

# Cultural Authenticity, the Family, and East Asian American Romance Novels

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**Abstract:** Although romance novels are overwhelmingly white where romantic protagonists and their communities are concerned (even if these societies are culturally diverse in reality), romance writers and readers of different ethnicities have challenged this white norm. Black American romance is a flourishing subgenre, albeit with its own problems of market limitations, and Hispanic romance publishing is a growing phenomenon. However, romance novels with East Asian protagonists are few and far between. This essay outlines briefly the rise of romance novels featuring East Asian protagonists (that is, protagonists mainly of Chinese, Japanese, or Korean background), and then explores how these novels constitute “Asianness.” Drawing on Edward Said’s concept of Orientalism and Stanley Fish’s configuration of strong and weak multiculturalism, I will consider how references to history, culture, and, above all, a certain notion of the oppressive Asian family are used to create a sense of authentic Asianness in historical romances set in China, as well as in contemporary romances that also employ tropes about identity formation and identity crisis often found in Asian-American Young Adult novels.

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**Keywords:** Asianness contemporary romance diversity East Asian American Fiction Historical Romance multiculturalism orientalism



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**[End Page 1]** In 2018 the film *Crazy Rich Asians*<sup>[1]</sup> was released to much fanfare and publicity, earning nominations at the Golden Globes and other awards, and grossing \$174,532,921 in the United States and \$238,532,921 worldwide (Box Office Mojo). Although criticized within Asian markets, especially in Singapore, for its erasure of non-ethnically Chinese characters from the romantic comedy, *Crazy Rich Asians* was lauded in the US for its all-Asian cast—something seldom seen in Hollywood (Ellis-Petersen & Kuo). In the same year, Helen Hoang’s romance novel *The Kiss Quotient*, featuring an autistic white heroine who falls in love with a mixed-race Vietnamese American hero, was published by Berkley with an initial American print run of 100,000 copies (Alter). It seemed as though the Asian-centered romance had finally entered mainstream popular culture, supported by corporate behemoths of the entertainment industry (*Crazy Rich Asians* was distributed by Warner Bros, while Berkley is an imprint of publishing giant Penguin Books) as well as by audiences who were apparently now receptive to romantic stories written by, and focusing on, minority characters.

However, the broader picture in 2018 for romance narratives featuring protagonists from racial and ethnic minority groups turns out to be more complicated. Between 2016 and 2018, Bea and Leah Koch, owners of US romance bookstore The Ripped Bodice, had produced an annual report on “The State of Racial Diversity in Romance Publishing.” The March 2018 report generated significant media interest in the US because the Koch sisters charted “zero progress in the last 3 years” since they began surveying major romance publishers about the number and percentage of “authors of color and indigenous peoples” being published. Journalists Alexandra Alter of *The New York Times* and Lois Beckett of *The Guardian* began investigating the romance industry. They interviewed romance publishers, the Romance Writers of America, black romance authors such as Beverly Jenkins and Alyssa

Cole, authors such as Alisha Rai and Sonali Dev who write about Indian and Indian-American romantic protagonists, and they concluded that the lack of racial and ethnic diversity within the romance industry is an ongoing structural problem. Beckett pointed to the inbuilt racism of romance writers, readers and publishers, noting how black authors and other authors of color

talked about white editors assuming black writers were aspiring authors, even after they had published dozens of books; about white authors getting up from a table at the annual conference when a black author came to sit down; about constant questions from editors and agents about whether black or Asian or Spanish-speaking characters could really be “relatable” enough.

These findings simply reiterate what scholars have argued for over a decade: romance novels are overwhelmingly white where authors, romantic protagonists and their communities are concerned, even if the nations and societies in which these novels are set are culturally diverse in reality (Teo, “Romance of White Nations”). Romance scholar Jayashree Kamblé observes that “the alleged ‘universal’ nature of mass-market romance fiction” contains “a narrative that normativizes ... Westernness—and more accurately, whiteness” (*Making Meaning*, Kindle location 2444). This whiteness manifests itself in the romance, not only because romantic protagonists are usually Caucasian, but because “light and dark serve to distinguish the sexes and the classes (and their sexual and moral inclinations), with white upper-class women representing the acme of beauty and purity and white upper-class men [End Page 2] the exercise of shining will over dark desire” (Kamblé, *Making Meaning* Kindle location 2476).

Romance writers and readers of different ethnicities have occasionally tried to challenge this white norm. Joseph McAleer and Jay Dixon both show that although a number of British Mills and Boon authors during the 1950s and 1960s tried to write stories tackling racism in their romance novels, and to include more racially diverse protagonists, such manuscripts were ultimately rejected by Mills and Boon for fear of offending their markets in South Africa and the southern United States. The issue of racial or ethnic representation is one that has as much to do with publishers, markets, and readers as with authorial intentions, but the romantic fantasies of white authors certainly do play a role in perpetuating the myth of nations and citizens that are all-white, despite the reality of diverse populations. Recently, Suzanne Brockmann, in her 2018 keynote speech accepting a lifetime achievement award from the Romance Writers of America, challenged the continuing resistance of white writers to representing diversity and supporting authors of color. Brockmann argued, “When you write what you see and what you know and what you have been told to believe, like books set in a town where absolutely no people of colour or gay people live ...? You are perpetuating exclusion, and the cravenness and fear that’s at its ancient foundation” (quoted in Beckett).

This perpetuation of exclusion has tangible material and financial effects. The fact that whiteness structures the romance genre results in significant disadvantages for nonwhite authors who challenge the white norm. Mallory Jagodzinski notes that the romance industry “has had a fraught relationship with race” (18), commenting that “stories about characters of color or stories written by authors of color are automatically slotted in the subgenre of multicultural and ethnic romance.” This results in “less author support and less resources to market the novel, leading to less reader consumption and less profit for the (often non-white) author” (15-16). Despite these structural disadvantages, black American romance is a flourishing subgenre today—albeit with its own problems of market limitations—while Hispanic romance publishing is a growing phenomenon (Markert Kindle locations 3166-3216, 4729-4843). Within the black American romance market, Beverly Jenkins, Brenda Johnson and “Zane”, in particular, have done much to challenge white romantic conventions, and recuperate black American history, black sexualities, and to introduce black cultural conventions of agape love and racial uplift (Dandridge, *Black Women’s Activism*; “Love Prevailed”).

Yet notwithstanding *Crazy Rich Asians* and *The Kiss Quotient*, romance stories featuring Asian protagonists are still few and far between, prompting writers, American readers, and bloggers with an Asian background to establish websites that compile lists of Asian-themed romances, as well as frustrated blogs that ask “Are Asian Men Not Sexy?” (Rachelle Ayala website) and “Where the Hell Are All the Asians?” (Lady Smut Romance/Sex/Pop Culture website). This essay is about the rise of American romance novels featuring East Asian [2] and East Asian American protagonists, written by novelists of East Asian as well as Caucasian backgrounds. I focus on East Asians rather than South, Central or Western Asians because, as we shall see, there is a common history charting the appearance of East Asian romantic protagonists in the romance genre that differs from other Asian traditions. South Asian romances written in English can be traced back to the mid-nineteenth-century Raj (see Teo, “Romancing the Raj”), and although they became Americanized at the turn of the twenty-first century, they draw on different traditions of [End Page 3] nationalism (see Kamblé, “Tempted by the Big Apple”) and the rich romantic traditions of Bollywood

cinema (see Selinger). The Western Asian or Middle Eastern romances too have a longer history than East Asian romances, appearing in the early twentieth century with E.M. Hull's *The Sheik* (1919) and other desert romances, and experiencing a revival in the form of contemporary sheik romances in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries (see Teo, *Desert Passions*). Despite romantic tragedies such as the iconic Puccini opera *Madama Butterfly* (1904), [3] romances written in English featuring East Asian protagonists only began to appear in the late twentieth century.

The term "Asian" is, evidently, confusing. There is a proliferation of "Asias" in the western imagination, and the first thing this essay does is to explore what "Asia" and "Asianness" means in relation to the romance genre, before proceeding to analyze how these novels imagine and constitute East Asianness. I will consider how history, culture, and, above all, a certain notion of the oppressive Asian family are used to create a sense of authentic Asianness in the historical romances of American novelists Jade Lee and Jeannie Lin, as well as contemporary romances that also employ tropes about identity formation and identity crisis found in Asian American Young Adult (YA) novels. In this essay, I use the term "Asian" as a shorthand to refer to an imaginary, historically shifting cultural construct of East Asian subjects and cultural identities in the United States.

### The problem of "Asia" and "Asianness"

The demand by bloggers and readers on websites such as Rachele Ayala or Lady Smut for sexy Asians raises an intriguing question: what exactly is it about a romance novel that makes it "Asian"? Protagonists who are from the dizzying diversity of "Asian" backgrounds? Here, we run into the first foundational problem: "Asia" is a western geopolitical and cultural construct produced through ancient Orientalizing discourses since classical antiquity (Said 1-2). The term "Asia" covers vast geographically, linguistically and culturally disparate peoples, regions, religions, histories and traditions spanning the Middle East to the Philippines, the seven "stan" countries of Central Asia [4] to Indonesia—and, sometimes, even northern Australia. Historically, there were no "Asians" within Asia. There were Indians (of various languages, castes and cultures), Chinese (also of various language groups), Mongols, Turkic groups, Japanese, Koreans, Thais, Hmong, Viet, Malays, Balinese, and a multitude of other linguistic, cultural, state, and national groupings. There were Buddhists, Taoists, Sikhs, Hindus, Muslims, Christians (since the sixteenth century in East Asia), and various other religious groupings. The categorization of such teeming diversity as a single entity—an Asia populated by Asians—was a racializing and Orientalizing gesture made by western powers during the age of empire. The naming of Asians served the purposes of colonizing and exploiting resources and people within the regions designated as Asia, but it also served attempts to keep Asians out of white settler colonial countries such as the United States and Australia through various immigration exclusion acts in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. [5]

After decolonization, however, postcolonial nations within this region acquiesced to this nomenclature and made the geopolitical decision to identify as "Asia" in a move reflecting what Gayatri Spivak has called a strategic use of essentialism. Banding together as [End Page 4] "Asians" allowed collective responses to the political, economic and cultural legacies of western colonialism—both European and American. More recently, as Nissim Kadosh Otmazgin shows, various cultural entrepreneurs from East Asian backgrounds have engaged in "strategic essentialism" for commercial purposes and financial reward. Various cultural products such as movies or music are marketed as "pan-Asian", deliberately appealing to "a sense of Asian-ness in the form of a commodity. In order to reach a wider pool of consumers, entrepreneurs invent new cultural products and cultural genres by intentionally attaching them with certain images, motifs, and feelings associated with 'Asian'" (260). The result, Otmazgin argues, "is not only transnational commercial success but also movies offered as 'Asian' to people both in Asia and in the West" (260) even though this is an artificial commercial construct. This is precisely what has happened with the novel and film *Crazy Rich Asians*: a story pertaining to the culture and lifestyles of a tiny elite of East Asian society is titled and marketed as generically Asian in order to broaden its consumer base in the United States and Asia.

If there is no singular Asia that exists as an identifiable political or cultural entity from which Asian romantic protagonists are drawn, then it follows that "Asianness" is a cultural construct describing racialization or ethnicization; that is, Asianness is the ongoing process of creating a group categorized as "Asian." This is certainly the position of prominent Asian Australian scholars such as Jacqueline Lo, Tseen Khoo and Helen Gilbert, and Asian American literary scholars such as Lisa Lowe, David Leiwei Li, Patricia P. Chu and many others who argue that Asianness and/or Asian American identity is a work in progress, constantly changing as the political circumstances of different groups designed as Asian change. It is notable that in the scholarship on Asian American literature—which is pertinent to contemporary Asian American romance novels—Asia is seldom defined even though Asianness is recognized as a changing cultural construct. David Leiwei Li traces comprehensively the

transformation of nomenclature categorizing immigrants and descendants from East Asia living in the United States from the late nineteenth to late twentieth century: from menacing “Orientals”, with all this word connotes in terms of an exoticized foreign, outsider status, to “Asian Americans” in the post-World War II period, “when they began to be recognized either as citizens or legal aliens” (6). Li, like Lisa Lowe (7) before him, acknowledges that the meaning of Asian American changed again in the late twentieth century, when American-born Asians primarily of Chinese, Japanese and Korean backgrounds were joined by immigrants from other parts of Asia. The formation of Asian American identity is, for Li, a response to problems arising “from the contradictions of American citizenship,” but to “say that there is a definitive Asian American culture would be premature at this point” (15-16).

The slipperiness, even evanescence, of Asianness in contemporary American culture has also been noted by Kelly Chong in her research into interethnic Asian American marriages, and pan-Asian ethnogenesis: the formation of a pan-Asian ethnic group. Chong observes that among younger Asian Americans who marry outside their linguistic group, there is a decline in interracial (Asian-Caucasian) marriages and an increase in interethnic (inter-Asian) marriages and family formations. While ethnic and cultural diversity are seen as attractive advantages by her respondents, Chong argues that notions of pan-Asian consciousness and identity, rooted in beliefs about shared cultural values, are often the reasons given for choosing Asian American partners over partners of other races. When questioned more closely about the nature of this pan-Asian identity and culture, respondents **[End Page 5]** from all Asian backgrounds are vague, resorting to “language, food, holiday celebrations, and values” (64). The content of Asian values generally consists of “things like ‘respect of parents and elders,’ ‘importance of family,’ ‘hard work,’ ‘being stoic,’ ‘education,’ ‘not talking back to grownups all the time,’ or mundane practices like ‘taking off shoes inside the house’” (65). Individual respondents, however, admit to being unsure about whether such practices are indeed Asian, “or just something our parents taught us” (65). Chong concludes that “‘Asianness’ as it is being constructed and negotiated within these families is hard to define, made up as the respondents go along; it is an ongoing construction” that is questioned by certain respondents who experience frustration at their inability to define Asianness clearly, but who feel a need to hold on to it in order to perform their difference from a white mainstream society that only conditionally accepts them as “normal” and “American” (71). This construction and performance of Asianness or pan-Asian identity among Asian Americans is thus another instance of Spivak’s “strategic essentialism,” serving the purpose of creating a normal community within a larger society that still questions their belonging.

Given the fluidity and contingency of Asianness, it is hardly surprising that the East Asian-themed romance novel struggles with defining itself. Where the historical romances tend to focus on a specific country and culture, especially China, contemporary Asian American romances engage in the ongoing process of constructing and negotiating Asianness and its place in American society—a theme that is also foundational to Asian American literature as it developed in the second half of the twentieth century (Sohn et al. 3). To return to the question raised at the start of this section: what is it about an Asian American romance novel that makes it Asian? Is it simply the inclusion of Asian romantic protagonists? In that case, white authors can write Asian romance novels, and they have indeed done so. (This, by the way, rarely occurs in black romance, where authors are almost invariably black.) Because the first romances featuring Asian heroines were written by white authors, I include these in my category of Asian American romances. However, it is more common for contemporary Asian American romances to be written by authors who have Asian heritage of varying degrees. In these cases, there appears to be a compulsion to draw from and highlight the authority of their background, and, consequently, Asianness is often demonstrated in difference rather than assimilability, no matter how many generations the protagonist’s family has been in the United States. I use the term Asian American rather than, for example, Chinese American because authors such as Ruby Lang use “Asian American” and “Asian community” to describe the characters and communities in their novels. They recognize that in America, a “Chinese” community might draw from Hong Kong, China, Singapore, Taiwan and other places, and in more remote American communities, people of Chinese heritage intermingle with those of other Asian backgrounds. It is thus easier to refer to the Asian American community. I argue that these contemporary novels display an ambivalence towards “strategic essentialism” in constructing Asianness or pan-Asian identity and locating it within the family. They also struggle with what Stanley Fish calls “weak” and “strong” multiculturalism. In weak or boutique multiculturalism, the assumption is that cultural difference is superficial and most ethnic Americans want to assimilate into the dominant, mainstream culture. In strong multiculturalism, cultural difference is not a matter of production and consumption but of bedrock cultural values that may or may not be compatible with western liberal democratic values. When Asianness is portrayed as weak multiculturalism, the focus is on objects, food, fashion and festivals. Asian identity is fungible, residing in customs, things or experiences that can be consumed. However, Asian American **[End Page 6]** romances that feature strong multiculturalism focus instead on the values of the Asian American family that clash with the desire for liberty and autonomy that characterizes contemporary American society and, in particular, the modern American heroine.

## The rise of romance novels with East Asian protagonists

The earliest American love stories featuring East Asian protagonists were written by the mixed race, British-born sisters, Winnifred Eaton and Edith Maude Eaton, who emigrated to the United States, living briefly in New York state, before moving separately to Canada. Writing under the pseudonym "Onoto Watanna", Winnifred Eaton's *Miss Numè of Japan: A Japanese American Romance* appeared in 1899, featuring a complicated and overlapping love triangle involving white American and Japanese men and women. In the end, one of the interracial romantic pairings survive, and the titular character, the Japanese heroine Numè, marries the white American hero Sinclair. This was one of the very few interracial romantic relationships to achieve a happy ending at the time (Regis, "Evolution of the American Romance"). More commonly, as Erin S. Young ("Romance in Chinatown") shows in her analysis of the love stories in *Mrs. Spring Fragrance* (1912) by Edith Maude Eaton, who published under the pseudonym "Sui Sin Far", interracial love relationships between white Americans and Chinese Americans failed because the internalized racism against Chinese at the time could not be overcome by white lovers. These early stories were explorations of love, rather than explications of the courtship or marriage plot typical of the romance genre, which remained overwhelmingly focused on white heroes and heroines.

Mills and Boon began introducing ethnic heroes from the late 1960s onwards, with mixed-race European and Arab sheikhs becoming more popular in the 1970s. However, it took the American romance publishers Dell and Silhouette Books to introduce the first contemporary category romance featuring mixed-race Caucasian-East Asian heroes in the 1980s, beginning with Noel Vreeland Carter's regency romance *Miss Hungerford's Handsome Hero* (1981) and Judith Baker's contemporary category romance *Love in the China Sea* (1982), both of which featured half European-half Chinese heroes. The heroines in these novels were white, as was the heroine in Mary Burkhardt's 1993 historical romance *The Panther and the Rose*. East Asian women do not feature as heroines of romance novels until the mixed-race heroines of 1990s romances such as Elizabeth Lowell's *Jade Island* and Katherine Stone's *Pearl Moon* (Young 206). From this point on, romantic protagonists with an East Asian background tend to be women rather than men. In the table below, there are more romance novels featuring East Asian heroines paired with white heroes than East Asian heroes paired with white heroines. Romance novels that feature only East Asian protagonists are more limited, such as the novels of Asian American authors Jade Lee and Jeannie Lin, who both write historical romances set in China, and a couple of novels by Camy Tang and Ruby Lang who write contemporary romances about various Asian American groups set in the United States. In what follows, I want to look briefly at the problems of negotiating Chinese culture in historical romances, and, crucially, to consider how various guises of "Asianness" are represented in contemporary romance novels featuring Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese and mixed-race Asian protagonists. **[End Page 7]**

Year	Novel	Publisher/format	Genre
1981	Noel Vreeland Carter, <i>Miss Hungerford's Handsome Hero</i>	Harlequin, paperback	Historical
1982	Judith Baker, <i>Love in the China Sea</i>	Silhouette, paperback	Contemporary
1990	Elizabeth Lowell, <i>Jade Island</i>	Avon, paperback	Contemporary
1991	Roz Denny Fox, <i>The Cinderella Coach</i>	Harlequin, paperback	Contemporary
1993	Mary Burkhardt, <i>The Panther and the Rose</i>	Zebra, paperback	Historical
1995	Katherine Stone, <i>Pearl Moon</i>	Harlequin MIRA, pb	Contemporary
2004	Jacqueline Diamond, <i>Illegally Yours</i>	Harlequin, paperback	Contemporary
2004	Kim Wong Keltner, <i>The Dim Sum of All Things</i>	William Morrow, paperback	Contemporary

2005	Cara Lockwood, <i>Dixieland Sushi</i>	Gallery Books, paperback	Contemporary
2005	Jade Lee, <i>White Tigress</i> (#1 in Tigress series)	Leisure, e-book	Historical
2005	Jade Lee, <i>Hungry Tigress</i> (#2 in Tigress series)	Leisure, e-book	Historical
2005	Jade Lee, <i>Desperate Tigress</i> (#3 in Tigress series)	Leisure, e-book	Historical
2006	Jade Lee, <i>Burning Tigress</i> (#4 in Tigress series)	Leisure, e-book	Historical
2006	Jade Lee, <i>Cornered Tigress</i> (#5 in Tigress series)	Leisure, e-book	Historical
2007	Jade Lee, <i>Tempted Tigress</i> (#6 in Tigress series)	Leisure, e-book	Historical
2007	Marie Donovan, <i>Her Book of Pleasure</i>	Harlequin, paperback	Contemporary
2007	Dorien Kelly, <i>Below Deck</i>	Harlequin, e-book	Contemporary
2007	Camy Tang, <i>Sushi for One?</i>	Zondervan, paperback	Contemporary
2008	Camy Tang, <i>Only Uni</i>	Zondervan, paperback	Contemporary
2008	Camy Tang, <i>Single Sashimi</i>	Zondervan, paperback	Contemporary
2008	Loreth Anne White, <i>Heart of a Renegade</i>	Silhouette, paperback	Contemporary
2010	Jeannie Lin, <i>Butterfly Swords</i>	Harlequin, paperback	Historical
2011	Jeannie Lin, <i>The Dragon and the Pearl</i>	Harlequin, paperback	Historical
2011	Camy Tang, <i>Weddings and Wasabi</i>	Self-published, e-book	Contemporary
2011	Cathy Yardley, <i>The Player's Club: Finn</i>	Harlequin, paperback	Contemporary
2012	Jeannie Lin, <i>An Illicit Temptation</i>	Harlequin, e-book	Historical
2012	Jeannie Lin, <i>My Fair Concubine</i>	Harlequin, paperback	Historical
2013	Lynna Banning, <i>Smoke River Bride</i>	Harlequin, paperback	Historical

2013	Vicki Essex, <i>Back to the Good Fortune Diner</i>	Harlequin, paperback	Contemporary
2013	Jennifer Lewis, <i>A Trap So Tender</i>	Harlequin, paperback	Contemporary
2013	Jeannie Lin, <i>The Lotus Palace</i>	Harlequin, paperback	Historical
2014	Jeannie Lin, <i>The Jade Temptress</i>	Harlequin, e-book	Historical
2014	Jeannie Lin, <i>The Sword Dancer</i>	Harlequin, paperback	Contemporary
2014	Sherry Thomas, <i>The Hidden Blade</i>	Self-published e-book	Historical
2014	Sherry Thomas, <i>My Beautiful Enemy</i>	Mass Market Paperback	Historical
2015	Jeannie Lin, <i>A Dance with Danger</i>	Harlequin, paperback	Historical
2015	Courtney Milan, <i>Trade Me</i>	Self-published, e-book	Contemporary
2016	Courtney Milan, <i>Hold Me</i>	Self-published, e-book	Contemporary
2016	Ruby Lang, <i>Hard Knocks</i>	Crimson, e-book	Contemporary
2017	Ruby Lang, <i>Clean Breaks</i>	Crimson, e-book	Contemporary
2018	Helen Hoang, <i>The Kiss Quotient</i>	Berkley, paperback	Contemporary
2019	Helen Hoang, <i>The Bride Test</i>	Berkley, paperback	Contemporary

Romance novels with East Asian protagonists. This list is by no means exhaustive. It was compiled from Goodreads.com

### Historical romances with East Asian protagonists

Chinese-American novelist Kathy Lyons, who first began publishing Regency romances under the pseudonym "Katherine Greyle," was the first romance novelist to create a series of historical romances set in China, written under the pseudonym "Jade Lee." From 2005 to 2007, Lee wrote six historical novels set in Qing dynasty China published by Leisure Books, which specialized in genre fiction. These books are known collectively as the "Tigress" series and they take place mostly in Shanghai at the end of the 1890s. After this, Lyons/Lee returned to writing mainly Regency historicals and contemporary romances. Then in 2013, Jeannie Lin, who has acknowledged inspiration from Jade Lee, had the first of her Tang Dynasty historical romances published in paperback by romance publishing giant Harlequin. After the relatively poor sales of Lin's fifth Tang Dynasty romance, *The Lotus Palace* (2013), Harlequin decided to release the sequel to this book, Lin's fifth Tang Dynasty novel *The Jade Temptress* (2014), only in digital format as an e-book. That decision created some controversy amongst the romance community, leading Lin herself to question whether Harlequin could effectively market historical novels set in China, but also to wonder whether romance readers simply did not want to read about China and "[n]o amount of skullduggery or seduction was going to get them to open that book" ("Jeannie Lin Tells Us"). However, when *The Lotus Palace* unexpectedly hit the *USA Today* bestseller list in early 2014, Lin's subsequent Tang Dynasty romances were released as paperbacks by Harlequin. To date, Lin has published eight full-length novels and a number of other short romances set in Tang Dynasty China. **[End Page 9]**

The Romance Writers of America's definition of a romance as a novel that contains "a central love story and an

emotionally satisfying and optimistic ending” (RWA website) is well-known among romance readers, scholars and the *JPRS* community, as are Pamela Regis’s “eight essential narrative elements” that characterize the romance novel. However, these points bear repeating because, as we shall see, they create problems for historical romances set in China. According to Regis, traditional romance novels feature the following plot elements:

the initial [corrupt] state of society in which heroine and hero must court, the meeting between heroine and hero, the barrier to the union of heroine and hero, the attraction between the heroine and hero, the declaration of love between heroine and hero, the point of ritual death [where it appears the union of the romantic protagonists is impossible], the recognition by heroine and hero of the means to overcome the barrier, and the betrothal. (*Natural History*, 30)

American-authored romance novels set in historical China immediately face the unromantic—even anti-romantic—features of traditional Chinese culture: the practice of foot-binding elite women which lasted for over a thousand years from the tenth to the early twentieth centuries; the sequestration of elite women within the patriarchal household; and the entrenched practice of arranged marriage, among other things. In her groundbreaking philological, philosophical, and literary survey of the concept of love in China, Lynn Pan argues that although Chinese people experienced love, there was no culture of romantic love in China, or any notion of marriage for love, until translations of Western literature about romantic love were disseminated among the modernizing elite in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (chapter 6). Pan observes that “while marriage was one of life’s central experiences in China, the ideal of the primacy of love never was” (280). Marriage did not simply involve two individuals, but the extended family, community, and even the state. This was also true of the West until the end of the eighteenth century (Giddens 39), but in traditional Chinese culture, the concept of the family included the ancestors who could bless or curse a union. Moreover, the actions of an individual were intertwined with the material fate of the family and the clan, infamously demonstrated in what happened to the families of myriad men who fell afoul of various emperors over the centuries: their extended families were invariably executed. Because marriage was always arranged, the wife was rarely the object of love since she was not freely chosen. Rather, prostitutes, courtesans, and concubines tended to be the love objects of Chinese men in love poetry. However, in traditional Chinese literature, love was not expected to last: many poems feature abandoned courtesans in their sumptuous bedchambers, lamenting the loss of their lovers. In fact, Pan contends that, historically, the Chinese had a different understanding of love from Westerners. In traditional Chinese culture, love and lust are essentially the same. Unlike the Christian-influenced West, there is no distinction between love and lust or sensual desire, no understanding that “true” love has a sublime or spiritualized dimension that transcends bodily desires, because there is no mind/body or soul/body split in Chinese culture. The most exalted form of love was not therefore between men and women, but rather, the filiality of children. Rather than romantic love or individual fulfillment, filial piety was idealized. In such a society, without the prioritization of either romantic love or the needs and desires of [End Page 10] the individual, a hero or heroine who dishonors the family by flouting their wishes regarding arranged marriage is considered a disgrace. This is in distinct contrast to many Western historical and contemporary romances, where heroes and heroines prove their love for one another by taking a principled stance against the ambitious marriage plans arranged by their families.

How, then, can a Western-style historical romance function in pre-modern China if there is no tradition of the primacy of romantic love? For Jade Lee, the solution in her *Tigress* series is for Chinese protagonists to be taught how to love by Westerners. The *Tigress* series consists of romantic erotica set mainly in Shanghai. They feature protagonists who are following a fictitious Taoist sect that believes that its members can enter the Taoist heaven and gain the status of Immortals—those humans who walk between heaven and earth—by channeling their sexual energy in certain ways. The goal of the sect is to indulge in very heavy sexual foreplay, but not to orgasm, for they believe that this would dissipate their *chi* energy and prevent them from accessing heaven. In the first book of this series, *White Tigress* (January 2005), the English heroine Lydia Smith sails to Shanghai to join her fiancé but is abducted and sold into white slavery. She is bought by the Chinese hero who wants to become an Immortal so that he can restore his family’s fortunes. He engages in heavy foreplay with her, arousing her sexual desire despite her horror at her situation. Eventually, the sexual desire that he stirs up transforms into love, and Lydia finds herself entering Taoist heaven and becoming an Immortal before the hero does, much to his bewilderment and chagrin. Only when the hero gives up his rigid control over his emotions and his belief that white people—especially women—are inferior animals, only when he allows himself to fall in love with her, does the hero manage to enter Taoist heaven and become an Immortal himself. The Chinese community is shocked, not only that the two marry for love, but that a white woman could become a Taoist Immortal so easily when Chinese individuals who have engaged in lifelong studies of Taoism have failed.



The second book features an American heiress who falls in love with a Manchu prince whose family has claims to the Qing throne, and who are plotting for him to overthrow the Dowager Empress Cixi. This white heroine undergoes a transformation similar to that of Lydia Smith, becoming Immortal when she has an intensely sexual experience with the hero after falling in love with him. However, the hero believes he cannot love her. He explains, "In China there is no such thing as desire. There is only proper and improper, honor and dishonor" (Lee Kindle location 8664). When she objects, he says:

"Do you know what it is for a Chinese man to love? ... We love our fathers and honor their position. We love our country and emperor, for he is the Son of Heaven and the ruler of us all. We love our sons, for they are our future and the blessings of our old age." But daughters and wives "are nothing. They are the holy vessels of our sons." (Lee Kindle location 8765)

"Chineseness" in Lee's novels is not only disparaged, it is also caricatured. The Chinese people in her novels are simplistic, self-regarding, and ignorant: they don't believe that Westerners are humans but some form of animal. And, of course, they do not understand what it is to love. Only when Lee's Chinese heroes overcome their contempt for women and their immense filiality, and only when they prioritize love for the white heroine over everything else, can they become Taoist Immortals. **[End Page 11]**

In the third book of this series, the ease with which Western women can become Immortal enrages the Chinese female Tigress of the Taoist sect. She cannot understand why, after devoting her life to studying the way of the Tiger, ignorant Western women should beat her to immortality. *Desperate Tigress* (November 2005), is about how the Chinese "Tigress" finally learns to love her Chinese husband as Western heroines instinctively know how to love. The rest of the series follows the pattern set out in these books: Western women, aroused by Chinese men's sexual skills, fall in love with the Chinese heroes they were initially averse to and attain Taoist heaven. They then teach Chinese men how to love, and only through the tutelage of Western women do these Chinese seekers find and attain what they have been searching for their whole lives. This is, of course, one way of dealing with the problem of romantic love in traditional Chinese culture, but it is Orientalist in the extreme. There is little positive in Jade Lee's depiction of Chinese society or history. The family is the malevolent site of oppression in almost every novel, Chinese filiality must be destroyed in order for Western individualism to triumph, and the only thing worth preserving about Chinese culture is its mystical Taoist sexual practices.

But what happens when a romance novelist takes Chinese history and culture seriously and tries to grapple with its uncomfortable fit with the romance narrative? Jeannie Lin's historical novels, which are set in Tang Dynasty China (618-907 CE) during the cultural efflorescence of the eighth and ninth centuries, are well-researched, and her personal website includes a bibliography of her source material, as well as notes explaining what aspects of her novels are based on fact or fiction ("History and Alternative History"). Lin's first novel, *Butterfly Swords* (2010), which won the Golden Heart award for Historical Romance, tries to adapt the Western historical romance to Tang Dynasty history. The protagonist of this novel is the crown princess, the daughter of a fictional Tang emperor, who runs away from an arranged marriage when she believes her fiancé is a traitor to the empire. In doing so, she brings both disgrace and danger to her family since her fiancé—the most powerful warlord in China—is deeply affronted. Compounding these problems, she has met and fallen in love with a blonde-haired, blue-eyed Turkic "barbarian" with whom she eventually elopes, escaping into the barely habitable Taklamakan Desert in Central Asia because every army in the Chinese empire is after them. There are many Western historical novels where the alienated couple leaves their families and homes to build a better future elsewhere, sustained by their love for each other. But there can be no happy ending in a Chinese historical romance that involves only the romantic couple. In accordance with traditional Chinese culture, the fulfilment of individual desire at the expense of the family brings shame to the heroine, diminishing her ethically, morally, and socially. She will be cursed by her immediate family and her ancestors. Unlike in Western historical romances, romantic love alone cannot redeem such a degradation of the heroine. The hero realizes this and releases the crown princess to return to her family and her arranged marriage. Lin thus depicts realistically how the control of the Chinese family over individual marriages can stifle the fulfillment of romantic love.

Ultimately, it is not romantic love that redeems the story and creates the happy ending; it is familial love. Siblings usually love and sacrifice for each other in Lin's novels, and while some parents are ambitious and tyrannical, others strive and sacrifice much for their children's happiness. In this regard, Lin's Chinese families have none of the callous indifference of Jade Lee's Chinese families in the Tigress series. Moreover, in *The Lotus Palace* (2013) and *The Sword Dancer* (2014), parents are shown loving each other although they **[End Page 12]** might not display affection overtly, and even though, in *The Lotus Palace*, the hero's mother shares her husband with the concubine

whom she chose for him. The family thus understands what it means to love and to sacrifice for each other, and perhaps these Tang Dynasty romances are equally romances about the family as well as about the lovers because if the family is the obstacle to the romantic union of hero and heroine, the family is also the solution. At the end of *Butterfly Swords*, the Emperor, witnessing how unhappy his daughter is, decides to call off the betrothal although this humiliation earns him the enmity of the warlord fiancé. The crown princess is allowed to marry the Turkic barbarian, and they are sent away to guard the northwest frontier of the empire so that Tang imperial politics no longer affect their future.

Tang Dynasty history and traditional Chinese culture, particularly its gender order and familial priorities, pose intractable problems for Lin as far as the structure of the romantic plot is concerned. Chinese dynastic and warlord politics, and the inescapable fact that higher-class women are usually sequestered within the family sphere, make it very difficult for the plot of the romance to work in a straightforward way. If the heroine does not escape the family, she will be married off at a very early age to a stranger in an arranged marriage. If she does escape the family, how can she survive in the male-dominated public sphere where very few professions are open to women? Moreover, marrying against the wishes of the family represents a profound breach of filiality both on her part as well as the hero's, whose marriage is also arranged for him by his family. These dilemmas for aristocratic heroes and heroines occur in Lin's novels *The Dragon and the Pearl* (2011), *My Fair Concubine* (2012), and *The Lotus Palace* (2013). With *The Lotus Palace*, however, Lin begins to move her stories out of the world of the aristocracy and into the underworld of the brothel. This novel and its sequel, *The Jade Temptress* (2014), feature two heroines who hardly ever appear in Western romance novels, historical or otherwise. The heroine of *The Lotus Palace* used to be a prostitute in a cheap brothel because she has a red birthmark covering half her face and was thus considered damaged goods by her parents. When the novel opens, she is working as a lowly servant in a pleasure house because she has been redeemed by her sister, one of the most famous courtesans of the *Pinkang li*—the brothel district of the Tang imperial city of Changan. This courtesan sister is the heroine of the second novel, *The Jade Temptress*. Featuring prostitutes as romantic heroines may be highly unusual in Western romances, but courtesans and concubines were the main love interest in traditional Chinese love stories so Lin's plots are actually historically plausible in this regard (Pan 2).

Because of her meticulous adherence to historical and cultural accuracy, the barriers to the union of the romantic couple are many and seemingly insurmountable in Lin's romances. Firstly, within imperial China, the individual is shown to be powerless in many respects, whether from the aristocratic class or from the lower orders, such as the constable-detective in *The Jade Temptress* or the thief-catcher hero in *The Sword Dancer*. Individual lives, choices, physical security, and prosperity are constrained by the family, the regional warlord, the emperor, and the social chaos that ensues as the Tang Dynasty disintegrates. It is thus difficult to portray the Chinese hero as the usual Alpha hero of Western romance because his agency is curtailed in so many ways. Secondly, the fact that men are traditionally betrothed by their families at a very young age makes it almost impossible for them to marry by choice without humiliating and destroying the honor of their families. And as mentioned above, without the blessing of the family, without the continuation and fulfillment of filiality, **[End Page 13]** both heroes and heroines are diminished even though they might love each other. There can be no happy ending without the reconciliation of the romantic couple with the family. Furthermore, because genteel women are hidden away in the domestic sphere, the most likely women heroes might meet and fall in love with would be servants, prostitutes, and rougher, uneducated peasant women who would rarely be heroines in Western historical romance novels. This creates all kinds of difficulties for a happy ending, even beyond class barriers. While the courtesan is shown to have the power of beauty and wit within the *Pinkang li* in *The Lotus Palace* and *The Jade Temptress*, Lin also shows that courtesans are not acceptable as wives, only as concubines whose lives and fortunes are still precarious because they are subject to the wife's control. There is thus little hope for a happy ending for a heroine if, realistically, she can only attain the status of a concubine.

To solve the external problem of the imbalance of power between the romantic couple and the state or turbulent public sphere, Lin relies on a *deus ex machina* that will create the conditions of security for her romantic couple in novels such as *The Dragon and the Pearl* or *The Sword Dancer*. In her other novels, the family must cease to be Chinese and become Westernized to the extent that they place the happiness of their individual children over family obligations and patriarchal wishes, so that the romantic couple might marry with the blessing of the family and remain integrated with the family—even if this means that the eldest son and scholar hero of *The Lotus Palace* is allowed to take a former prostitute as his wife, rather than just his concubine. The reciprocal love of parents for their children allows such a historically implausible choice to be made, thus the family ultimately redeems the romance and creates the happy ending. This is a clever and strategic solution, for it allows Lin to present a recognizable, culturally authentic version of Chineseness rather than simply inventing it, while acknowledging the

capacity for love and change within the family.

## Contemporary American romances with East Asian protagonists

As with historical romances, the first contemporary romances featuring Chinese and other East Asian American protagonists were written by white Americans. The pressures of representing a romantic love relationship against the claims of the family also haunt these contemporary romances, for the Asian American family frequently functions as the site of conflict and the obstacle to romantic love. In the first study of contemporary romance novels featuring half-Chinese heroines who fall in love with white American men, Erin S. Young ("Saving China") argues that Elizabeth Lowell's *Jade Island* (1990) and Katherine Stone's *Pearl Moon* (1995) both present the Chinese family functioning within an outdated historical culture "in which individual desires and feelings are painfully oppressed, and defined rules are marked by an extreme enforcement of gender inequality" (206).

Lowell's novel is particularly toxic in its representation of East Asians. Chinese businessmen at a charity event puff cigarette smoke into the air "in defiance of Seattle civic law" (Kindle location 724). Japanese businessmen barge their way through the queues around the buffet table "as though no one else was in the room. ... They were simply accustomed to being at the top of the cultural pecking order" (Kindle location 813). The entire novel operates according to a racist, Orientalist binary whereby degraded Chinese culture—represented by the family—is starkly contrasted against white American [End Page 14] individualism, liberty, respect, and loving family ties. Lowell does not allow for love among family members, in the way that Jeannie Lin does. The heroine of *Jade Island* is the illegitimate daughter of the third son of a powerful Hong Kong tycoon and his white American mistress. Her father will not acknowledge her as his daughter until the white hero forces him to do so, and neither will the rest of the Tangs—the heroine's Hong Kong Chinese family. In fact, an uncle frames the heroine for his own theft of his father's priceless jades and tries to have her murdered by the Chinese triads to cover his crime. He does this because he is deeply in debt, for gambling "runs like lightning through the Chinese culture. Every male over the age of ten bets, whether it's on mahjongg, dogs, horses, or the next bicycle to reach the intersection" (Kindle location 1307). The triad murderer manages to escape the United States with the help of a Chinese-American lawyer who deals with shady Chinese business in America: "Prostitutes, gambling, drugs, loan-sharking, trafficking in parts of endangered species" such as "bear gallbladder, tiger penis, that sort of thing" (Kindle location 3565). All the Tang men have arranged marriages and keep mistresses, because "Beauty could be purchased. Power had to be married" (Kindle location 2056). Even the heroine's grandfather—who is supposed to be fond of her because she possesses the most understanding and appreciation of jade within the family—sets her up to be raped by a mainland Chinese businessman who has powerful ties to the corrupt Chinese communist government, and only the white hero's intervention prevents this from happening. Her father suspects that such plans might be afoot, but he does nothing because he is only a third son and therefore powerless. At the end of the novel, the heroine, who has longed all her life to be loved by the Tang family only to be despised and betrayed by all them, including her own father, finally finds a family who loves and accepts her: the white American hero's family.

Not all novelists represent East Asian culture in such an unrelentingly negative way, of course, but novels that exhibit "strong" multiculturalism often inadvertently portray the Asian family as incompatible with American society. Lowell's novel displays a blend of both strong and weak or boutique multiculturalism. Despite the heroine's longing for love and acceptance from her Chinese family, her own performance of multiculturalism is weak—consisting primarily of her knowledge and expertise in jade and other Asian valuables. Thus, she is easily assimilated into mainstream white American society through her relationship with the white hero. Although this novel is written by a Caucasian American, the pattern of social integration through marriage can be found in Asian American immigrant literature where, as Chu argues, "marriage is a key site for representing the immigrant's Americanization", and the "immigrant romance" conventionally "recounts the protagonist's search for a white partner to Americanize him or her" (19).

Novels that use weak or boutique multiculturalism to represent Asianness tend to focus on exotic tidbits of cultural products or practices. Camy Tang's series of Christian inspirational chick lit does this most obviously with the titles of her novels— *Sushi for One?* (2007), *Only Uni* (2008), *Single Sashimi* (2008), and *Weddings and Wasabi* (2011)—which emphasize the aspect of Japanese culture most Americans might be familiar with: food. Tang describes food in detail, as well as how the local San Francisco Bay area Japanese community celebrates the lunar festival. Other novels such as Marie Donovan's *Her Book of Pleasure* (2007) use traditional Japanese clothing as a shorthand for Japanese culture. In Donovan's novel, the heroine wears a bridesmaid's sash like an *obi*, and her mother has bought an *Uchikake* kimono for her as a gentle pressure on her to get married. The title of Donovan's novel refers to another aspect of East Asian culture that is intriguing to some of these [End Page 15] authors: Chinese and

Japanese erotic art. The American hero of *Her Book of Pleasure* finds an antique and very valuable Japanese pillow book of erotic art depicting various heterosexual positions, gives it to the half-Japanese half-Caucasian American heroine, who is an expert in Japanese culture, and the two end up recreating the sexual scenarios portrayed in several erotic drawings. Lowell's *Jade Island* also describes erotic jade sculptures in considerable detail, noting that while the heroine is blasé about such commonplace artwork, valuing it only for the quality of the jade and the workmanship, the white American hero is shocked and aroused by what he sees.

American authors without an Asian background have to rely on research rather than personal experience to create the Asian content of their stories. For writers such as Lowell and Donovan, who research historical Chinese or Japanese culture, the result is that the reader learns much about the history of Chinese jade and Japanese art, but not much about the actual lives of Chinese- and Japanese-Americans. In a classic example of boutique multiculturalism, cultural objects become repositories of history, culture, and society, as in Lowell's observation in *Jade Island* that Chinese jade represents the "the soul of an entire culture" and "a condensation of Chinese history" (Kindle locations 82 and 2833). Dorien Kelly, by contrast, relies on American media reportage of the Chinese communist party's repression of its population, as well as its human rights violations, to show her understanding of contemporary Chinese society and culture in her novel *Below Deck* (2007). In this novel, the Chinese heroine lost her Chinese husband when he protested against the communist government on June 4, the anniversary of the Tiananmen Square massacre, and was imprisoned and poisoned for his political activities. She wants to get to Paris with their son to continue her husband's political activity against the Chinese government, and is only dissuaded from doing so when the hero, an Israeli-American ex-Mossad agent, convinces her that she would be dooming her child to the same fate as his father. Meanwhile, she has to stave off her in-laws' threat that unless she gives her son to them to raise, they will ensure that her passport is cancelled so that she is rendered stateless, deported back to China and thrown into prison. In the end, no matter how much research non-Asian romance authors do about various Asian cultural topics, they fall back on stereotypes of the oppressive Asian family to convey the Asianness of the strong multicultural romance. But is the Asian family portrayed differently when represented by Asian American novelists?

Romance writers who have an East Asian background, such as Canadian novelist Vicki Essex or American novelists Camy Tang, Ruby Lang, and Courtney Milan, tend to write plots with "strong" multiculturalism. They feature second- and third-generation Asian heroines who, despite some experience of racism in their childhood, generally function well within American society. Conflict and the obstacle to love in these contemporary romances originate from intergenerational conflict and misunderstanding within the East Asian family, rather than conflict between the Asian romantic heroines and broader American society. Interestingly enough, intergenerational conflict is intertwined with a failure to achieve the American Dream —material prosperity—in Vicki Essex's *Back to the Good Fortune Diner* (2013) and Camy Tang's Sushi series (2007-2011). In her analysis of neoliberal maternal discourse in twenty-first century Asian American women's popular fiction, such as mother-daughter dramas or chick lit, Pamela Thoma argues that these novels portray the pressure felt by Asian American women to be a "model minority" in efficiently juggling fertility, motherhood, family, and employment (41). These tasks are reserved for the intimate private sphere, with little recognition that the state has a role to play in helping to manage and **[End Page 16]** balance such activities that actually contribute to community-building and the public good. Instead, the values and assumptions of the neoliberal marketplace are reinforced, and Asian American women are schooled to adopt values and practices of "privatization, entrepreneurialism, and consumption" (41) in order to access the benefits of citizenship. "Asian values" are thus portrayed as "cultural assumptions of 'distinctive' family solidarity, diligence, respect for education, and self-sufficiency" that neatly "align with the privatization of citizenship under neoliberalism" (49). Failure to achieve this full repertoire of neoliberal behaviors then equates to failure, not only of the individual Asian American child, but also of the Asian American parents to achieve successful integration and fulfil their roles as a model minority. Similarly, rather than blaming the structure of neoliberal capitalism for the redundancies or low wages with which the heroines of Essex's and Lang's romance novels struggle, these novels present social and financial problems as individual failure, and as a source of cultural conflict with East Asian parents. The failure of the children to establish successful careers and material prosperity symbolizes the failure of the immigrant parents' dreams.

Essex's *Good Fortune Diner* features two intertwined love stories. The first involves an ambitious second-generation Chinese American heroine who loses her job as a New York-based editor and is forced to move home to her parents' place in upstate New York, where they run an Americanized Chinese restaurant serving culturally inauthentic Chinese food (fried chicken balls) to small-town Americans. She falls in love with an American organic farmer she used to tutor at school but must overcome his father's racial prejudice and her own desperate desire to move back to New York to resume her career as a literary editor. New York, with its coffee and bagels and pizza,

represents her successful integration into mainstream, cosmopolitan American culture, and her rejection of her Chinese roots that had caused her so much pain as a child: pain because of her parents' unrelenting criticism and failure to praise; and the pain of ridicule and rejection at her Asian oddness, such as when her classmates asked her "if she ate dog meat, or if their family caught stray cats and turned them into chop suey" (Kindle location 4662). The secondary love story involves the heroine's older brother who, as a dutiful, filial son, has given up his own ambitions to help out his parents in the diner. He is in love with a white American doctor who practices in New York, but he doesn't dare to let his parents know because they insist that their children marry ethnic Chinese.

The novel works awkwardly as a romance because it is caught between the structural requirements of the romance genre (Regis, *Natural History* 30) and the themes of the Asian American Young Adult novel (Manuel & Davis vi-viii): intergenerational family conflict arising from parental misunderstanding as they cling to the traditions and values of the old culture; the insistence on the authority of the parents over children's lives and the prioritizing of the family over the individual children's dreams and ambitions; intense sibling rivalry as the children are compared with each other in order to spur them on to greater academic achievement; and the devaluing of liberal arts and humanities for more pragmatic career options. "You should have gone into medicine," the heroine's Chinese mother tells her. "You never see any doctors getting laid off" (Kindle location 4698). The adult children are caught between the traditional Chinese family and the racism that they encounter in wider society; a racism that is both overt and aversive, whereby equality of races is publicly acknowledged but interaction with people of different races and ethnicities is avoided (Dovidio & Gaertner). In the end, like the non-Asian authored novels discussed above, the **[End Page 17]** traditional Chinese family is yet again shown to be oppressive and inimical to romantic love. The heroine's brother, in particular, has to break free of Chinese culture and to embrace Western individualism in order to achieve happiness in love. He tells his parents, "I have to go. I need to find myself, figure out who I am, where I fit in this world" (Kindle location 7531). His father berates him as an "ungrateful, selfish boy" who is "useless," but he grudgingly accepts his son's decision in the end.

*Good Fortune Diner* differs from the non-Asian authored novels in that the romantic protagonists' relationship with the family is more complex than simply breaking free of the oppressive family. If the heroine's brother has to break free from this Chinese concept of family in order to find love, she has to accept her own Chinese roots and understand the importance of family in order for her own love affair with the hero to be successful. This pattern of how Asian American children respond to their parents is drawn directly from a well-established tradition of Asian American literature. Chu argues that there is a gender difference in Asian American bildungsromane with regard to how sons and daughters relate to their mothers: "Asian women in the men's texts are used to represent aspects of the authors' homeland or ancestral culture that are abjected from the male protagonists, the better to establish their Americanness" (20). For women writers, however,

the daughter needs to see the mother clearly as a subject in her own right in order to understand her own identity. Asian American women authors emphasize the daughters' need to base their adult, autonomous selves on strong but not overwhelming connections with their mothers; generally speaking, there is a greater emphasis on continuity than on the oedipal tasks of separation or rebellion noted in men's writing. (91)

Because the heroine in *Good Fortune Diner* is "more American than Chinese," she has to learn to understand her mother's values in order to accept and understand herself, and fulfill her romance with the hero. Her mother explains the importance of family and filiality to her:

"For our generation, we don't leave our family behind. We don't abandon and forget about our parents. ... You'll have lives of your own, boyfriends and girlfriends, husbands, wives. One day, you'll have children, too. With everything else happening in the world, it becomes harder and harder to remember where you came from. That is why we raised you the way we did, to remember your heritage, your roots, your family. Family is what you have left when everything else is taken from you." (Kindle location 7733)

The heroine finally achieves her happy ending when she learns to combine her individualistic ambitions with her love for the hero and his family, as well as an appreciation for and acceptance of her own family and cultural roots. Valuing the family and tradition clearly constitutes the "Asianness" of the novel, in addition to the trappings of boutique multiculturalism.

The same pattern generally holds true for Ruby Lang's Asian-American romance novels and Camy Tang's Christian inspirational chick lit romances. There are, of course, differences between romance and chick lit novels. Where romance centers on the courtship of the romantic couple, "chick lit features single women in their twenties and

thirties [End Page 18] ‘navigating their generation’s challenges of balancing demanding careers with personal relationships’, and they claim to “offer a more realistic portrait of single life, dating, and the dissolution of romantic ideals” (Ferriss & Mallory 3). Yet there are distinct overlaps especially between Christian chick lit—or “church lit”—and the romance genre, so much so that romance publisher Harlequin, which already had a niche Christian romance line in its Love Inspired series, bought from Steeple Hill Publishing its Café romance line devoted to church lit (Ferriss & Mallory 6). Camy Tang’s novels fall into this overlapping space, featuring four Japanese-American and mixed Japanese-Chinese-American female cousins who fall in love with Asian heroes, usually of Chinese background, but who are mostly preoccupied with juggling work, church, relationships, and family ties. The binding thread throughout the novels is the tyrannical Japanese grandmother who threatens to cut off relations with her granddaughters unless they marry the Japanese men she foists upon them. Japanese culture is shown to be oppressive to the modern desires—both professional and romantic—of the heroines. However, the structure of the Christian inspirational genre means that mainstream Western culture is equally perilous as far as relationships and material values are concerned. In each novel, the Japanese-American heroine and hero have to strengthen their relationship with God in order to find each other and to establish a lasting love relationship.

Ruby Lang’s romances revolve around Asian American heroines who struggle with a rejection of their oppressive families, and an eager embrace of mainstream American society that is nevertheless inherently racist in its assumptions and daily interactions with Asian Americans of various ethnic backgrounds. *Clean Breaks* (2017), set in Portland, Oregon, and featuring two Asian American romantic protagonists whose parents are from China and Taiwan, also expresses the frustration of second- and third-generation Asian Americans as they are caught between the gendered and cultural assumptions and expectations of their families, and the aversive racism of mainstream American society. The heroine has just recovered from treatment for melanoma when she meets the hero, a Taiwanese minister’s son whose wife has just divorced him. Sarah is estranged from her family and the Asian American community in Los Angeles because of an incident that happened in her last year of high school: she got caught topless at a particular party. Because of that incident, she was “slut-shamed” by the Asian American community, who ostracized her

for bringing bad rep to the Asian community. Most of the other kids in our grade had done similar things, but I wasn’t allowed my perfectly normal teen behavior. ... That’s the problem with being a so-called minority, isn’t it? One measly strike and you’re out – even your own people don’t want to be tainted by you. (Kindle location 304)

Sarah resents her parents because they did not support her even though she graduated as the class valedictorian, was awarded a college scholarship to study medicine, and is now a successful, overworked obstetrician/gynecologist. And because of the intense sibling rivalry fostered by her parents, her brother deems her a “slut” and not good enough for his friends to date.

If the Asian American community comes in for a heavy dose of criticism for its conservative values and judgmental ways, mainstream American society is also criticized for its unintentional assumptions about and bias towards Asian Americans. After Sarah and Jake start dating, his Taiwanese father, the Reverend Telly Li, comes to visit, and they take him to [End Page 19] dinner at a popular Asian restaurant in Portland. Reverend Li agrees that “It’s a white people restaurant ... [t]hat’s why they can charge higher prices” (Kindle location 1237). Sarah thinks the restaurant is a “caricature” that is “verging on racist” because “there aren’t any actual Chinese involved in the making of the whole restaurant” and its menu is inauthentic. The Reverend’s son supports Sarah’s opinion, pointing out that white Americans always question the Taiwanese minister’s knowledge of the Bible despite his many years of theological training, and no white person has ever turned up to attend one of his services,

whereas people are willing to shower this Neville Whatsit with praise and money because he worked in Taipei for a year and can serve us a Taiwanese breakfast for dinner? Sure, he had skills. So do you. And if the fact that you’re treated differently even though you’re an expert in your field isn’t some deeply held bias, I don’t know what is. (Kindle location 1349)

But his father’s imperturbable response is, “Religion is not a restaurant” (Kindle location 1349). Here, the complexity of Asian American relations to mainstream society is revealed because it is the more integrated younger generations—those like Sarah and Jake who have grown up in mainstream American society—who recognize and resent aversive racism, whereas the older migrant generation, absorbed in their own community, are more tolerant and less quick to perceive or resent racist slights.

All these issues are serious concerns for Asian American individuals or the Asian American community, and writers should be lauded for trying to raise awareness of them within the romance genre. However, despite the belated change of heart Asian parents have about the happiness, autonomy, and self-determination of their children at the end of the novels, the overwhelming presentation of the Asian families in these novels reinforces the negative, one-dimensional portrayals in non-Asian authored romance novels such as Lowell's or Kelly's. In seeking to create authentically Asian American romance novels, many Asian American writers appear to be drawing on the stock themes and scenarios of Asian American mother-daughter relationships, as exemplified in Amy Tan's 1989 bestseller, *The Joy Luck Club* (see Chu 22; Li 109-141), or Asian-American YA fiction where the overwhelming focus is on identity formation and crisis (Morgan), and the troubling negotiation of an Asian American individual's place within the oppressive family and racist mainstream society. These preoccupations rather overwhelm the romantic storyline as the romance cedes considerable narrative space to another genre that is not without its own representational problems. Much of the extant scholarship on contemporary Asian American YA literature (e.g. Chiu; Hung; Jesús; Manuel & Davis; Morgan; Yokota) voices concerns about how typical teenage conflicts with parents in mainstream Caucasian YA fiction become racialized within Asian American novels, with the result that Asian cultures are demeaned and shown to be an ill-fit within America of the present and future. Morgan argues that the unrelentingly negative portrayal of the Asian family—something obviously shared in many contemporary romance novels—creates the perception in readers, and in Asian American youth themselves, that the “Asian family, because of their culture, are racist, sexist, ethnocentric, and totally out of place in the America of my future.” Despite the attempts at the end of romance novels to work through these issues and to bring about the Asian heroine's acceptance of her parents and her own culture, the notion that Asian culture is alien, oppressive, and unassimilable haunts the romance—even though the Asian family's [End Page 20] emphasis on hard work and material success are equally shared by mainstream white Americans who buy into the American Dream.

How, then, can romance novels represent Asian American protagonists and Asianness in such a way that they do not seem alien and even inimical to the mainstream—if this is indeed what is necessary for commercial success? One way is by only employing boutique multiculturalism to represent Asian cultures within the global capitalist market—a strategy exemplified by Jennifer Lewis's Harlequin Desire novel, *A Trap So Tender* (2013). Lewis makes little attempt to display her research into or knowledge of “authentic” Asian cultures. Her Asian American heroine wears her Asianness lightly and is represented as a successful businesswoman who is completely integrated into mainstream American society. The novel gives a nod to notions of Asian filiality in that the heroine's main obsession throughout most of the novel is to buy back her father's Singaporean factory from the hero—a Scottish venture capitalist—so that she might establish a better relationship with her father. But she wants to do this, not because of cold and alienating Chinese culture, but because her parents were divorced when she was a child and she grew up without knowing him. Aside from her intense filiality, the heroine's capitalist, materialist, and individualist values are generally indistinguishable from any other white protagonist's in a contemporary neoliberal romance novel. In Lewis's novel, Singapore features as a modern urban center of global capitalism and finance; it is not exoticized or Orientalized, and there is no suggestion that it is only the historical aspects of Singaporean culture that can represent its authentic Asianness.

In this respect, Lewis' novel prefigures the strategies used by Kevin Kwan in *Crazy Rich Asians* to portray a new version of a transnational, cosmopolitan pan-Asian culture. In both Kwan's novel and the film, the lifestyles of the Asian superrich flow effortlessly across borders. They buy property and display extravagant consumption in London, Singapore, Hong Kong, Shanghai, Indonesia, and Australia. Although Kwan's novel retains the topos of the Asian family that exerts oppressive control over its younger members, the result is not alienation from mainstream society, for the majority of his Asian characters believe their wealth and heritage place them far above mainstream society, especially white American society and culture which they disdain. Both novel and film portray major Asian cities such as Singapore, Hong Kong and Shanghai as wealthier and more financially and technologically sophisticated than the West. Ethnic Asian minorities and the poor are erased from the world of *Crazy Rich Asians*, which presents pan-Asianness as a global luxury brand.

Can Asian American romance novels that focus on ordinary people, rather than the wealthy elite, display strong multiculturalism positively, defining Asianness in a way that does not demonize the family or portray Asians as incompatible to mainstream American society? Recent novels that manage to do this include Milan's *Trade Me* (2015) and Helen Hoang's *The Kiss Quotient* (2018). Hoang's novel features two unusual romantic protagonists: a white heroine, Stella Lane, who is a highly successful accountant with Asperger's Syndrome, and a mixed-race hero, Michael Phan, a part-time sex worker whose mother is Vietnamese and whose white father is a con artist infamous for seducing women and stealing from them. Michael engages in sex work part-time to help defray the costs of his mother's expensive cancer treatment. Hoang turns expectations of the Asian family on its head in this novel

because the pressure to marry and have children do not come from the Asian parents; instead, they are exerted on the heroine Stella by her controlling mother. It is Stella's white family that sets high standards of individual success and withholds approval unless those expectations are met. Although Michael's part-Vietnamese family is **[End Page 21]** dysfunctional, this is because their white father abandoned them. Michael's extended family proves to be remarkably resilient and supportive. Towards the end of the novel, he learns from his Vietnamese cousin Quan that although he struggled to make ends meet and to ensure the wellbeing of his mother and sisters, he never had to carry the burden of his family's problems by himself: "You're not alone, you know," Quan tells Michael. "Family's got your back" (Kindle location 3621). Strong multiculturalism is still displayed through Michael's filiality and the importance of putting his family's wellbeing first, above his own ambitions and desires, but the family also comes to his rescue and sets him free to pursue his dreams. Moreover, Stella finally finds acceptance, understanding, and a strong sense of family from Michael's extended Vietnamese family rather than her own. This theme of the supportive nature and unconditional love provided by the immigrant Vietnamese family is continued in Hoang's sequel, *The Bride Test* (2019), which tells the story of how Quan's mother finds a Vietnamese bride for her autistic younger son, Khai. Hoang drew from her own experience of Asperger's Syndrome and her Vietnamese background to write these two novels. The "authenticity" of Vietnamese culture is represented in the form of words, names, titles of address for various members of the Vietnamese family and community, food, customs such as wedding banquets, and, importantly, the individuation of Vietnamese characters and families. There is neither an idealization or demonization of Vietnamese individuals or families; especially in *The Bride Test*, Hoang shows that the heroine—a single mother who begins the novel as a toilet cleaner in Ho Chi Minh City—is disdained by some Vietnamese, but she is supported and greatly loved by her own mother and the hero's family, as well as various members from the immigrant community in Santa Clara County, northern California.

In Courtney Milan's *Trade Me* (2015), strong multiculturalism in the form of Asian filiality is represented in complex ways, combined with the politics of intersectional feminism. The heroine Tina struggles with being looked down upon because she is an Asian immigrant and poor. When she voices her opinions in class, they are ignored or derided unless the rich, blonde, white hero acknowledges the accuracy of her critique: "I hate that nobody even recognized me as a person until Blake spoke up," she says. "I hate that he looks at me, that he gives me a silent nod, like he's granted me his permission to criticize him. I didn't need his permission" (Kindle location 210). Tina is frustrated by her parents' expectations, the pressure they place upon her to succeed in college and to become a doctor, and their Falun Gong background which nobody understands. Yet at the same time she is fiercely protective of them and refuses to be ashamed of or embarrassed by her mother's frankness. Although Milan draws on discourses of Asian American mother-daughter conflict, particularly in Tina's feeling that she can never live up to her mother's expectations or gain her mother's approval, Tina also acknowledges the complex motivation behind her mother's complaints about her: the Asian American parent's "boast/insult" is a "way of telling everyone how proud she is of me, of boasting without really boasting" even though it sounds rude, passive-aggressive, and can indeed be hurtful to the child (Kindle location 2597). *Trade Me* escapes essentializing or demonizing Asianness through different strategies. Firstly, like Hoang's novels, Milan makes it clear that there are different types of Chinese subjects, and that the Chen family's Falun Gong background places them at odds with the Chinese government. One individual's or one family's experience cannot be extrapolated to represent the Asian community as a whole. Secondly, in a related point, behavior is individualized rather than generalized. Tina's father and younger sister both agree that her mother **[End Page 22]** Hongmei's "inappropriate and embarrassing" behavior is not due to "cultural difference" or "a Chinese thing" because people in China also thought the same about Hongmei (Kindle location 2477-2478).

Thirdly, and most importantly, Milan shows that other adult children from different cultural backgrounds also have their own struggles with family and parental expectations; this is not a purely Asian American issue. Tina's flatmate Maria, a transgender Latinx woman, was thrown out of her home by her parents when she was twelve and she has not seen them since. (Maria's story is told in the sequel, *Hold Me* (2016), which features a bisexual, ethnically mixed Asian hero, a scientist whose parents are Chinese and Thai, and who struggles with the trauma of his younger brother's suicide.) Tina realizes her frustration and struggles with her parents' approval pale in comparison to Maria's problems, because however controlling her mother might be, the family is still intact and sustained by love:

If I had been trans instead of Maria, I can imagine how my come-out would have gone. My mother would have been confused as hell. She would have asked me to explain it three or four times, and I'm not sure she would have gotten it even then. But I am sure of one thing: she would still love me. (Kindle location 2282)

In *Trade Me*, the white hero Blake Reynolds also has serious problems with his technology mogul father Adam. Adam has commoditized his family life and relationship with his son, using their private lives to sell consumer



electronic products and software. The pressure he places on his son to drop out of college and join the company is so great that Blake has developed an eating disorder, among other psychological problems. Filiality and the yearning for parental approval is not only Asian in this novel. Blake acknowledges he wants his father “to be proud of me, and I’ve finally come to the point where I either have to lose myself completely or disappoint him” (Kindle location 2146). The end of the novel reveals that Adam Reynolds has become a cocaine addict in order to maintain his business edge in the highly competitive tech world, and the white hero’s family is shown to be even more dysfunctional than the Asian American Chen family. With her trademark acuity, Milan deftly shows that the cultural expectations causing so many problems in this novel are actually mainstream neoliberal American definitions of material success, rather than racialized or ethnicized cultural expectations. Tina may have imbibed these standards herself, but she realizes that her Chinese immigrant parents cleave to different standards and values of success: helping other people, and being content with what they have. Therefore, although cultural authenticity is still displayed through Tina’s filiality and her assumption of financial responsibility for her family, Milan avoids falling back on damaging stereotypes of the oppressive family, and by drawing parallels between the family problems faced by both Blake and Tina.

## Conclusion

Writing an East Asian romance novel is difficult because of the pressure that authors of all backgrounds feel to be culturally authentic and to use various notions of Asianness to **[End Page 23]** distinguish these books from mainstream white romances. In historical romances such as Jeannie Lin’s, historical accuracy fulfills the function of authenticity, while the family is portrayed as both the obstacle as well as the solution to romantic love. In contemporary romances, however, creating Asianness appears to be more difficult. The desire for authenticity manifests itself in the markers of weak or boutique multiculturalism—descriptions of food, costumes and quaint cultural traditions and superstitions—as well as strong multiculturalism, expressed as inflexible East Asian values that result in the tyranny of the family and the oppression of the romantic protagonist. In a literary novel, there would be much more time and space to explore the complex nature of family relationships. Given the requirements of the romance genre and the need to focus on developing romantic relationships, overcoming barriers to the romantic union and so forth, Asian families are often reduced to one-dimensional caricatures that ironically reinforce cultural stereotypes in novels that intend to be culturally authentic. Asianness in these novels becomes Orientalized and problematized to the point that, as Erin Young (“Saving China”) observes, “Asianness” is “something that must be rescued from itself” (206). The main features of Asianness must be abandoned before the Asian-American protagonists can establish romantic relationships. It is ironic that the least problematic East Asian romance novels can be written by non-Asian authors such as Jennifer Lewis who feel no need to display authenticity, and who simply portray Asian heroines as already integrated into their Westernized, globalized cultural milieus, because this allows the heroine to get on with the job of falling in love with the hero rather than negotiating her own ambivalent and complex relationship with her family.

There is, nevertheless, signs that this reductive view of Asianness is changing as the Asian American romance continues to develop. If the limited word length of the Harlequin category romance necessarily encouraged a truncated, essentialist view of Asianness either as the objects of boutique multiculturalism or the problematic Asian family, lengthier, single-title romance novels such as Milan’s *Trade Me* and *Hold Me* or Hoang’s *The Kiss Quotient* and *The Bride Test* allow for a more nuanced exploration of Asianness within the romantic narrative, because more complex Asian characters and subplots can be interwoven with the main courtship plot. Milan and Hoang build on displays of boutique multiculturalism to create authentic Chinese, Vietnamese, and mixed-race Asian American communities. However, by drawing upon and focusing on other issues such as poverty or eating disorders in *Trade Me*, transgender identity, the complex manifestations of post-traumatic stress disorder brought on by a family member’s suicide in *Hold Me*, or autism in Hoang’s *The Kiss Quotient* and *The Bride Test*, both Milan and Hoang are able to show that the problems of filiality that beset Asian American protagonists may indeed have a distinct Asian flavor, but they are shared by Americans of all ethnic and cultural backgrounds. These problems are simply a subset of experiences that characterize and enrich modern lives in a cut-throat neoliberal society marked by the striving for material success and the privatization of social problems. As with Jeannie Lin’s historical romances, Asian families function in complex ways in these recent romances. They are both the curse and the cure for love and loneliness. At their best, they form an extended network embracing and supporting the lovers, making the point that romantic love is still a family and community affair.

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I am very grateful to Erin S. Young for her help with this essay, particularly her suggestions of recent Asian American romance novels. **[End Page 24]**

[1] Based on Kevin Kwan's eponymous novel which, unlike the film, is predominantly a satire of Singaporean and other East Asian "high society" communities rather than a generic romance novel, even though it contains a rather perfunctory romantic relationship as the framing plot.

[2] In common usage, this term refers to protagonists of diasporic Chinese, Japanese or Korean background who claim an imaginary Confucian cultural heritage, but it can also include those in other parts of Asia with this heritage.

[3] Based on American writer John Luther Long's short story "Madame Butterfly" published in *Century Magazine* (1898).

[4] Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the former Soviet republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.

[5] The 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act or the 1924 Johnson-Reed Act (including the Asian Exclusion Act and the National Origins Act) in the United States, for instance, or the Immigration Restriction Act that was legislated when Australia became a federated nation in 1901. **[End Page 25]**

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changing reality of the American Dream. In the novel, the American Dream, as typified by Gatsby, stands for independent thinking and living, and the ability to profit from one's hard work. Whether meaning and authenticity is found (or just marginalization) is up to interpretation, but the novel is one of the most direct commentaries on the American Dream in the American literary canon.

Read Next. May is Asian American Pacific Islander Heritage Month, and there are plenty of books to crack open in honor of the holiday. Here are a few to start with. Pachinko is a historical novel that follows four generations of a Korean family that migrates to Japan, following a large ensemble of characters who must deal with the legal and social discrimination they face as immigrants. In order to move up in society, the family opens up pachinko parlor, a slot machine style game popular in Japan, from which the book takes its name. This is a list of romance novels in which either the hero or heroine is Asian or of Asian descent. Also included are books in other genre which include a relationship/romance with an Asian character. Score. A book's total score is based on multiple factors, including the number of people who have voted for it and how highly those voters ranked the book. All Votes Add Books To This List.