

Romancing the Strait: Love and Death in Li Ang's Seven Prelivities of Affective Affinity

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Li Ang's most recent novel, *Seven Prelives of Affinitive Affinity* (2009), is an allegorical account of romance across the Strait. The cross Strait relations used to be hostile and antagonistic, largely propelled by civil and cold wars. But since 2008 the relations have increasingly been very much like that of premarital courtship. Li Ang finds the two cultures across the Strait to be so alike and so mutually affined or even entangled that she develops her narrative around most intensive love scenes between a Taiwanese writer Ho Fang and a Chinese official Chow Xiaodung.

Throughout the novel, Li Ang deploys the romance frame of lovers' discourse on multiple and conflicting levels to show that the relationship between Ho and Chow is far from simple or even innocent. Ho is a career woman, a cosmopolitan figure caught in the old and new world orders. Not a feminist in any strict sense of the word, Ho nevertheless is relatively radical in challenging the norms—sexual, political, cultural, and economic. She has a long-term boy friend in Taipei, but after she meets Chow she fantasizes about having gorgeous sex with both men. In the meanwhile, she also engages another Chinese dissent, so as to know the mind and body of the June 4th generation, to comprehend the trauma and repetition compulsions in a diaspora who has never overcome the fact that he is no longer integral to the Chinese soft and hard powers. In addition to experimenting sex with different men, Ho travels all over the continents for business and for pleasure. China or Taiwan is only a small fraction of her world. Ho enjoys flexibility and freedom beyond the ideological and geographic confines. She theorizes about Taiwan's alternative modernity and places Taiwan in a Pacific Asia context or on the larger scale of global cultural economy, suggesting that Taiwan can never be just Chinese. In her (or the implied author's) opinion, Taiwan may have more roles to play if it befriends China but at the same time is made more desirable while not tied to one-on-one relationship.

In contrast to Ho, Chow is an up-rising star in the Chinese bureaucracy, as the Communist regime now turns proto-capitalist. A southern Chinese fluent in Fukianese, Chow is a prestigious member of the new ruling class who attempts to appropriate Taiwanese cultural experiences and to expand China's soft power internationally. Chow is married with children, but his affective affinity with Ho enables him to be more sympathetic with Taiwan even though he often would address Ho as "a woman from that

small island.” The self-orientalizing tendency in Chow is apparent in many respects. His name indicates that he knows the East (Orient) well, so as to be able to contain and manage it. (Ho Fang’s name, on the other hand, suggests that she doesn’t have a home or even have any slightest clue as to whither Taiwan will go.) Surviving Cultural Revolution as a “bad element” having family ties to Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek’s government in Taiwan, Chow is eloquent, graceful, but ruthless, very much attuned to the Chinese art of management. He knows how to manipulate others in terms of Chinese philosophy and literature, but he is also ready to embrace almost everything materialistic (though hardly conceptual) from Euro-America. Cautious but occasionally daring, civil but at times brutal to his inferiors, Chow represents the calculated aggressivity in contemporary Chinese political and economic culture. He grasps every chance to make good impressions as well as to exercise his power. He is partially “liberated,” as Ho tries to caress him using Qigong and to cultivate the extra-marital affair for mutual’s benefits. Deep down, Chow is however up for more important positions in Beijing. Once he spoke in favor of Taiwan’s democratization, but he soon curbs and learns from his mistakes. In Ho and Chow, we witness the split and differential mechanism between sex and politics. The mechanism operates on several levels—mythological, ideological, and factological, among others.

As in many other novels by Li Ang, *Seven Centuries of Affective Affinity* contains explicit sex scenes and reveals sub-versive intents of a woman artist giving a new twist to the tales of love and fate, to stories of Taiwanese merchants having second wives (ernai) in China. Ho Fang meets Chow Xiaotung in a conference. At first, she thinks very little of him, regarding him as a relatively typical bureaucrat or Communist intelligentsia. However, as they see each other more often, Ho finds Chow to be not only a handsome and potent man, but a Chinese who is capable of appreciating Taiwanese culture and of becoming very Taiwanese. As Ho and Chow get to know each other more, Ho is constantly surprised by Chow’s nearly omnipresence in Taiwan and his inclination toward merging with the native. On the one hand, Ho sees Chow as almost her predestined partner who seems to embody characteristics of an ideal lover in ancient romance narratives. On the other, she feels that Chow has managed to be more Taiwanese than herself, and in that respect she fears that China has developed very subtle tactics of containment and coercion by employing someone like Chow, a southern Chinese and Fukianese from Zhang-Qian area, to acquire everything Taiwanese.

The novel begins with a question of “almost the same but not quite”: “The Taiwanese and Chinese speak the same language and use the same scripts? How come they are so much alike while deep down different?” (Of course, here one hastens to add that accent can be an important denominator and the debate concerning the complex or simplified written characters often put both sides in strife with each other.) In different ways, the question of national and cultural identity, as shaped by historical or social processes, also concerns many scholars in Taiwan studies such as Tonio Andrade, Melissa Brown, and others. On the other hand (and more extreme end), Alan Wachman lays out the scenario that the burden of territorial integrity punctuated by China’s expansionist aims would put Taiwan’s autonomy in jeopardy, even resolved by military force. And now with Ma and

Beijing signed ECFA, Taiwan's independence status is very much threatened. To Li Ang, who is an optimist, the sustainability of the first Asian democratic polity and of its cultural economy, would lie in Taiwan's ability to assert its difference. Li Ang elaborates on such an ambiguous identity crisis as Ho Fang finds cultural resonances and mythological wonders in Chow Xiaodung who is not only from an "imaginary" homeland for most Taiwanese—Qiangchow—but seems to embody features highlighted in traditional romances which trace heroes and heroines' passions for each other to previous existences—affinity over seven centuries.

Ho has read quite a few romances about such famous Chinese couples as Meng Jiangnu, White Serpent, Liang-Zhu, etc. Since her childhood, Chinese narratives of eternal love and reincarnation have left memorable impressions and made her part of the Chinese imagined communities or of that republic of letters. While Shu-mei Shih and Jing Tsu would call Ho's exposure to Chinese literature and the artifice of remembrance as "sinophonic," in terms of looking alike and of disavowal, Li Ang sticks to the idea of cultural continuity and resemblance, suggesting that Taiwan is very much under the sway of "cultural China." In the novel, Ho links herself to the mythological structure of love and torment. The novel ends with a twist on such mythological ties and tries to resolve ideological differences, but one wonders if religion may be a way to make peace or to ease the tensions across the Strait.