loss, becoming a "rootless generation".

Leon has made tremendous economic efforts to secure a place in mainstream society. Like many second-generation immigrants, he tried to realize the American Dream through hard work. He eventually started a laundromat in an attempt to prove his worth and realize the so-called "American Dream". However, the laundromat eventually closes down due to fraud, which is not only an economic failure, but also a heavy blow to his identity. This incident reveals the systematic obstacles faced by second-generation immigrants in their attempts to integrate into mainstream society: no matter how hard they try, they are always excluded from being "real Americans". Leon's fate epitomizes that of second-generation immigrants, who are the bearers of intergenerational responsibilities, bound by the traditions of the first generation and paving the way for the assimilation of the third generation, and have become "transitional victims" in the cultural rupture.

The third generation of immigrants, represented by Laila, Nina and Anna, were born in the United States and received an American education, but at the same time, they received a Chinese education at home. This dual cultural space has

instilled different values in them, making them make very different choices in the face of cultural identity.

Laila is a representative of third-generation immigrants trying to find a balance between the two cultures. She embraces the values of mainstream American culture while trying to preserve her family's Chinese heritage. By tracing her family's history and memories of the Chinese Railroad, Laila transforms the streets of Chinatown into an "archaeological layer of memory" and tries to reconstruct her own cultural identity in the writing of history. Her choice is a positive reconciliation; she neither completely rejects Chinese culture nor blindly follows American culture, but tries to find a dynamic fit between the two. Laila's efforts symbolize the possibility of third-generation immigrants seeking reconciliation in the midst of a cultural tear.

Unlike Laila, Nina chooses to reject Chinese cultural traditions wholesale and denies her Chinese identity completely. She sees herself as a completely American and tries to get rid of her father's cultural baggage through assimilation. Nina's choice reflects an extreme cultural disconnection, as she attempts to gain acceptance in mainstream society by severing her ties with tradition. However, this choice does not free her completely from identity anxiety, but instead plunges her into another form of isolation: she is unable to return to the cultural world of her family nor truly integrate into mainstream American society.

Anna's fate is the most tragic of the three sisters. She is caught in a conflict between two values: on the one hand, she cannot accept the traditional Chinese family values represented by her parents, especially the oppression of arranged marriages; on the other hand, she longs for freedom of love and personal independence, a desire that is irreconcilably at odds with her family's expectations. Anna's boyfriend causes the closure of her family's laundry, an event that exacerbates the conflict between her and her family. Her parents object to her relationship with her boyfriend, while Anna is caught in a dilemma between her family and her personal freedom. Ultimately, this squeezing of cultural space leads her to destruction. She escapes this irreconcilable conflict by committing suicide with a leap from an upper floor. Anna's death is not only a tragedy of personal destiny, but also an extreme manifestation of cultural conflict. Her "vertical fall" symbolizes the cruelty of traditional cultural oppression, and at the same time reveals the immense pressure that third-generation immigrants are under in the cultural tear.

4. Conclusion

Space is a product of ideological manipulation; it is both a physical objective and one of the entities of spiritual and social relations. But it is also subject to rewriting in accordance with changes in society. The politics embedded in space is reflected in this novel as the existential space ruled under white group power and discourse. The shrinking of existential space is the result of a combination of: confinement in physical space, oppression in mental space and tearing of cultural space. In the face of such a predicament, the evolution of intergenerational choices is not only a path of suffering, but also a path of resistance and rewriting for the shrinking of the living space of the ethnic Chinese.

The first generation chooses to hold back and compromise, trying to survive in the cracks of the system. The second generation chose to resist and escape, trying to break the double oppression of family and society.

The third generation chooses to integrate and reconstruct, trying to find their own identity in the multiculturalism. The choices of these three generations reflect the gradual adaptation and struggle of Chinese immigrants in American society, and also reveal the profound impact of survival space on individual destiny. From stoicism to resistance, and then to attempts of integration and diversification. Their choices are not only individual survival strategies, but also epitomize the entire Chinese community's search for a way out in the flood of history.

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