

**FEMINIST TEMPORALITY AND THE FUTURE:
NEGOTIATING GENDER, RACE, AND AGENCY
IN CHINESE AMERICAN AND MALAYSIAN
CHINESE SUPERNATURAL FICTION**

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by

FANG SIRUI

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**TEMPORALITI DAN MASA DEPAN FEMINIS: MERUNDINGKAN
GENDER, RAS, DAN AGENSI DALAM FIKSYEN GHAIB CINA AMERIKA
DAN CINA MALAYSIA**

ABSTRAK

Fiksyen ghaib telah menjadi satu genre sastera yang penting dalam kesusasteraan Cina Amerika dan Cina Malaysia yang ditulis oleh penulis wanita dalam Bahasa Inggeris. Untuk menangani genre yang berkembang ini, disertasi ini mengkaji bagaimana watak-watak wanita, termasuk watak utama wanita, hantu, dan perantara roh, menggunakan agensi mereka untuk membuka jalan ke arah masa depan feminis dengan berinteraksi dengan masa lalu dan masa kini yang dipengaruhi oleh patriarki dan unsur-unsur perkauman dalam empat novel: dua novel Cina Amerika iaitu *The Hundred Secret Senses* (1995) oleh Amy Tan dan *Water Ghosts* (2009) oleh Shawna Yang Ryan, serta dua novel Cina Malaysia iaitu *The Ghost Bride* (2013) oleh Yangsze Choo dan *Black Water Sister* (2021) oleh Zen Cho. Untuk mencapai tiga objektif kajian, disertasi ini mengemukakan rangka kerja penyelidikan yang menggabungkan dua pendekatan kualitatif—analisis teks dan kritikan retorik feminis—dengan teori temporaliti feminis oleh Elizabeth Grosz serta teori agensi temporal oleh Steven Hitlin dan Glen H. Elder. Rangka kerja ini menyumbang kepada analisis terperinci mengenai transformasi identiti, agensi, penentangan, dan masa depan feminis watak-watak wanita dalam keempat-empat novel tersebut. Dalam setiap karya, watak-watak wanita menggunakan pelbagai strategi agen untuk merundingkan identiti jantina dan kaum mereka; strategi-strategi ini dizahirkan melalui interaksi mereka dengan wacana patriarki Konfusianisme dan wacana kaum pada pelbagai dimensi temporal, termasuk melalui penentangan, cabaran, revolusi, pemberdayaan diri, dan perancangan yang

jelas. Meskipun terdapat perbezaan konteks dan temporaliti, watak-watak ini bergerak dari masa lalu yang traumatik atau dipengaruhi unsur-unsur perkauman menuju masa depan feminis yang menghormati perbezaan jantina dan perbezaan kaum. Disertasi ini juga menyoroti perjuangan watak-watak wanita dalam menghadapi masa lalu, masa kini, dan masa depan: sesetengah watak memilih untuk melepaskan trauma masa lalu demi mencapai kelahiran semula, manakala yang lain aktif menyambung hubungan dengan kehidupan lampau untuk mengejar reinkarnasi. Seorang watak wanita belajar daripada masa lalu wanita-wanita lain untuk memikirkan semula dan mengubah matlamat hidupnya sendiri, manakala seorang lagi merenung memori wanita-wanita lain dan mengambil tindakan semasa untuk mengawal hidupnya serta merangkul masa depan feminisnya sendiri. Temporaliti yang dinamik ini akhirnya menerangi pelbagai jalan yang berbeza dan unik menuju masa depan feminis, yang melibatkan memori, pelupaan, dan tindakan pada masa kini.

**FEMINIST TEMPORALITY AND THE FUTURE: NEGOTIATING
GENDER, RACE, AND AGENCY IN CHINESE AMERICAN AND
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ABSTRACT

Supernatural fiction has emerged as a significant literary genre in the field of Chinese American and Malaysian Chinese literature written by female writers in English. To address this evolving genre, this dissertation examines how female characters, including female protagonists, ghosts, and spirit mediums, exercise agency to pave the way towards the feminist future by engaging with their patriarchal and racialised past and present in the four novels: two Chinese American supernatural novels, Amy Tan's *The Hundred Secret Senses* (1995) and Shawna Yang Ryan's *Water Ghosts* (2009), and two Malaysian Chinese supernatural novels, Yangsze Choo's *The Ghost Bride* (2013) and Zen Cho's *Black Water Sister* (2021). To achieve three research objectives, the dissertation provides a research framework that integrates two qualitative methodologies—including textual analysis and feminist rhetorical criticism—with Elizabeth Grosz's theory of feminist temporality and Steven Hitlin and Glen H. Elder's theory of temporal agency. This research framework contributes to a nuanced analysis of identity transformation, agency, resistance, and the feminist future of female characters in the four selected novels. In each novel, female characters navigate various agentic strategies to negotiate their gender and racial identities; these strategies are expressed through their engagement with Confucian patriarchal discourse and racial discourse at different temporalities, including resistance, challenges, revolutions, self-empowerment, and decisive plans. Despite contextual and temporal differences, all characters move from their traumatic

and/or racialised past towards a feminist future that respects sexual difference and racial difference. This dissertation also considers women's struggles with the past, present, and future: some female characters let go of their traumatic past to achieve resurrection, while others actively reconnect with past lives and pursue reincarnation. One female character learns from other women's past to rethink and modify her own life goal, while another reflects on other women's memories and takes present actions to control her own life and embrace her feminist future. This dynamic temporality ultimately illuminates different and distinct paths towards a feminist future that involves memory, forgetting, and present actions.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

Chinese culture is a repository of rich religions and traditions, such as ancestor worship, ghost rituals, spirit mediumship, spirit possession, and soul journey. These traditional practices have not only endured in China but also taken root and developed in diasporic Chinese communities such as Chinese American and Malaysian Chinese communities, which provide an abundant source of material for diasporic Chinese narratives in relation to the themes of haunting, the uncanny, and the monstrous. Based on this cultural background, Chinese American and Malaysian Chinese speculative and supernatural literature has become popular by integrating cultural heritage with diasporic Chinese experiences, identity negotiation, and the pursuit of a sense of belonging. In doing so, Chinese American and Malaysian Chinese speculative and supernatural literature provides an alternative way for writers and readers to engage with their cultural heritage and rethink their diasporic experiences, which challenges the conventional modes of realist storytelling.

Beyond its engagement with cultural heritage and immigrant experiences, Chinese American and Malaysian Chinese speculative and supernatural fiction also extends its focus on temporality or temporal perspective. Temporality is a concept that describes how humans “confront the experience of duration” (Smith, 2015, p. 973); in other words, it refers to how individuals continuously experience and make sense of a series of events throughout their lives. This understanding aligns with Elizabeth Grosz’s (2005) view of temporality as dynamic and generative matter—a continuous process of generating “transformations” (p. 2) and always being “directed toward the future” (p. 1). Such a dynamic concept of temporality is often expressed

through a temporal perspective related to the past, present, and future across various theoretical frameworks, including Elizabeth Grosz's theory of feminist temporality and Steven Hitlin and Glen H. Elder's theory of temporal agency. Notably, these scholars focus on how individuals' experiences, actions, identities, and perceptions shift over time. For instance, Grosz (2005) discusses how feminists and antiracists attempt to "ameliorate existing [patriarchal and racialised] conditions or compensate for past ones" (p. 5) and how their understandings of identity undergo "transformations" (p. 2) from the past to the future. She further locates this transformation within "the realm of agency" (p. 6)—the capacity of individuals to decide how to live their lives. Similarly, Hitlin and Elder (2007) also define agency as the ability to make resistance, life decisions and plans, and "transitions" (p. 182) in one's life trajectory. In this sense, female agency can be understood as a temporal force that drives the future—including the future of Chinese American and Malaysian Chinese women—beyond the constraints of the patriarchal and racialised past and present. 33

This dynamic force of temporality is also reflected in Chinese American and Malaysian Chinese speculative and supernatural fiction, which not only reflects the forgotten, repressed histories or memories but also exceeds the historical locale to the future realm (Reyes, 2018). In doing so, speculative and supernatural fiction evokes the contemporary Chinese American and Malaysian Chinese groups' reflection of ancestral memories about patriarchal and racial oppressions, diasporic experiences, and traumas, and present the future as a space where Chinese American and Malaysian Chinese people exert agency to confront enduring struggles, negotiate their gender and racial identities, and pursue a sense of belonging. Through this temporal perspective, Chinese American and Malaysian Chinese speculative and

supernatural fiction provides a new way to consider how diasporic Chinese individuals' resistance, negotiations in the past and present, and how they define female agency as a force that leads to their transformations from a patriarchal past toward an empowered and feminist future. Despite the new perspectives on temporality and culture present in Chinese American and Malaysian Chinese speculative and supernatural literature, this field has still lacked "the trope or a critical heritage to discuss these [supernatural and uncanny] matters" (Ng, 2008, p. 2) but has remained its focus on social-realist readings. Hence, a critical examination that analyses speculative and supernatural fiction from a temporal perspective becomes necessary in the field of Chinese American and Malaysian Chinese literature.

Moreover, the necessity of focusing on speculative and supernatural fiction is also related to gender and racial issues. In the field of Chinese American and Malaysian Chinese literature, most works are written by male authors and primarily reflect the male perspectives on gender and racial discrimination in the twentieth century (Tang, 2019). Conversely, diasporic Chinese female writers, including female writers from Chinese American and Malaysian Chinese backgrounds, intertwine the supernatural and cultural events to disrupt conventional narrative limitations, which forces both readers and characters to confront official histories and their omissions with alternative voices and realities of diasporic Chinese women. Their supernatural works also provide a new version of temporality by describing and imagining the feminist future. The term "feminist future" is derived from Elizabeth Grosz's (2005) theory of feminist temporality, which means a future that respects "sexual difference" (p. 164) and "racial difference" (p. 89). It is worth noting that supernatural fiction centred on the feminist future does not neglect the past and present. Instead, it highlights the strong connection among the patriarchal and racialised past, present, and

feminist future. In other words, Chinese American and Malaysian Chinese supernatural fiction by female writers highlights the distinct ways in which diasporic Chinese women engage with issues of agency, empowerment, identity negotiation, and future aspirations.

According to the above discussion, using Elizabeth Grosz's theory of feminist temporality and Steven Hitlin and Glen H. Elder's theory of temporal agency, this dissertation examines how female characters, including female protagonists, ghosts, and spirit mediums, exercise agency to pave the way towards the feminist future by engaging in their racialised and patriarchal past and present in the four novels: two Chinese American supernatural novels, Amy Tan's *The Hundred Secret Senses* (1995) and Shawna Yang Ryan's *Water Ghosts* (2009), and two Malaysian Chinese supernatural novels, Yangsze Choo's *The Ghost Bride* (2013) and Zen Cho's *Black Water Sister* (2021). The past is the primary "force" (Kohn, 2006, p. xvii), which resonates in the present and holds the potential for the future. However, the development of women's past, present, and future relies on their agency, which manifests as both resistant and non-resistant actions. Marginalised women can avoid repeating their "former state[s]" (Kohn, 2006, p. xviii) and "make new and meaningful beginnings in both thoughts and actions" (Kohn, 2006, p. xiii) by learning from and challenging their racialised/gendered past and present. Therefore, by engaging in past and present racial/gender discourses in various agentic ways, Chinese American and Malaysian Chinese women can move into a better and different feminist future.

This chapter provides the introduction of this dissertation and covers the definition of key terms, research background, research objectives and questions, the statement of the problem, the significance of this study, scope and limitation, and the organisation of the study.

1.2 Gender and Race in Speculative Fiction and Supernatural Fiction:

Definitions and Background

This section aims to clarify the definition of speculative fiction and supernatural fiction, as well as the concepts of gender identity and racial identity. It also explains why this dissertation chooses gender and race as its research focus. Speculative fiction is “a fuzzy set super category that houses all non-mimetic genres” (Oziewicz, 2017), including fantasy, science fiction, supernatural fiction, magic realism, superhero tales, steampunk, slipstream, and many more. Supernatural fiction is a “subgenre” (Spratford & Clausen, 2004, p. 4) or a “micro-subject” (Gill, 2013, p. 72) of speculative fiction that is fast becoming a crucial part of Asian American literature and Malaysian literature in English (G. V. S. Chin & Quayum, 2021; L. M. B. Davis, 2014; Quayum, 2021; Ragnab & Zainal, 2022; Silliman & Stievermann, 2015; Thoma, 2021).

In American sociology, the supernatural refers to forces or entities beyond or outside nature that can “suspend, alter, or ignore physical forces” (Stark, 2004, p. 10). In Chinese literary studies, supernatural fiction refers to fiction about “Zhiguai” [records of the strange] and “Shenmo” [gods and demons], including themes related to gods, demons, ghosts, and monsters (Gou, 1999; Lu, 2006). In Southeast Asian literary studies, supernatural beings are defined as “the incorporeal being believed to have powers to affect the course of human events” (Laranjo et al., 2013, p. 18), such as Penanggalan, Pontianak, and Toyol in Malaysian folklore. Based on the above definitions, my dissertation defines supernatural fiction as a genre with themes related to ghosts, spirits, demons, monsters, and vampires, which are beyond the laws of nature and cannot be explained through science, logic, or rationality.

According to scholars in the field of Asian supernatural novels and movies, the analysis of supernatural beings is closely related to gender. According to Balmain (2017), the fox spirits and ghosts in East Asian films, especially those in China, Japan, and Korea, are frequently described as females who suffer from “gendered stereotypes” (p. 6) and “sexual inequality” (p. 6) but have the ability to absorb the life force of men, which reflects women’s resistance to patriarchy. In Asian movies, the Pontianak, a beautiful female Malaysian vampire, is frequently described as a murdered woman who is confronted with patriarchal oppression in the past and returns to “execute revenge or justice” (Lee & Balaya, 2016, p. 163) after death. The return of female monstrosities like Pontianak is also considered as a threat to the patriarchal order, who break “male dominant narratives” (Lee & Balaya, 2016, p. 173) in Asian movies. In contemporary Chinese films, female snake demons symbolise how women eliminate gender anxiety and negotiate gender identity in a patriarchal society (K. H. Chen, 2021; W. Yang, 2022). In Chinese literary studies, female ghosts suffer from the “biases of culture and gender” (A. C. Yu, 1987, p. 429) and are viewed as a subversion of ideal femininity in ancient China because traditional Chinese female ghosts are commonly portrayed as “defiant, rebellious, and indifferent to traditional morality” (Zheng, 2020, p. 753). Even in the West, female ghosts and vampires are used by writers to “disrupt [patriarchal] gender norms” (Roberts, 2018, p. 4). It can be observed that a tradition of connecting supernatural beings with gender exists in past scholarship.

Moreover, gender is a significant theme of investigation in supernatural beings and the broad field of speculative fiction. Female writers are one of the creative groups of speculative and supernatural fiction that expresses a central concern with gender. Taking a broad literary historical perspective, Jackson (1989) argues that realism has

dominated western literature and cultures from the eighteenth century onwards, with an emphasis on “rationality and the materialistic and atheistic philosophy” (p. xvii). Reason has been further constructed as a “masculine domain” (Diamond & Quinby, 1988, p. xvi) which is separated from and superior to emotion and imagination, so Jackson (1989) contends that realist literature or rationalism is also the male-dominated area, of which the “values and definitions” (p. xvii) are determined by men. In this sense, speculative literature by female writers can be interpreted as a “reverse discourse” (C. Duncan, 1994, p. 234) that challenges the male dominance of realist literature and the mainstream rationalistic culture. Critically too, female writers’ speculative fiction draws on and reflects gendered experiences in which women have traditionally been ignored or neglected by patriarchal rational discursive systems; for example, female characters are described as irrational and their descriptions of supernatural beings, ideas of reality, and imaginations of the future have been dismissed as “female nonsense” (C. Duncan, 1994, p. 244) by male atheists like their husbands in some speculative works by female writers, even though these female characters’ thoughts are ultimately proven correct. By doing so, female writers highlight the fact that women’s voices are often disregarded and neglected by men when their thoughts are not based on masculine discourse or realist logic.

However, female writers are not the only creative group of speculative fiction and supernatural fiction. Speculative fiction, in general, is dominated by white male authors and readers (Burger et al., 2021; Call, 2011). Until the mid-to-late 1960s, readers, editors, and publishers of science fiction were “irrevocably hostile to women” (Davin, 2006, p. 55). Brave female writers before the 1960s, such as Leigh Brackett and C. L. Moore, had to hide their gender by using “male pseudonyms or neutral initials” (Davin, 2006, p. 56). Since the 1960s, a notable transition occurred in the field

of speculative fiction with the emergence of numerous female writers, including Lois Gould, Rhonda Lerman, Judith Merrill, Angela Carter, and Kate Wilhelm (Oziewicz, 2017). Furthermore, supernatural works by male and female writers show different textual features based on their gendered narrative styles. For example, the supernatural stories of male writers, such as Charles Dickens, Robert Louis Stevenson, and Edward Bulwer-Lytton, tend to be more “diagnostic, clinical, journalistic, and vested in mensuration” (Dickerson, 1996, p. 7).

In contrast, the supernatural works of female writers are not about suspicion and fear of the supernatural but rather describe a frightening world where women are marginalised and forced to be silent from a “feminine point of view” (C. Duncan, 1994, p. 234). There is more past scholarship that supports C. Duncan’s arguments. For example, Weinstock (2009) argues that female writers’ American gothic and supernatural tales express specific female anxieties and desires in a patriarchal culture (p. 194). Stewart (2000) contends that the supernatural tale is an ideal discourse for hidden agendas and deeper textual levels, so Victorian female writers use supernatural stories to represent women’s marginalisation and enter the area traditionally accessible only to men (p. 114). Liggins (2013) believes that British supernatural fiction reflects British women’s struggles with marginalisation and helps readers to better understand the female experience (p. 40). These past studies also contribute to exemplifying why my dissertation chooses supernatural works by female writers. Different from realism, rationalism, and most of the male writers’ supernatural texts of having more “ballast or rigour” (Dickerson, 1996, p. 8), supernatural fiction becomes the alternative discourse for female writers to express women’s repressed desires, voices, anger, and rebellions against patriarchal oppression, violence, and injustices.

Furthermore, speculative fiction and supernatural fiction are both considered to be closely related to race. Historically, western writers, such as Gertrude Barrows Bennett, Ursula K. Le Guin, Douglas Adams, and Greg Egan, have dominated the genre of speculative fiction, which has no space for Asian writers. According to Sohn (2008), Asians have been portrayed in American and British speculative fiction since the early twentieth century, but most of these early works were overtly Orientalist. In such works, Asian characters were cast as villains to express western anxieties about Asian immigration in the twentieth century, which is commonly referred to as a form of “yellow-peril fiction” (Sohn, 2008, p. 5). Since the 1980s, the rise of Asian countries has evoked a new wave of western fear towards the East, which manifests in “techno-Orientalism” (Sohn, 2008, p. 8), a notion that portrays the East as underdeveloped and regressive in humanism. Drawing inspiration from the phenomenon of techno-Orientalism, non-Asian writers often depict Asians as “dystopian and atavistic” (Goh, 2013, p. 47) figures in speculative fiction. This racialised portrayal towards Asians highlights a perceived contradiction between Asians’ advanced technology and “inhumane qualities” (Sohn, 2008, p. 8), which proves western writers’ racialised opinion that Asians run counter to the ideals of “western liberal humanism” (Roh et al., 2015, p. 5). Hence, there is a latent connection between speculative fiction and race, as most speculative novels written by non-Asian writers show different levels of racism towards Asian characters.

This latent connection about racism also exists in supernatural fiction. Ellithorpe et al. (2018) claim that African American supernatural fiction uses a distinct division between humans and supernatural creatures to reflect “traditional racial and ethnic group divides” (p. 3), which enables readers to attain a deeper understanding of racism and prejudice in African American literature. Hobson (2015) also points out

that American supernatural fiction has shown explicit racism and “white supremacy” (p. 28) in American culture. Taking vampires as an example, Hobson further argues that most early American supernatural novels depicted vampires as white, but coloured vampires have begun to appear in contemporary American supernatural fiction as a metaphor for “mixed-racial origins” (p. 25). Eguibar-Holgado (2020) contends that supernatural fiction reflects the racial oppression experienced by characters and the behaviours of Black women defying racial oppression. Supernatural elements also appear frequently in postcolonial literature. For instance, Shear (2006) argues that supernatural elements in postcolonial novels symbolise “ideological haunting” (p. 81), such as apartheid policies that haunt the South African people. Wisker (2007) states that supernatural fiction allows postcolonial people to observe the world and express their visions. Beyond being a space for the expression of racial and ethnic differences, supernatural fiction is a way for postcolonial groups to criticise and comment on the values, actions, and effects of historical colonisers, including the painful or traumatic memories caused by western imperialism and colonialism (Ngcobo, 1988; Wisker, 2007).

The preceding discussions have defined the relationship among supernatural fiction, gender, and race. Next, gender identity and racial identity will be briefly discussed to clarify the definitions adopted in this dissertation. The definition of gender identity ranges from binary concepts to more nuanced perspectives. For example, essentialists perceive gender as intrinsic traits rooted in “biological mechanisms” (Sánchez & Pankey, 2017, p. 52). Robert Stoller uses the term gender identity to discuss the conflict between individuals’ sex and their “sense of self” (Holmes, 2012, p. 187). Inspired by Stoller, Oakley (1972) contends that gender identity is “a matter of culture” (p. 16), which refers to the process of classifying men and women into

masculine and feminine from birth. Similarly, Butler (1990) also views gender identity as a social construction that is reinforced by individuals' "regulatory practices of gender coherence" (p. 34), such as the acts of following the patriarchal discourse and compulsory heterosexuality. Different from the former, Grosz (2005) conceptualises gender identity as the individual's "place" (p. 167) that is recognised by socially dominant groups. In her argument, women are usually positioned as "the supplement" (p. 174) of men in a patriarchal society, such as wife, mother, secretary, and whore, which is explained in Chapter Three in detail. However, Grosz also emphasises that gender identity is not fixed or stable but can be "reconfigured" (p. 185) or reconstructed through feminist resistance and struggles.

The socially constructed nature of gender identity is evident in the contexts of Chinese American and Malaysian Chinese women. Under the influence of Orientalism and American racial discourse, Chinese American women are constructed as "sexually exotic docile bodies" (R. S. Chou, 2012, p. 2), with their feminine qualities stereotyped as showing "submissiveness and sensuousness" (S. Ma, 2000, p. 11). At the same time, both Chinese American and Malaysian Chinese women are expected to follow the domestic and subordinate roles of traditional wives and mothers within Confucian patriarchal discourse. In this sense, this dissertation defines gender identity as a social construction related to femininity, sexuality, and gender roles. It focuses on how patriarchal discourse constructs women's gender identity, and how women, in turn, reconstruct and redefine their femininity, sexuality, and roles within the family and society.

Similar to gender identity, racial identity is also seen as "a social construct" (Tehranian, 2000, p. 842) that symbolises political struggles and social conflicts rather than biological attributes such as skin colour. In the context of the Chinese American

diaspora, Kim (2012) defines racial identity as individuals' "identification with membership in a socially designated racial group" (p. 139), which is largely affected by their struggles against white American racism and their attitudes towards their own group. Goh and Wong (2004) further clarify that Chinese American racial identity is the "only common denominator" (p. 87) in the diasporic Chinese community, which is constructed based on racial origin rather than culture. Although Goh and Wong exclude culture from their definition, culture remains an essential element in the discussion of racial identity. As Ien Ang (2001) contends, Chinese American people need to look for the "cultural content" (p. 48), such as Chinese heritage and history, to navigate their racial identity.

Different from America, the construction of racial identity is based on the racial classification system of Malaysia, which includes the Malays, Chinese, and Indians. Although contemporary Malaysian census forms use "ethnicity" to describe cultural and social classifications, these classifications still "fall back on colonial categories of race" (Reddy & Selvanathan, 2020, p. 650). This historical connection explains why many academic studies still use "race" to discuss the multiplicity of Malaysian racial identities. Unlike the racial identity of Chinese American people, Cyn and Ganapathy (2016) firmly argue that the racial identity of Malaysian Chinese individuals is "marked by Chinese culture" (p. 171), as it is Chinese cultural heritage that distinguishes them from other races, particularly Malays and Bumiputras. Moreover, Reddy (2019) states that mixed-racial Malaysian Chinese, despite being required to identify with a single race on official documents, "may change" (p. 330) their racial identities over their lives under the impact of specific cultural and spatial contexts. Based on these definitions above, my dissertation will highlight how cultural heritage influences the racial identity of Chinese American and Malaysian Chinese women in

the four novels; it also discusses how Chinese American women deal with American racial discourse.

Next, the justification for comparing Chinese American and Malaysian Chinese supernatural fiction in this dissertation needs to be elaborated on. There are three reasons. Firstly, as an ethnic minority group in America and Malaysia, diasporic Chinese communities share a persistent racial anxiety and frequently encounter racial issues in history and the contemporary world. In a white-dominated America, early Chinese immigrants were historically treated as “labourers but not as sojourners or neighbours” (Voon, 2024, p. 96). Despite their crucial contributions to building America, early Chinese immigrants endured severe racial discrimination and systemic injustices, such as being “confined to Chinatown” (Wong, 2009, p. 9), prohibited from “interracial sex and marriage” (Choy, 2022, p. 104), and burdened with derogatory stereotypes. For example, Chinese women were portrayed as “villainous temptresses” (Hwang & Parreñas, 2021, p. 571), while Chinese men were stigmatised as “feminine or homosexual” (T. S. K. Kong, 2012, p. 293) in historical America. Even in contemporary America, under the enduring influence of Orientalism—which upholds “western superiority and non-western inferiority” (Koikari, 2002, p. 32)—Chinese Americans continue to be regarded as perpetual foreigners and racial Others. Regardless of how fully they have assimilated or are praised as a model minority, their position remains “subordinated along America’s citizenship line” (N. Kim, 2007, p. 131)—a racial boundary that divides insiders from foreigners. The prolonged experience of racial discrimination and exclusion has fostered a profound and enduring anxiety among Chinese Americans—an unease related to both their Chinese heritage and the persistent marginalisation, hatred, and racialised alienation rooted in American racial discourse.

Compared to Chinese Americans, Malaysian Chinese—though a minority in Malaysia—have historically faced less antagonistic race relations. From the fifteenth century onward, Chinese traders cooperated with the locals, intermarried, and settled in the Malay Peninsula. By the nineteenth century, both indigenous and colonial authorities in British Malaya not only welcomed Chinese immigrants as “legitimate residents and workers” (Voon, 2024, p. 106) but also acknowledged their economic contributions, which fostered a sense of belonging among Chinese immigrants. At the same time, the implementation of the “divide and rule” policy ensured that the indigenous, Chinese, and other racial groups lived in their respective areas, maintained distinct customs and traditions, and collectively participated in the development of British Malaya. This colonial racial policy constructed “a sense of unity in diversity” (Voon, 2024, p. 102) and relatively harmonious racial relations in British Malaya.

However, after independence in 1957, this colonial racial classification was institutionalised as “the primary markers of [racial] identity” (I. Ang, 2022, p. 764) in contemporary Malaysia. In specific, the Malay was designated as the “native race” (I. Ang, 2022, p. 764) of the Malay Peninsula, while the Chinese became a “non-indigenous race” (I. Ang, 2022, p. 764), which gave rise to the hyphenated identity such as Malaysian-Chinese—a label that reminds Malaysian Chinese of their non-indigenous and “extra-national origins” (S. P. Gabriel, 2014, p. 1215). At the same time, the racial classification also deepened the divide and tension between indigenous and non-indigenous communities, as the Malays, Chinese, Indians, and others were officially recognised as separate groups rather than as unique but equal groups enjoying equal rights and status in Malaysia. This racial tension peaked during the racial riots of 13 May 1969, which were related to the social and economic disparities between Malays and Chinese in Malaysia. To address Malay grievances during the

racial riots, the government implemented a series of policies, including the New Economic Policy and the National Education Policy, to “establish the superior Malay status through language, education, and economy” (G. V. S. Chin, 2006, p. 6). Although these policies uplifted and comforted the Malay community, they simultaneously gave rise to a sense of loss and anxiety about “the marginal status” (G. V. S. Chin, 2006, p. 6) among non-Malays, especially the Malaysian Chinese. Despite such racial anxiety, Malaysian Chinese have remained deeply rooted in Malaysia and continue to regard it as their “one and true homeland” (S. P. Gabriel, 2014, p. 1221). They insist that the Chinese identity and cultural heritage should be recognised as an integral part of Malaysian identity, rather than something foreign, non-indigenous, or “not-belonging” (G. V. S. Chin, 2006, p. 6). Based on the above discussion, although the historical and contemporary racial dynamics in America and Malaysia differ in significant ways, both Chinese Americans and Malaysian Chinese occupy the position of ethnic and racial minorities who share common “tensions, sentiments, and anxieties” (S. W. Ang, 2019, p. 6) regarding their racial identities, racial relations, and the sense of belonging in their respective countries. These shared anxieties, tensions, and pursuits are evidently expressed and reflected in their literary works, including the four supernatural novels examined in this dissertation.

Secondly, patriarchal gender norms and family structures dominate most Chinese American and Malaysian Chinese communities. For example, J. H. X. Lee (2015) points out that Chinese patriarchal gender rules—which are rooted in traditional Confucianism—affect the first-generation and local-born Chinese American individuals’ perspectives on “filial responsibility” (p. 356) and “homosexuality” (p. 357). Local-born Chinese American individuals—who hold western values and have differing interpretations of gender and sexuality—often conflict with those who adhere

to traditional Confucian patriarchal gender norms and the Confucian patriarchal family structure (Chung, 2016; J. H. X. Lee, 2015). In Malaysia, there are traditional Chinese practices that emphasise the regulation of the body and the perpetuation of gender roles within the family hierarchy (G. V. S. Chin, 2005; Hirschman, 2016). Additionally, some Malaysian Chinese communities prefer children of a particular gender, which is perceived as having strong connections to the traditional patriarchal cultures of East and South Asia (Pong, 1994). These gender issues, rooted in Chinese patriarchal discourse, are also frequently described in Chinese American and Malaysian Chinese supernatural novels.

Lastly, Chinese American literature and Malaysian Chinese literature are historically rooted in realism, and speculative fiction has emerged rapidly in both countries since the 1990s and the millennium (Fan, 2021; G. V. S. Chin & Quayum, 2021; Patterson & Troeung, 2016). Although the two areas show a similar preference for realism in history and a similar developing tendency in speculative literature in the 1990s and the millennium, Chinese American and Malaysian Chinese writers use different literary genres and symbols to describe gender and race, which will be discussed in the next section. Considering the above reasons, this dissertation contends that Chinese American and Malaysian Chinese supernatural fiction present numerous similarities and differences, which should be further examined. Through this dissertation, the different experiences of and ways employed by diasporic Chinese women to negotiate their gender and racial identities in their respective diasporic communities are reflected. At the same time, this dissertation can provide a deep understanding of the different gendered and racial contexts and discourses in America and Malaysia across various time periods. Additionally, by analysing the similar or different literary symbols used by the two groups of female writers, this dissertation

can reflect the shared or unique cultural heritage of Chinese American and Malaysian Chinese women, such as Chinese myths, religions, gender norms, and traditions. Therefore, my dissertation chooses four Chinese American and Malaysian Chinese supernatural novels and examines Chinese American and Malaysian Chinese gender and racial issues and the feminist future in four selected novels from 1990 to 2022.

1.3 Background of the Study

After establishing the relationship among supernatural fiction, gender, and race, this section provides a comprehensive background on the tradition of Chinese American and Malaysian Chinese writings, the development of speculative fiction, and the supernatural narratives of diasporic Chinese literature in America and Malaysia.

1.3.1 From Realism to Speculative Fiction: The Emerging Literary Genre in Chinese American and Malaysian Chinese Literature

Chinese American and Malaysian Chinese literature written in English is historically rooted in the tradition of realism. In America, Chinese American literature is subsumed under the umbrella term of “Asian American literature”, while Malaysian Chinese literature in English is incorporated into Malaysian literature in English. Historically, Asian American literature has been dominated by autobiographies, historical novels, and memoirs (B. Huang, 2010; G. Huang, 2006; G. Xu, 2021; P. Lai, 2008; T. Yu, 2011). However, poetry, short stories, realist or historical novels, and life-writings are popular genres among Malaysian writers in English, including those of Chinese descent (F. Lee, 2021; Ganesan, 2019; Gui, 2017; G. V. S. Chin & Quayum, 2021; Patterson, 2013, 2018).

The early Chinese American literature in English began in the 1880s with international Chinese students who obtained American citizenship (Holland, 2007), such as Yan Phou Lee and Yung Wing, who wrote autobiographies. From the 1940s

to the 1960s, a number of active Chinese American writers, including Louis Chu, Virginia Lee, Pardee Lowe, and Jade Snow Wong, produced autobiographies and realist novels. From the 1960s to the 1980s, the American civil rights movements inspired highly educated American-born Chinese to engage in literary writing. Maxine Hong Kingston was one such writer who gained renown for her memoirs and historical novels, such as the memoir *The Woman Warrior* (1976) and the historical novel *China Men* (1980) (Bao, 2006; He, 2019; J. Lim, 2006; Shu, 2001). The other famous writer, Amy Tan, described the dilemma of Chinese American women and mother-daughter relationships in her historical novels, including *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) and *The Bonesetter's Daughter* (2001) (Bhandari, 2020; B. Xu, 1994; Dunick, 2006; Walsh, 2017). In addition to the American-born Chinese writers, some new first-generation Chinese American writers after 1978, such as Ha Jin, Li Yiyun, Anchee Min, and Geling Yan, focused on immigrant life and Chinese history (Armbruster, 2015; H. Gong, 2014; Lam, 2011; Matthews, 2016). Evidently, Chinese American literature has been deeply rooted in realism since 1887, which emphasises historical and present social issues.

Different from the development of Chinese American literature, Malaysian literature in English can be traced back to the growth of a literary coterie at the University of Malaya, followed by publications like *The New Cauldron* in 1949 (Quayum, 2003). Notably, the first English book by a Malaysian Chinese writer was a collection of poetry titled *Pulse* by Wang Gungwu in 1950 (Quayum, 2020). However, Malaysian writers in English faced numerous ongoing difficulties in the early years, as English was regarded as an “alien” (G. V. S. Chin, 2006, p. 2) language, which resonated with the historical experience of colonial exploitation and oppression in Malaysia. In 1963, the post-independence Malaysian government directly followed in

the line of colonial British policy, where politics “remained institutionally segmented along ethnic lines” (Anderson, 1998, p. 325). In 1967, Malay became the official language, while English still enjoyed the official status. However, the cultural and language policies changed after the racial riots of 1969, which were considered as “a result of Malay discontent” (Quayum, 2021, p. xiv). The Malaysian government emphasised the status of Malay as the national language while degrading the status of English to a foreign language, which dispelled the possibility of racial unity and resulted in the categorisation of Malaysian literature in English as the “sectional literature” (Quayum, 2008, p. 152). Influenced by cultural policies, Malaysian Anglophone writers have experienced marginalisation caused by “the culture of censorship” (G. V. S. Chin, 2006, p. 2) and neglect from authorities, communities, and mediums (Quayum, 2021, p. xvi). Consequently, two groups of Malaysian Chinese writers emerged. The first group comprised local writers who were still active in Malaysia, including Lee Kok Liang, who continued writing in English, and Wang Phui Nam, who entered a period of silence (Quayum, 2008, p. 153). The second group departed from Malaysia and established their careers as transnational or global Malaysian writers for freely writing and expressing themselves in English, such as Ee Tiang Hong and Shirley Lim (G. V. S. Chin, 2006; Quayum, 2001, 2003, 2008).

Since the 1990s, globalisation and changes in Malaysian language policy have contributed to the revival of Malaysian Chinese literature in English. Realism remains a dominant theme of Malaysian Chinese literature in English. For instance, Tan Twan Eng writes historical fiction in Malaysia, while a new generation of transnational writers, including Tash Aw, Tei Chiew-Siah, and Jason Lee, write historical novels and autobiographical poems from their different settlements and diasporic conditions (A. Ang, 2022; Quayum, 2020; Poon, 2016). In contrast to earlier diasporic Malaysian

Chinese writers disillusioned by racial riots and language policies, contemporary diasporic Malaysian Chinese writers have diverse motivations for settling abroad. The latter navigates a globalised and decentralised reality characterised by multiple centres and identities, while the focus on “transconnections and mobility” (G. V. S. Chin & Quayum, 2021, p. 585) is on the rise. Although realism remains a significant literary genre in Chinese American and Malaysian Chinese literature, speculative fiction has grown in popularity in Asian American literature and Malaysian literature since the 1990s and 2000s.

According to past scholarship, the genre diversity of Asian American literature exploded into different kinds of speculative fiction in the 1990s, which reflects the “fictive exploration of a crisis of capitalism” (Song, 2005, p. 63) and racial ordering during the early 1990s in America. Since 2000, the number of speculative novels by Asian American writers has increased dramatically, which represents a “sea-change” (Patterson & Troeung, 2016, p. 74) in the literary genre that deviates from Asian American ethnic autobiographies. As part of Asian American literature, Chinese American literature mirrors this evolving tendency. For example, Ted Chiang, a second-generation Chinese American writer, won his first Nebula Award in 1990 with his science fiction, “Tower of Babylon”. Since the millennium, Ken Liu, a first-generation Chinese American writer, has published 86 short works of science fiction, four novels, and four collections in his unique style called “silkpunk” (Healey, 2021, p. 55), which combines Chinese magical and supernatural elements with technology. In the recent two decades, an increasing number of American-born Chinese female writers have entered the realm of speculative fiction, such as Elizabeth Lim, Joan He, SL Huang, and E. Lily Yu, as well as first-generation female writers Cindy Pon and Marie Lu. Their works include science fiction, thrillers, fantasy, supernatural novels,

and short stories with horror, fantastic, and supernatural elements. These local-born and first-generation Chinese American writers listed above draw inspiration from Chinese history, folklore, and mythology to create speculative fiction (Kidd, 2018; Millen, 2021; Woo, 2006). For instance, the American-born Chinese writers Joan He's *Descendant of the Crane* (2019) and Elizabeth Lim's *Six Crimson Cranes* (2021) are typical Chinese-inspired fantasies that engage with Chinese history and myths, such as the legend of the white snake. The first-generation Chinese American writer Cindy Pon's *Silver Phoenix* (2009) is a fantasy based on fantastic Chinese creatures like phoenixes and demons.

Moreover, according to Jerng (2021), Asian American writers have a purpose to rearticulate the “yellow peril” (p. 182) as a set of images, fantasies, and threats in science fiction. As a part of the Asian American community, Chinese American writers also share a similar writing purpose of reshaping the images of Asians. In an online interview, Ken Liu declares that his science fiction attempts to afford the Chinese more “agency, complexity, and self-determination” (K. Chen, 2014) compared to conventional western narratives. Charles Yu and Ted Chiang's science fiction works are recognised for effectively reconstructing the images of Asians along “postracial” (Fan, 2016, p. 1) lines under the current situation that China's rise has rebalanced the East versus West framework. However, Ted Chiang's science fiction seldom marks the racial identities of characters and excludes the social relationships that emphasise the “racial disparity” (Esaki, 2020, p. 15). Additionally, Chiang's short science fiction, “Liking What You See” (2002), is connected to gender, discussing the reproduction of gender and racial ideologies (Foster, 2009). Marie Lu's fantasies, *Legend Series* (2011), also relate to gender, which describe the silence, rejection, betrayal, and acceptance of homosexuality in a fantastic world (Lashley, 2015).

Similar to Asian American speculative literature, Malaysian speculative fiction has rapidly developed since the millennium (G. V. S. Chin & Quayum, 2021; Quayum, 2021; Patterson, 2013). Notably, several Malaysian writers contributed to speculative fiction in the 1990s, such as the transnational Malaysian writer Tunku Halim and Malaysia-born Australian Chinese writer Beth Yahp. Since 2000, numerous diasporic Malaysian Chinese writers have emerged as creators of speculative fiction. For example, Angeline Woon and Jaymee Goh live in Canada, Zen Cho and Yen Ooi in the UK, Yangsze Choo in America, Stephanie Lai in Australia, and Sue Lynn Tan in Hong Kong. These diasporic Malaysian Chinese writers create various forms of speculative fiction. Angeline Woon, for instance, published the short noir story “Big Bertha and the Stones of Justice” in 2013. Stephanie Lai’s “One Last Interruption Before We Begin” (2011) is a short tale with fantastical and steampunk components. The science fiction *Sun: Queens of Earth* by Yen Ooi, released in 2014, imagines a future of advanced technology and space travel. *Sorcerer to the Crown* (2015) and *The True Queen* (2019), two fantastic novels by Zen Cho, depict magic and witchcraft in Regency London. Sue Lynn Tan has published two fantastic novels, *Daughter of the Moon Goddess* (2022) and *Heart of the Sun Warrior* (2022). Both works rewrite ancient Chinese mythology into an adventure about love, family, and women’s power.

In addition to diasporic writers, local Malaysian Chinese writers have contributed to speculative literature in Malaysia with the support of “local publishers” (G. V. S. Chin & Quayum, 2021, p. 586), such as Silverfish Books and Buku Fixi. Notable male writers include Terence Toh, Joshua Kam, William Tham Wai Liang, and Zedick Siew, while female writers include Julya Ooi, Anna Tan, and Chuah Guat Eng. For example, Julya Ooi published her collection of horror short stories, *Here Be Nightmares*, in 2014, while Anna Tan and William Tham Wai Liang respectively

published their short science fiction works, such as “Code” (Tan, 2015) and “Kakak” (Liang, 2015). Zedick Siew’s “Hearts in the City”, a short work of noir fiction, was released in 2014. The speculative writings of Malaysian Chinese writers, both diasporic and local, encompass a diverse range of genres, including fantasy, horror fiction, science fiction, noir, and supernatural novels, as well as short stories featuring horrific, fantastic, and supernatural elements (G. V. S. Chin & Quayum, 2021; Quayum, 2021).

Interestingly, religion, politics, race, class, and gender are significant perspectives in Malaysian science fiction. Anna Tan’s “Codes” is considered to imply the “race-based identities” (Mattar, 2021, p. 701) in postcolonial Malaysia and to discuss the possibility of taking “cyberspace” (Mattar, 2021, p. 703) as a free space of gender and ethnicity. Beyond the realm of science fiction, Zen Cho’s fantasy novel *Sorcerer to the Crown* provides profound insights into “race and gender discrimination” (Philip, 2016, p. 39). Therefore, Chinese American and Malaysian Chinese speculative fiction reflect strong concerns with gender and race, which are also evident in the supernatural fiction produced by diasporic Chinese writers in America and Malaysia.

1.3.2 Supernatural Novels by Chinese American and Malaysian Chinese Female Writers

This section examines supernatural fiction by diasporic Chinese female writers in America and Malaysia and their major themes. Similar to Chinese American speculative fiction, Chinese American supernatural fiction has been popular since the 1990s. Amy Tan departed from the realist tradition to focus on the supernatural in the 1990s with the novel *The Hundred Secret Senses* (1995). Lan Samantha Chang published *Hunger* in 1998, a collection of short stories with supernatural elements.

After 2000, there are numerous supernatural works by Chinese American female writers, including Amy Tan's novel *Saving Fish from Drowning* (2005), Shawna Yang Ryan's novel *Water Ghosts* (2009), Alyssa Wong's short horror fiction "Hungry Daughters of Starving Mothers" (2015) and the ghost tale "Olivia's Table" (2018), RF Kuang's fantastic and supernatural trilogy *The Poppy War* (2018), and E. Lily Yu's ghost story *On Fragile Waves* (2021). Among these Chinese American supernatural works, gender and race are the predominant themes. For example, Alyssa Wong's "Hungry Daughters of Starving Mothers" relates to lesbian identity (Arkenberg, 2015). Chang's *Hunger* focuses on the ethnic identity and diasporic experiences of different generations of Chinese Americans in one family (Y. Ma, 2019; W. M. Wang, 2022). Yu's *On Fragile Waves* describes diasporic experiences and the home for Afghan migrants in Australia (Regan, 2021).

Similar to Chinese American literature, diasporic and local Malaysian Chinese female writers created several supernatural works in the 1990s. For example, the Australian Malaysian writer Beth Yahp published a supernatural novel, *The Crocodile Fury*, in 1992. After 2000, the number of supernatural works by diasporic Malaysian Chinese writers rapidly increased, including Cassandra Khaw's short ghost tale "Some Breakable Things" (2016), Zen Cho's short fiction "The House of Aunts" (2014) and supernatural novel *Black Water Sister* (2021), and Yangsze Choo's novels *The Ghost Bride* (2013), *The Night Tiger* (2019), and *The Fox Wife* (2024). Concurrently, local Malaysian Chinese female writers published some supernatural works, such as Anna Tan's short ghost story "Regret" (2020), Wan Phing Lim's short horror ghost story "The Moths of Pearl Hill" (2017), and Julya Ooi's collection of short ghost stories, *Taiping Tales of Terror* (2020). It is important to note that gender and race are also central themes within Malaysian Chinese supernatural works. For instance, Yahp's