



## Cultural Context Study on the Literary Genealogy of *The Uninvited*

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### Abstract

*The Banquet Bug*, the first English novel by Geling Yan, an American Chinese Writer, was published first in the U.S.A to great critical acclaim and was awarded the Golden Prize in the fiction category by Chinese American Librarians Association (CALA). This essay, from the perspective of literary genealogy, studies its unique cultural context. Based on the study of the specific cultural contexts, the author tries to unveil the mystery of the unique style of Yan's novels from the angle of literary genealogy.

**Key words:** *The Banquet Bug*; Literary genealogy; Cultural context

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## 1. RESEARCH BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

*The Banquet Bug*, the first English novel written by Geling Yan, an Chinese American Writer of the 21<sup>th</sup> century, came out first in the U.S.A. to great critical acclaim and was awarded the Golden Prize in the fiction category by Chinese American Librarians Association (CALA). Geling Yan is a writer who writes in Chinese and English, and a professional Hollywood screenwriter at the same time. There are so many screenplays composed by her that we are familiar with, such as *The Sent-Down Girl*, *The 13*

*Women of Nanjin*, *Lanfang Mei*, and *Siao Yu*. *The Banquet Bug* is a story about the hero Dan Dong, a laid off worker, was once mistaken for a journalist and got a chance to attend a press conference. In the press conference, he tasted a various of delicious food he had never had before and a small sum of money for transportation. From then on, he was disguised as journalist to enjoy delicious food here and there and take away transportation fees in all kinds of press conferences. Thus he became literally a “bug of banquet”. He even tried to rub shoulders with some artists, businessmen and prostitutes. What's more, he met a bosom friend in the circle. However, how long this kind of disguise can last?

In the book review column, the *New York Times* lauded the novel as “A conversation across centuries and a deft exploration of the wondrous and sad inscrutability of the human heart.” Ha Jin, a famous American Chinese writer, regards it as a unique novel of great ambition and emotion.<sup>1</sup> The book, a masterpiece of Yan, who has rich experiences in both Chinese and western cultures, again showcases the unique style of her fictions. This paper analyzes its distinctive cultural context from the perspective of literary genealogy.

“As a new branch of comparative literature, literary genealogy is a genealogical theory of literature. It focuses on the inner developing system of literature and intends to explain why a certain literary text differs from others.” Cultural context is the source of literal texts. From the perspective of literary genealogy, cultural context refers to the field of culture formed by accumulation of culture and cultural status at specific time and space. It should contain two aspects. Firstly, it refers to certain cultural status relevant to the text, including the specific cultural environment combined by elements like living status,

<sup>1</sup> “Geling Yan stands as an eminent writer from the Chinese diaspora . . . an ambitious, eloquent, and unique book.” —Ha Jin, author of *Waiting*

social customs, physiological status, ethnics and values. Secondly, it refers to the living style, desires, cognitive abilities and approaches and psychology of the creator of the text (individual creator or collective creators, with or without consciousness) in the field of culture; in another word, it stands for the cognitive status of the literature creators. And Yan's latest work has just born into this kind of cultural context. This paper explores the mystery of the unique style of *The Banquet Bug* from the eastern (oriental) context, the western (occidental) context and global context.

## 2. CHINESE VARIOUS OF LIVING STATUS ABROAD

Geling Yan focuses on writing Chinese various of living status under the condition of alienating cultural conflict. Her novels all demonstrate Chinese body status, the difference of Western and Eastern culture, and especially the repression of mighty Western culture to marginal non-mainstream Eastern culture.

### 2.1 The Humiliated Body

Since long time ago, Western colonists had discoursed power over migrants. This phenomenon can be seen through migrants' body repression. In some of Geling Yan's novels with the material of Chinese living abroad, she presents Westerners' racial discrimination and material depression through Chinese bodies are different from Western bodies. She spares no effort in writing how Chinese labors were treated on the other side of the Pacific Ocean: Men's low wages and women's tragic fate by selling as goods. All these demonstrate colonists' power discourse. The old labor in Geling Yan's novel *Fusang* was regarded as the object of being hatred as the whole China and even eventually beaten to death, just because he lagged behind the team occasionally. Westerners treated Chinese as good and hate them, for their bodies represent their race: yellow skin and dark eyes.

Why do Westerners abuse Chinese bodies like so? Politicians and people who possess power govern people though controlling bodies first. If the formers want to weaken latters' will and depress the revolt, what they should set off to beat them first is the body. In American, it obviously exists that the mainstream strong group bully and oppresses the non-mainstream weak group. This phenomenon suggests that the strong Western civilization who has discoursed power invades to other civilizations. Westerners' assimilate Chinese culture through getting rid of the culture on their bodies. It is a mean and a way. They pose political racial discrimination on the insult of the body. Therefore, the body exteriorly becomes political discourse right.

The heroine in *It is Adam And it is Eve* betrayed her uterus and gave birth to a baby with a gay. She agreed

to be a mother for the money. Similarly, the heroine in Geling Yan's another novel *The Maroon Hair* felt Westerns' attention being a model. This kind of attention is kind of attention of the other; and "I" was watched as "the other". Opposite to "the native", the other is a core concept in post-colonial theory, which emphasize the characteristics of the object, alien, exterior, specificity, fragment, and difference. It is referenced the native. The other stress on the alien and the reference of the native. To American, the dark-hair and yellow-skin Chinese is the other. Westerns talk about China and imitate them to spit with a tone despise, which obviously shows Westerns' racial discrimination and cultural hegemony. Westerns show their cultural superior, which set off the Pastern's feeling of 'being watched'. The Eastern heroine is a person who did not have the respect from Western men and she is not equal in front of them.

Why Westerners have estrangement and discrimination and why Chinese hatred is still so strong nowadays? In Geling Yan novels, she analyzes intrinsic quality of this kind of hatred. She gave a vivid metaphor that "the impulse and plateau of sex", and "people feel the pleasure of organism when some crashes in front of them". Geling Yan deeply thought over racial discrimination. She illustrates racial discrimination and hatred in the perspective of life itself in *Fusang*. This kind of discrimination has a deep historical reason. To Americans, so many Chinese come to their country to take jobs away from them. That's why Chinese are discriminated and oppressed, and therefore they are outside of main-stream society. With time passes by, Chinese American social and economic status has improved a lot. However, Chinese American never gets chance to approach to politics because of their own cultural background and race, and the exclusion of main-stream society. Geling, Fan deeply felt in this way. So she wrote the Easterners' oppression from Westerners in the angle of the body, and put this kind of 'hatred' to a high gear of human nature as well as. When it comes to this point, culturally and historically Geling Yan caught a deeper connotation.

### 2.2 The Lonely Body

Concerning loneliness, Geling Yan interprets it from the perspective of human life consciousness, containing deep cultural connotation.

The image of "dark hairs wrap the neck" appears over and over in *The Romantic Luck of an Insomnia Person*, which presents the loneliness in the perspective of image "body". The dark hair is a body symbol to Easterners. Being far away from home, dark hair makes "me" alienated and it brings a kind of identity belonging connected with cultural part. In the context of post-modernism, cultural identity is closely related to cultural difference. Cultural difference shows cultural power. Cultural hegemony is inevitable. Power plays and controls different cultural relation, which is more obvious in a

country with strong economic and military ability. Deluo Pei in *The Green and Lemon-Yellow Bird* shows his loneliness with eyes. This type of loneliness does not only belong to the boy Deluo Pei, but a race and a group.

Geling Yan demonstrates us the common spiritual feeling 'loneliness' with the body image of long hair, dark eyes, i.e. "It is pointed out in body politics that 'ego' is the essential existence in the world-the only property of existence. In order to keep the property safe, ego has to be alert to 'non-ego' and other dangerous elements." At present, cultural hegemony still exists. Because unequal phenomenon still exists in Western and Eastern cultural communication. As a conscious body of weaker cultural, Geling Yan sensitively caught the alien's revolt to Western cultural expansion. For example, the heroine in *The Romantic Luck of an Insomnia Person* refused an American's invitation, and the heroine in *The Dead End Cafe* revolted a stranger's care. This kind of resistance is self-protection instinct, with the subconscious attention to protect national independence, 'ego', and freedom.

Geling Yan's loneliness's has the meaning of culture and world. She illustrates human common spiritual feeling from the perspective of human life. One's eyes and skin can never be changed, and so is someone's cultural identity. Pale and lonely body is symbolic of human spiritual loneliness and non-redemption. Geling Yan paid close attention to human spiritual by demonstrating human loneliness.

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### 3. THE THREE CULTURAL CONTEXTS OF THE BANQUET BUG

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#### 3.1 The Eastern Culture Context of *The Banquet Bug*

*The Banquet Bug* tells the fantastical tale about a bunch of banquet-crashers, who dine and wine at state-sponsored banquet by subterfuge. Dan Dong, the protagonist in the novel, is a laid-off worker of a Beijing can be factory. Mistaken as a journalist in his job-hunting and dragged to a press conference, he later attended a banquet, where he enjoyed lots of exquisite and expensive delicacies he had never had the chance to lay his eyes on and also was offered a bribe. Later he has officially become a banquet-crasher, posing as a journalist or free-lancer and frequenting at major press conferences. The fake keeps sponging off and accepting bribes, really living up to the name of a banquet bug. Yan depicts the typical life of an unemployed Beijing couple in English. Geling Yan was born in Shanghai in 1958 and grew up and studied and even worked for a while in China. She married to a Chinese man in 1986 and divorced three years later. From those experiences we can see that she spent her early ages in China. We all know that how important the early period of life to someone's life, especially for a writer.

As the Second War ended, China became an independent country and master of itself, getting rid of Western countries' and Japanese invasion and repression. Japan and other Asian independent countries stepped into an era of national autonomy and equal development. Therefore, it is urgent to start cultural construction. The phenomenon of Multicultural coexistence is inevitable; it is a trend for Western countries and Asian countries to have equal communication, mutual understanding, learn from each other, and absorb each other's advantages. The great change of society leads to cultural change. Before being independent, if China was bound to the tradition, colonialism and nationalism and resisted Western culture, then it gained dignity and became more confident with political and economic autonomy after the foundation of New Republic China. Under this condition, China could calm down and ponder over conflicts of two cultures or even multicultural coexistence. After the mid of 1960s when China carried out the reform and opening policy, it experienced the contact, conflicts, adjusts, and merges of Western culture, which led China to make conclusion and ponder over about itself own culture. It is China major mission to catch up with modern pace and be an independent country.

The cultural context that forms the literary genealogy actually has three aspects. The first aspect is to show the cultural context with the distinctive accumulation of culture and the cultural context of Chinese people, according to Yan Shadang. As a writer well-versed in Chinese culture and eastern culture, Yan has stressed her special American Chinese identity and the eastern cultural features with constant Chinese elements.

Since ancient times, binary opposition between men and women existed because of different physical conditions. According to Chinese civilization system, it is recorded in *Books of Changes* that "God has arranged everything, and he has made the rule that who is superior to whom...the woman is inferior to the man." Ban Zhao confessed in *Lesson for Women* that "women are different from men just like yin is different from yan. A man is strong because of energy and a woman is beautiful because of tenderness." It is also said in Neo Confucianism: "The female, symbolic of yin, must obey the male who stands for yan." Therefore, we can see delicate characteristics of Chinese aesthetics about women: tender, graceful, elegant, and beautiful. It is even reasonable to see the phenomenon that women rely on men and men are strong. Thus, it formed a stereotype of female figure: softness, sensibility, and without ambition. There is a saying: it is necessary and wise to give in male's world. To those who regard their appearance as an important way to survive, this sentence is literary right to some extent. If so, those women put themselves into a position inferior to men by themselves. China has a long history and man were superior to women for thousands of years.

In the novel, the background, the life of Dong Dan and his wife Little Plum and the cuisines of the banquets are telling examples of eastern context. For example, she depicts a shower scene, in which Little Plum stole water from the factory to give her husband a good shower. The description on one hand mirrors the abysmal living conditions of the laid-offs in Beijing; on the other hand, it also reflects a Chinese cultural tradition that Chinese women often diligently and meticulously take care of their husband. In the book, the shower scene is a reflection of the eastern cultural context, which Yan has once been exposed to. For another instance, abundant food at the banquets depicted in the novel, the special cooking and peculiar raw materials all open a door for the western readers to understand Chinese culinary delights. Those elements, carefully selected by Yan and of distinctive cultural attributes, imprinted the eastern culture in the Chinese story of the banquet bug.

### 3.2 The Western Cultural Context of *The Banquet Bug*

In the West, the word 'culture' is ambiguous, and its meaning is often changes in different historical periods, and with the influence of some specific factors. Generally, there are two mainstream understandings about culture: the best that has been known, and the totality of man's product. Four views of culture are influential in modern Western academic world, which are diachronic view, synethnocentrist view and holistic view. The word civilization is also rich in meaning. However, essentially refers to those active and effective parts of culture. Unfortunately, civilization has suffered a serious alienation, i.e. Its achievement is often used for conquering, slaughtering, and even destroy the nature.

Yan was invited by USIA (United States Information Agency) in 1988 and later got admitted into the MFA Writing Program in School of Arts Writing, Columbia University. During her stay and her study trip in the US, she experienced cultural shock by herself and learned firsthand the western writing skills. As a writer crossing two cultures, she shows unique atheism in her works. The second aspect of the cultural context that forms literary genealogy is to "show the struggle and integration with some alien culture" (Yan, 2000). The popularity of *The Banquet Bug*, the first English novel by Yan, is partly because of her deep understanding and deft employment of the western cultural context. On one hand, she used something commonly seen in western cultural context to tell a Chinese story. For instance, to illustrate the destitution of Dong Dan and Little Plum, she writes

*He was not worried about getting a job until he found, two months into his reserve worker status, that he and Little Plum only had fifty-five yuan in the bank. Not even enough for the two of them to have a Big Mac dinner at McDonald's. (Yan, 2000, p.2)*

Both Big Mac and McDonald's are poster children of American culture, very easy for western readers to understand their poverty. Another example, "*He went to the hotel in his best outfit, a polyester sports jacket atop khaki slacks, with a pair of black leather shoes to match a fake Dunhill bag he borrowed from a neighbor*" (Ibid.). Dong's dressing is also very westernized. She has added a western flavor to cater to her western readers. On the other hand, the western writing techniques she acquired from her U.S. study experience have instilled new blood into her novel. Western fictions excel at psycho-drawing and multi-dimensional depiction of characters. Her depiction of Dong Dan not only focuses on his appearances but also his state of mind. Chinese novels stress the twists and turns and completeness of drama, while western novels often prefer incomplete segment writing. She introduces Dong's fantastical banquet-crashing experience segment by segment and concludes the story with an open ending. The novel written by an American Chinese writer is therefore inevitably branded with western culture.

### 3.3 The Global Cultural Context of *The Banquet Bug*

"*The third aspect of the cultural context that forms literary genealogy is the cultural context that shows the similarity in thinking and cognition of human kind*" (Yan, 2000). "*A deeply political and masterfully executed novel that exposes the inequalities driving the world's next superpower*" says the *Daily Telegraph*. *The Banquet Bug* by depicting the life of Dong Dan, a small potato at the bottom of the social ladder, reveals a host of hot social issues, such as corruption, academic pilgrims, squandering of tax-payers' money and social inequalities. All those social problems mentioned in the fiction are common across the globe. In the context of globalization, the hot issues discussed in her novel have triggered interest from readers of various nationalities and cultures and touched the sensitive topic of insatiable human greed and desires. The book is about the shared destiny of the people on the planet, consistent with the exploration of human nature in Yan's books. Yan chooses the global social issues and diagnose humanity from cross-cultural perspective. This shows a global context and also follows the globalized trend of American Chinese literature.

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## CONCLUSION

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This paper has analyzed the three cultural contexts in the genetics of *The Banquet Bug*, namely, the eastern cultural context, the western cultural context and the global cultural context. It sheds light on literary genealogy of Yan's fictions. Because of Yan's international background, profound knowledge about the differences between eastern culture and western culture and unique style and atheistic taste in three cultural contexts, her works have caught wide attention from both eastern and western

readers and received critical acclaims at the international stage.

It is a truth that there are so many differences between Western and Eastern countries, mainly ethnical, class and economic differences. Can the huge economic difference be erased through cultural communication? We have to say that Genling Yan is too naïve. Cultural exchange between Western and Eastern countries will avoid difference caused by social system and economic basis? Under present situation, Geling Yan's idea cannot work out. Her so called idea of "being the same" is a kind of ignoring difference and despising "being the same", rather than the real "equal". However, we still believe that people who have different nationalities and culture still essentially have so many things in common. Being in common is the basis of being equal. So far, it is important

and meaningful to keep the "ego" as an Eastern writer while rubbing shoulders with Westerners. There is no doubt that Genling Yan's novels prompt us to think over deeply the question.

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