

A Linguistic Game: A Brief Language Analysis of *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book*

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Abstract

The book *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book (TM)* is published as a novel, which is Kingston's first true novel during her writing career. There are many remarkable writing techniques in her trilogy, such as, language usage, narrative perspectives, plot narration and other diverse narrative styles. In this thesis, it aims to focus on one of the most attractive features—its language usage in *TM*, especially on the names of its title and protagonist which strikingly embodies the significance of readers' participation and the uncertainty of the language in a postmodern fiction.

Key words: A linguistic game; Name; Uncertainty; Identity; Postmodernism

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INTRODUCTION

Saussure provides us with the concept of the signifier. He believes that language is the combination of the signifier—linguistic signs and the signified—conceptual meanings... In linguistics, the signifier and signified interplay with each other and both sides exist simultaneously. He also assumes that on the one hand the relation between the two sides is affirmatory and on the other hand it's uncertain. In *TM* by Kingston,

Saussure's definition about the signifier and the signified is exhibited vividly and typically in the name of the title and the protagonist. The name of the protagonist in *TM* is Wittman Ah Sing and the full name of the title of the novel—*Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book*, which is both much worthy to be appreciated.

Linguist Saussure firstly provided us with the signifier—linguistic signs and the signified—linguistic meanings. Then the congruent relationship was absolutely optional, subjective and abnormal. Because of the absence of the signified, the signifier, namely, linguistic signs would replace the signified. Then, linguistic meanings would be dependent on differences of linguistic signs. Moreover, it would form the undying signifier slippage from one signifier to another signifier. Derrida moved forward a further step by saying that signs only pointed to linguistic meanings literally in order to illustrate the absence of the linguistic meaning or the pointed object which meant the pointed object was put off or differed. Therefore, differences were the combination of the different and the deference, and linguistic meanings along with it took changes with no other choice but embodying in the context. This illustrates that determination—the signified meaning means an endless deferring process. It also means that it doesn't have such given original meanings by language. All signal meanings are fixed in a large signal network temporarily, and then there will emerge new meanings in the continuous process of deferring and postponing. Linguistic meanings differ in deference, and defer in difference further. There is no ultimate and constant meaning in the world, just as there is no changeless structure. Language is just an endless game of difference and deference. The ultimate or eternal meaning can be within sight but beyond reach. Just as the saying goes beforehand, all meanings can be sketched and analyzed through the context of the text and may be also influenced by the author's intentions or purposes of creating the text.

1. THE NAME OF THE TITLE

Under usual circumstances, the word trip implies journey (usually short), especially for pleasure (Hornby, 2002, p.520), in which the objective is to appreciate the scenery and entertain travelers, but here, the meaning of trip far surpasses its denotation. Here, trip is a pun. It refers to the space movement for Chinese people from homeland to the United States and also implies crossings between different boundaries, the interlacement for different cultures, some catabolic experiences and a kind of process in which Chinese Americans unceasingly change themselves, discover themselves and find the community cultural orientation for themselves in a new world where it is filled with historical ruptures, spatial-temporal crisscrosses and cultural changes. In a word, it means not just a kind of spatial movement, but also a kind of spiritual movement. Moreover, in American idioms, it can also indicate drug addicts' experiences in illusions. In the Counterculture Movement of the United States in 1960s, the writers of the lost-generation frequently took drugs to enable themselves to experience the illusions. It was believed that in this kind of state, they could be much more creative. Owing to this, the word tripping can be comprehended as the possibility of exploiting and questing the intelligence and cultivating personality and creativity. The word "master" in the title can be stated as several meanings in use senses, but here, together with "trip", it can be explained as a professional tourist. Namely, that "tripmaster" means a professional tourist, and at the same time, through the whole text the other potential meaning of this word occurs—a guider of the trip. For the first meaning, literally, it points out that the protagonist is traveling among western American cities, while, potentially, some other understandings will be stated afterwards. It indicates that the protagonist is enjoying a sightseeing tour in the human beings' cultural classics in history—both including eastern and western classic cultures. It directs that the protagonist is traveling spiritually just like the writers of the lost-generation. For the other meaning, the guider of the trip, to be specific, it means that the protagonist is a guider in the drug illusion in order to make their escape from the hurt caused by as drug addicts. It also expresses that the protagonist is a guider for the lost-readers or audiences in the text reading trip or thinking trip and so on. Generally, the protagonist is a playwright or we can say that his final ideal dream is to produce plays and dramas on the stage of the United States and more significantly, in the end, his dream has come true. Thus, the word "tripmaster" shows that the protagonist is trying to guide his own ideal dream of his career trip and most importantly give guidance to the rest of Chinese Americans who are living in self-loss both coming from the reality and the spirit. To a further step, it also implies that the protagonist helps all Chinese Americans search for their long-lost cultural identity. He himself is trying his best to put such an action into

practice. Thus, here, the meanings of this vocabulary "tripmaster" coined by Kingston are much more complicated.

Moreover, the word "monkey" in the title is so familiar to us. Even a kid can know monkeys very well, let alone the adult readers. But, here, the word "monkey" used by Kingston is not the meaning we are familiar with. It's not pointing a kind of animal which is a member of a group in the creature world. It is much similar to human beings in appearance and it is a type of small long-tailed tree-climbing animal. It indicates handsome Monkey King who appears in one of Four Chinese traditional classics, *Journey to the West*. At the beginning of the novel, when the protagonist invites Nancy to pay for a visit in his house, he calls himself as "Monkey King" and also behaves as "Monkey King". The protagonist says in the novel that "I am really: the present-day U.S.A. in carnation of the King of the Monkeys." (Kingston, 1989, p.33)

He sprang from the desk onto the chair and from the chair to the mattress and from the mattress up to the desk again, dragging his long arms and heavy knuckles. His head turned from side to side like a quick questioning monkey, then slower, like an Indian in a squat, wagging his head meaning yes-and-no. He picked a flea from behind an ear—is this a flea? —or is it the magic pole in its toothpick state that the King of the Monkeys keeps hidden behind his ear? (Kingston, 1989, p.32)

When Nancy shuts the door, leaves the protagonist's house, the monkeyish behaviors show again.

Alone, Wittman jumped off the table to the mattress, trampoline off that to the Gold Mountain trunk and onto the chair. Keep up the mood, not in liege to her. Elongating his chimp-like torso, he stretched for a look at himself in the built-in mirror on the door. He ruffled out his chair. Sao mang mang mang-key maw-lau. Skinny skinny monkey. "Bee-e-eeen!" he yelled, loud enough for her to hear. "Bee-e-eeen!" which is what Monkey yells when he changes. (Ibid., p.33-34)

In this way, the author not just connects this American work with Chinese culture, but builds close links between the protagonist and Monkey King in the characteristics of wisdom, courage, humor and the achievement of Monkey King targeting demons and seeking Buddhist scriptures. Just like Monkey King, who has "seventy-two changes", the protagonist also has "seventy-two changes". Monkey King has owned different types of incarnations, and Wittman's identity is endlessly changeable. He is a member of lost-generation experiencing "The Civil Movement". He is a campus poet reading in the railway carriage. He is a shop-assistant selling plaything in the toy department of the store. He is an unemployed city man. He is a playwright recreating Chinese Americans' history by his dramas. He constantly changes and shows his many-sided selves, including Chinese Americans' pluralism and fluidity in identity. Many-sided selves reconstruct Chinese Americans' subjective dignity and subvert its stiff recognition in the whites' society.

In its subtitle, a phrase “fake book”, this has various meanings, arrests readers’ attention. The original meaning of the word “fake” is “not genuine” (Hornby, 2002, p.520). It means false or illegal, so when readers catch the first sight of it, they will feel bewildered. What is a “fake book” or what is a false book? In a visit, Kingston described this word as that the word was about a jazz term in music, which meant a lot of basic tones, songs and musical sounds usually improvised by jazz masters. Sometimes this was just the start of the musical tone, thereafter it’s the improvisation. So she tried to create a book including a general plot, providing suggestions for social activities and thoughts. She hoped that it could lead to readers and let them improvise forward (Skenazy, 1998, p.81).

Therefore, “fake book” is explained as improvised melody including both the readers’ improvised melody and the protagonist’s improvised melody. The first one has already mentioned in the author’s statement in the previous paragraph. Because the author applies some typical postmodern creative methods to the novel resulting in disorder, chaos or obscurity, etc. in the text reading. Therefore, in the reading process, it’s necessary for readers to comprehend or analyze the author’s meaning or intention here and there. It is the readers’ improvised melody. For the second point, it may refer to two kinds of cultures: Chinese culture and American culture. During Wittman’s creation, he borrows a large amount of Chinese elements from Chinese traditional classics, such as *Journey to the West*, *Water Margin* and *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. At the same time, Kingston also assimilates the western culture and American films into her literary creation. Therefore, in the novel, there are so many movie names spoken out by Wittman, such as *Gold Rush*, *The Lady from Shanghai*, *Seven Samurai*, *Death of Night*, *The Twilight Zone*, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, *The Longest Day*, *Blood and Roses*, *Far From the Madding Crowd*, *Snow Country*, *The Time Machine*, etc. Wittman also cites the American great democratic poet, Walt Whitman’s poetry lines. Kingston borrows a lot of phrases from Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* as headlines of different chapters in the novel, for instance, *Trippers and Askers* for Chapter one, *Linguists and Contenders* for Chapter Two, *Ruby Long Legs’ and Zeppelin’s Song of the Open Road* for Chapter Five and *A Song for Occupations* for Chapter Six. Wittman also models the Beat Generation on dressing-ups and life styles. In the description of the text in the beginning, we see such a weird protagonist. He is the bearded young man, has long hair, dresses like a hippie, takes drugs, and has no steady jobs, etc.. This is the protagonist’s improvisation. This is also Kingston’s intention on the subtitle, with which she hopes as soon as readers catch the first sight of this subtitle, and it will be just as they hear an exciting musical jazz song which arouses their desires

and interests to go further into next steps and then grasp the gist of the work.

But furthermore, maybe what are being tucked away in our thought are some more implications of this phrase “his fake book” in the subtitle. As we all know, in the book *Journey to the West*, the final mission for Sun Wukong (Monkey King) together with Pigsy and Sandy is to protect Tripitaka (Tang Sanzang) in the pilgrimage for enlightenment. Finally, when they succeed in obtaining scriptures from Buddha, Sun Wukong has found that the scriptures are false, for there are no written words on them. What does this mean to the March of the Volunteers? Maybe it predicts that the trip is full of hardships, dangers and adventures. For Monkey King, “Tripmaster Monkey”, it is a “false” trip on account of no-words scriptures. This allusion to our protagonist also shows “his false trip” from receiving education in colleges, making friends, even looking for a mate, looking for jobs, pursuing ideal dreams and reconstructing identities in a white-controlled society although he himself is an American who is born and grows up here. Although his country is an inclusive multi-national country in which the Blacks’ legal rights can be acknowledged, his trip still has not fulfilled, no matter from his historical identity to his political identity. On this kind of circumstance, it also can be said that it is “false” for the people’s identity who is Chinese descents but Americans who have Americanness. As a “Tripmaster Monkey”, representing all Chinese Americans like himself in the trip of realizing the acknowledgement of their identity, he is false over the past years. Just as March of the Volunteers, they must suffer all eighty-one disasters in their pilgrim trip guided by Monkey King, they can get true scriptures. Thus, Chinese Americans must experience the mistreatment, discrimination and difficulties. Then, through their struggling, striving and great efforts, they can get the real identity as a real American rather than only a Chinese American. In this process, the protagonist, Wittman is the very guider who is a representative of all Chinese Americans to help them fulfill the final goal at last. So here, it’s a pun in the subtitle of the novel.

In a word, at the first glance of the text, the author has brought full use of her adept ability into playing language games. Although, previously, we have already made analysis of the title nearly word by word, it’s still hard to reach into just one option or answer for explaining the use of each word. Kingston’s exquisite language skills are extremely dazzling.

It is just appropriate to correspond with the theory given by Saussure and Derrida. “Trip”, “master”, “monkey”, and “fake”, all the meanings of these words or linguistic signs are just assured in a large signal network temporarily, then they are constantly differed or deferred just like the signifier and signified. No matter what kind of language games and what options for the text are, the author of fiction entirely utilizes this linguistic selective

process for the purpose of serving the theme of the fiction. In *TM*, the theme is explained as the following. The kernel part of it is that Chinese Americans claim their identity—national identity, rather than in culture, then, to be exact, it goes beyond it. Kingston has fixed her creation on American culture. There is a saying by Wittman in his *One-Man Show*:

Once and for all: I am not oriental. An oriental is antipodal. I am a human being standing right here on land which I belong to and which belongs to me. I am not an oriental antipode. (Kingston, 1989, pp.326-327)

Sojourners no more but. Immigration got fooled yet. You not be Overseas Chinese. You be here. You're here to stay. I am deeply, indigenously here. And my mother and father are indigenous, and most of my grandparents and great-grandparents , indigenous. Native Sons and Daughters of the Golden State. Which was a name our ancestors made up to counteract those racists, the Native Sons and Daughters of the Golden West. We want a name somewhat like that but shorter and more than California, the entire U.S.A.-ours. (Ibid., p. 327)

Kingston's literary creation is one organic part of American literary. It also seems to say that she is desirous to set up a community—a multi-national and multi-cultural American community, in which Asian Americans, Chinese Americans, Black people, other minority ethnic groups and white people are all Americans. They are all equal. When Kingston is fighting for obtaining Chinese Americans' national identity, she also elaborates their cultural hybridity and striving for an independent cultural group. For this reason, all her stylistic skills serve it. The name of the protagonist in *TM* is also another obvious case to this end.

2. THE NAME OF THE PROTAGONIST

The name of the protagonist is Wittman Ah Sing. It is a very interesting name, probably because every word in it is so familiar to us, but if they are put together, it's foreign to us. Thus, it will be very fascinating and absolutely meaningful to the concrete analysis of it. The name "Wittman Ah Sing" is also like a linguistic game—there are three words and each of them carries a single meaning, but according to the context, these three words altogether have a multitude of meanings. In Chapter Nine "One-Man Show", Wittman Ah Sing explains his name to his audiences.

I'm one of the American Ah Sings. Probably there are no Ah Sings in China. You may laugh behind my family's back, that we keep the Ah and think it means something. I know it's just a sound. A vocative that goes in front of everyone's names. Ah Smith. Ah Jones. Everyone has an Ah, only our family writes ours down. In that Ah, you can hear we had an ancestor who left a country where the language has sounds that don't mean anything-la and ma and wa-like music. Alone and illiterate, he went where no one other Chinese was. Nobody to set him straight. When his new friends asked him his name, he remembered that those who wanted him had called, "Ah Sing." So he told the school-marm, "Ah Sing, ma'am", and she wrote

down for him the two syllables of a new American name. (Ibid., p.307)

In Wittman's words, it seems that the vocative "Ah" is just a prefix of a surname rather than a family name. The vocative "Ah" functions to show the affectionate color. The protagonist's name is a typical case in combination of Chinese and American culture. Firstly, it is a parody on a great American democratic poet, Walt Whitman. Wittman's father gives his son this name in the hope of realizing his great respect and great expectation. While Whitman sings for the whole America as well as the ordinary American people. He advocates democracy and equality. Whitman's strong ambition is incisively and vividly embodied in his great work *Leaves of Grass*, portraying all kinds of people in America and trying to create the national identity for America. Whitman says: "I celebrate myself, and sing myself." (Whitman, n.d., p.327) These are what Wittman wants to do and wants to say. This parody can function in inheriting the American culture and embodying the protagonist's Americanness. In the novel, Wittman says to Siew Loong:

"Okay," said Wittman. "I act you theater; you act me theater. Only one thing but. You are going to stay F.O.B. as long as you hear and say "Revolution," and be thinking 1911, 1949. Forget Tobacco Shit War and Kung Fu War. Seventeen seventy-six, Siew Loong, July 4-our Revolution. We all the same Americans, you sabe? Get it? (Ibid., pp.201-202)

In "One-Man Show", Wittman also says:

We mustn't call ourselves "Chinese" among those who are ready to send us back to where they think we came from. But "Chinese-American" takes too long. Nobody says or hears past the first past. And "Chinese-American" is inaccurate-as if we could have two countries. We need to take the hyphen out—"Chinese American." "American," the noun, and "Chinese," the adjective. (Ibid., p.327)

Secondly, it can be also reflected in Chinese culture. In the south of China, "Ah" usually accompanies people's surnames, which show a kind of affection and intimacy among people. Furthermore, "Ah Sing" has been known to many Americans at that time. A restaurant owner and leader of San Francisco's Chinese community, his name is Norman Asing, who fought against the immigration restriction in 1852. He wrote an essay in which he utilized the rhetoric of "The Declaration of Independence" and U.S. Constitution to the governor of the state for trying to protect his people from the unequal immigration restriction. Just like Norman Asing, the protagonist's name "Ah Sing" has the resemblance; hence, Kingston bestows "Ah Sing" to him, in the hope of his fighting against racism and marginalization for his people after a century. At the same time, "Ah Sing" is the rewriting of "Ah Sin", who does a crafty Chinese gambler firstly exist in a poem by Bret Harte, an famous American author in 19th century. This is a kind of irony in order to destroy the stereotype of Chinese Americans who were usually effeminate, deceitful or self-denial in

white Americans' eyes shown in some books and other channels. Kingston intends to create such a completely new image of Chinese Americans as masculine, never-silent and confident in striving for their equal position and legal status. In addition to this, "Ah Sing" in Chinese sounds like "Ah Xin", or "Ah Xing", which mean that owing to the protagonist's continuous and persistent striving and efforts, he will finally, with expectations, open a new era for Chinese Americans and in this era, he, together with his companions, will be a new person rather than a traditional Chinese American. In this sense, he is unwilling to deny his Chineseness in his bloodship, furthermore, he is willing to be a new Chinese American in his national identity. Moreover, "Ah Xing" means a star. The protagonist is seen as a star. What kind of star? A theater star, a culture star and a new Chinese American star. Through his hard work in theater and culture, he will be able to lighten his theater garden utilizing all kinds of affordable sources—both from the Chinese and Americans. He will shed the brilliant light in the dark sky of Chinese Americans' silent world.

Beyond that, "Ah" bears a certain resemblance to the English first-pronoun, "I", and for this reason, it stresses the "self-hood" or "individualism" which is also a kind of symbolization in the United States. Then, as an American, the protagonist calls upon all Chinese Americans to find out their identity as true Americans. Moreover, in English vocabularies, "sing" usually occurs in such phrases as "sing a song". In the novel, the protagonist also "sings a song"—singing a song of democracy and equality echoing the opening line of the first inscription of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*: "One's self I sing, a simple separate person, / Yet, utter the word Democratic, the word En Masse." (Wang, 2008, p.37) It is also attractive for us to concern with the word "wit" except for the factors stated before, which has a resemblance in pronunciation and rewriting in spelling of "Whitman". There is another kind of indication in it. It means the intelligence of the protagonist. He is one of the acculturated fifth-generation of Chinese Americans. He has graduated from Berkeley and majored in English. He is a playwright with a capability of producing dramas. He is a new and witty Chinese American different from the traditional stereotyped Chinese American who, as an immigrant, worked in laundry, Chinese restaurant, etc. of Chinatown. He has the brilliant hope to keep his feet to survive and develop in his own land as a leader and model to all Chinese Americans.

Here, Kingston places a hybridity in the protagonist's name. It is a kind of combination of the name of great American poet "Whitman" and a typical Chinese name "Ah Sing". Kingston mixes the order of the protagonist's name—the customary family name as the surname and vice versa. The name of the protagonist highlights the new significance in the process of blending and assimilating

with two different kinds of cultures. It can break the hegemony of the western voice, which has made the Chinese Americans' voice with hybridity. The new voice possesses the same legitimacy like the western voice. We can even say that Kingston breaks the strict limitation with the protagonist's name with hybridity in the process of the hybridity between the western culture and Chinese culture. What's more, she redefines the new cultural identity of Chinese Americans in an ambiguous space, namely, the third space.

CONCLUSION

At the first look at the title, it may be so confusing and lost to all readers, because it's just uncertain and everything is uncertain, which is one of the remarkable features of the postmodernist fictions. To postmodernists, they depend on fixed meanings during the process of readers' endless searching and unscrambles in the text reading. According to an important viewpoint about Theories of Discourse in postmodernist linguistic philosophy, linguistic signs gradually lose their function in representing surface features and not any more point out their meanings by themselves. Any spoken or written word, including writing itself, is lost in an endless chain of the signifier. It means that any postmodernist text doesn't have an organic meaningful centre. The meaning of the text is not going to come from the creation of the author himself or herself, but from the reading and unscrambles of the text by readers. Anyone has the chance and possibility to make any explanation of the text. Postmodernist readers, holding a kind of critical and creative attitude, explore the extra-meaning of the text. Most important of all, they rewrite the original text through their subjective construction of the meanings. As a postmodernist fiction, *TM* certainly shows its distinctive postmodernist stylistic characteristics in many aspects. Further into its body of the text, its striking postmodernist stylistic characteristics will be more and more enchanting and fascinating.

Through the analysis above from the perspective of the names in the title and the protagonist, Kingston unfolds a striking linguistic picture in front of readers. That seems the linguistic game is out of intention, truly it is with the writer's purpose in which readers unconsciously participate. The significance inside it can be interpreted by the readers themselves, which, also to some extent, embodies the spectacular feature of the postmodern fictions - the certainty of the language is fading away.

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