

When Wuxia Met Romance: The Pleasures and Politics of Transculturalism in Sherry Thomas's *My Beautiful Enemy*

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Abstract: A case study of Sherry Thomas's Qing-era *My Beautiful Enemy* (and its prequel, *The Hidden Blade*) allows for a fruitful discussion of changing representations of diversity in romance fiction and its appeal to readers. *MBE*'s heroine is Anglo-Chinese, and the novel's plot draws on wuxia, a literary and cinematic genre that has a long history in China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. It is also associated with immigration and exile, perhaps resonating with Thomas's own move from China to the U.S. Readers might find its infusion in romance appealing for two reasons: one, it features a warrior heroine (a type popular in paranormal and urban fantasy romance, which questions gender roles), and second, it taps into the worldwide appreciation for wuxia, inspired by hits like *Crouching Tiger*. *MBE* enacts the genre's features closely: the heroine is a righteous knight errant and a racial and gendered Other, intervening in nineteenth-century English and Chinese politics through uncanny martial means. Her struggle to determine her ethnic and political identities alongside filial piety and romantic love makes for a more transcultural romance novel.

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That the romance genre has an international readership (in English and in translation) is well known, as is the fact that the texts are predominantly Anglo/white European/American in both their characters and settings. But a multicultural strain has grown stronger in recent decades, particularly in terms of one or both protagonists being African/African-American/Asian/Latinx/multiracial.[1] Sherry Thomas's Victorian and

Qing-era-set 2014 novel *My Beautiful Enemy* (*MBE*) and its prequel *The Hidden Blade* (*THB*) are notable in this vein. However, not only does the heroine, Bai Ying-Hua/Catherine, have English and Chinese heritage but the novels draw on a genre called *wuxia*, a literary and cinematic form with a centuries-long history in mainland China, as well as Hong Kong and Taiwan. *MBE* fuses the traits of this fantasy-based martial arts genre with those of mass-market Anglo-American romance fiction and stars a biracial heroine whose ethno-national negotiations evoke the contingent nature of women's social and personal identity. Consequently, this neo-Victorian romance allows for a fruitful discussion of changing representations of cultural diversity and gender roles in romance novels.

The Victorian setting of *MBE* evokes the history of the British Empire. Elizabeth Ho argues that "the return to the Victorian in the present offers a highly visible, highly aestheticized code for confronting empire again and anew," and she attributes the current crop of neo-Victorian texts, all interested in "the aftermath of the empire and its reappearance in processes of globalization," to this trend (qtd in Llewellyn & Heilmann 27). These claims provide my point of departure for parsing the palimpsests of empire and glimpses of contemporary multiculturalism in romance fiction through Thomas's novel, set partly in 1891 China and London, and partly (through flashbacks) in 1883 Chinese Turkestan (Xinjiang/Sikiang).[2] Moreover, by flipping back and forth between the Victorian and Qing setting, *MBE* not only stages the challenges that women have faced in the recent past at the fault lines of cultural and racial identities, but also acts as an allegory of what they continue to face. More specifically, Thomas's use of the Victorian setting in *MBE* serves to voice the contemporary struggles of the actual and psychological—see more on this conception below—female immigrant to the present day Anglophone Global North, with Victorian England standing for the North's continuing dominance in the global imaginary.[3] In narrating the impact of the British Empire on its Anglo-Chinese heroine, *MBE* raises the specter of the current boundary-less empire of globalization and the pressures it exerts on female immigrants from, and/or residents of, the Global South. In other words, the historical setting and period enact a drama that is about our contemporary moment, when globalization is exporting the cultures of the Global North across the planet. These cultures include expectations of gender behavior, as well as love and marriage. Women from the Global South encounter them as normative or aspirational even while they live in their home countries, and doubly so if they leave those places to travel to the heart of the neo-empire of globalization.[4]

MBE is thus a tale not just of the kinds of opposing socio-economic and civic demands between which all women are torn, and with whose representation romance fiction is preoccupied, but also of the specific demands that a neo-imperial ideology visits on women in non-Anglo/European countries. In particular, it stages a possible resolution for the demands placed on women who have immigrated to the geographic centers from which those ideologies radiate. That this tale is set in 1891 England, when Victoria's empire reached its peak, is not chance. The Victorian era represents a period when codes of linguistic and gender norms were dispersed across the globe from the seat of the empire. This presages our present moment, when globalization, in the form of Anglo-American neo-liberalism, has brought specific ideologies of normativity to the world, especially to Asia and other parts of the Global South. Just as contemporary women (particularly in the latter) labor to fit the Anglo expectations of beauty and behavior found in Hollywood cinema and other media (see

footnote 4), Chinese female ideals in the late-Qing period (end of the nineteenth century) were heavily influenced by European womanhood.

Thomas's fierce Ying-Hua can be read as a woman of this moment, when old and new versions of what makes an ideal woman were in flux in China. The shift was a result of China's political defeats at the hands of the British, American, and other European empires, which led to internal and external pressures to rethink the existing Confucian value system, including gender roles and human worth overall. The history of Western influence on Chinese expectations of the ideal woman is summarized by Xia Xiaohong in "The Great Diversity of Women Exemplars in China of Late Qing," which examines China at the end of the nineteenth century. Xia's article argues that while many editions of the book *Biographies of Exemplary Women* had disseminated models of ideal women since 2 BCE, these models required reconsideration following China's increasing contact with the West, as well as its loss of power over the Qing period. Surveying the biographies of Western women printed in books and columns in local women's newspapers, Xia notes the inclusion of women like "Harriet Beecher Stowe... Queen Victoria, Jean-Marie Roland (better known as Madame Roland), Johanna von Puttkammer (Otto von Bismarck's wife), and Florence Nightingale" (222). Xia later also mentions Queen Catherine of Russia and notes the special emphasis in these compilations on revolutionaries like French anarchist Louise Michel, Charlotte Corday, Anita Garibaldi, writer Madame de Stael, suffrage activist Dame Millicent Fawcett, and two Russian nihilists. Xia points out that one of these collections by Yang Qianli was meant by Yang for use as a textbook and its Western figures as models for Chinese women to emulate. Such books, claims Xia, trained girls to be new women, highlighting the independence or revolutionary spirit of these figures rather than their status as wives of great men, as some versions did (227).[5] Thomas's neo-Victorian, neo-Qing novel captures this moment of competing Chinese and Western forms of femininity.

Although she does not actually read any of the above-named texts and technically grows up about a decade prior to their dissemination, Ying-Hua is like the Qing-era women who encountered this historical change in female role models. Thus, in addition to encountering the same struggles to meet gender and labor expectations that all romance heroines face, she must also address a racial and linguistic expectation both from within her home (the old Chinese ideal of gentlewomanly grace and obedience to patriarchy) and from the world that has intruded on it (the new ideal of boldness and educated self-sufficiency). In other words, as a teenager in China, she was required to walk, to speak, to dress, and to be artistic with her mother's lauded grace, as described in the prequel novel *THB*. But she receives a Western education—in a pointed reference to the genre's literary forebear, she knows Austen's Elizabeth Bennet, a beloved non-conformist heroine—and is also forced to take on martial duties if she and her family are to survive personal misfortune, much of it resulting from China's national turmoil.

In addition to having this historical referent, Ying-Hua's journey functions as an allegory of present-day women's self-restructuring when faced with multiple cultures and differing expectations, as we see in the well documented struggles of recent immigrant women. Caroline Plüss, for instance, discusses this phenomenon in her study of Singaporean migrant women. She convincingly argues that migrants are deemed different by locals, and this difference used to block their ability to "access new and desired resources" (126). As a result, some of them change their characteristics to resemble the local majority in order to fit in and to gain those resources:

To overcome such exclusion and devaluation, migrants can try to construct new cultural capital by changing some of their cultural characteristics and, therewith, their identifications (Plüss 2005, 2011). Such changes often involve adopting characteristics of those who control access to desired resources. (126)

Ying-Hua experiences these demands and displays similar adaptive behavior (as Thomas herself has done as a writer). She constructs a hybrid identity, though not a multicultural one as much as a multi-masked or transcultural one, in the sense of performing one cultural self over another to achieve her personal, familial, and national goals. In effect, the novel uses its Victorian setting to tell a historically faithful tale of a woman with a mixed-race identity forged by the impact of British influence in China in the late Qing period. When read through Plüss's analysis, however, and in light of Thomas's own trajectory, it becomes a story of how contemporary women in non-Western countries may live in a cultural neo-colony, this one created by globalization (particularly via mass media that is manufactured in the West). It also hints at how these new visions of womanhood and personhood can force the formation of a hybrid identity, with one face masking many. Such masking becomes even more pronounced for those who migrate to neo-colonial centers. This hybridity, a dialectical resolution for an on-going contemporary du(a/e)lism, is one that Thomas achieves for Ying-Hua by having her selectively adopt the "characteristics of those who control access to desired resources" (Plüss 126).

Even as the novel foregrounds this cultural negotiation and its costs via the settings, Thomas uses the tropes and character types of the Chinese wuxia genre—both the millennia-old knight-errantry literary tradition and twentieth-century wuxia cinema—to create a culturally hybrid novel, thus transforming the Anglo-centric genre itself and giving it a broader perspective. In other words, while Ying-Hua/Catherine is a hybrid character, putting on or taking off one of her many selves depending on the nation-space in which she finds herself, the novel is a hybrid too, with transcultural components such as this heroine as well as elements of wuxia.

An ancient popular martial arts genre used to address questions of righteous action and nationalism, including for twentieth-century Chinese people in the diaspora, wuxia is a fitting instrument for Thomas's transcultural intervention in Anglocentric romance fiction. Transculturation is a phenomenon that was proposed by Fernando Ortiz in his dialectical understanding of the contact of cultures: "The product of a meeting between an existing culture or subculture and a migrant culture, recently arrived, which transforms the two and creates in the process a neoculture" (Onghena 182). Further, "transculturality," per the editors of *Exploring Transculturalism*, is an accurate way to understand the phenomenon in which technology and increased cross-border mobility has ratcheted up cultural contact and led to migrants who "explore, examine and infiltrate new, seemingly alien cultures," though not without varying levels of culture shock (Berg & Éigeartaigh 11). Most importantly, even as these travelers "transcend" their cultures to adapt to a new one, they have an impact on the host culture, "whose hegemonic rules and values may be challenged by the influx of different ideas and behaviors" (Berg & Éigeartaigh 11). *MBE* is in many ways an example of the transculturation of romance fiction, with Thomas's knowledge of a popular Asian genre reconceiving a Western mass-market one. Through *MBE*, Thomas reinvigorates the Victorian historical romance using wuxia, providing imagined resolutions to contemporary problems

that women, especially of color, encounter under late capitalism as the boundaries of nation-states both harden and blur.

Immigration and the Romance Novelist

The story of an Asian protagonist encountering and contending with Western expectations can represent Thomas's own trajectory. Her grandparents were something of an oddity in northwest China in the early twentieth century, having gone to English-language colleges and adopted a Western sensibility (Fox). Many of Thomas's family members immigrated to the United States, and her mother moved there to study while Thomas herself stayed behind, arriving in the U.S. later. Thomas has talked about being a teenage immigrant and feeling like a linguistic and cultural misfit, struggling with the immature stories in children's primers though her sensibilities were far more developed due to linguistic fluency in Chinese and a wider acquaintance with Chinese literature. She has also said that reading English-language romance novels with the help of a bilingual dictionary contributed to her language learning.[6] But she has gone on to be a bestselling author of English romance novels and her oeuvre, till this duology, enacted the genre's Anglospheric chronotopes and starred white protagonists, a version of "adopting [the] characteristics" of the dominant culture (Plüss 126). Thomas's trajectory prompts my reading of *MBE*'s heroine as an allegory for how women cope with the demands placed on them by the new cultural imperatives that accompany globalization, specifically in relation to subject position, national identity, and belonging: demands even more pronounced for women immigrants to the West.

Yet *MBE* is a story of how an alien, as Sara Ahmed conceives the term, is not just one who travels to a "foreign" land, but someone who is treated as an "outsider insider" in a community:

the alien is the one who does not belong in a nation space, and who is already defined as such by the Law. The alien is hence only a category within a given community of citizens or subjects: as the outsider inside, the alien takes on a spatial function, establishing relations of proximity and distance within the home(land). Aliens allow the demarcation of spaces of belonging: by coming too close to home, they establish the very necessity of policing the borders of knowable and inhabitable terrains. (3)

Ahmed's framing of an alien as someone who functions to define what the homeland is, usually *inside* the border of a nation, is visible in Thomas's novels through the life of Bai Ying-Hua/Catherine Blade. She is a biracial nomad, an outsider everywhere, someone whose familial and cultural loyalties play out across competing gender and national (British and Chinese) scripts and over geographic crossings.

An Alien Everywhere: 1883 Chinese Turkestan and 1891 England

In *MBE*, the Sino-British heroine lives/moves across multiple cultures in nineteenth-century Qing China and England. The story of Ying-Hua's youth—growing up as the

illegitimate daughter of a woman who was first sold into sexual slavery in Shanghai to an Englishman and then became the concubine to a high-ranked Chinese noble—is narrated in the prequel *THB* (set in 1860s imperial Peking/Beijing). That novel also tells of how Ying-Hua was raised to be a lady but struggled to achieve traditional feminine perfection when young. This gender struggle has an added cultural twist, as if her biracial self lacks an essential Chineseness—her calligraphy is not sufficiently elegant, and no one thinks her comparable to her mother, the epitome of the cultured, graceful Chinese gentlewoman. In an expansion of her alienation, even that partial femininity is something she must shed when she begins secretly training in martial arts (partly due to her nanny’s worry about her bleak future as an Anglo-Chinese orphan and because she inadvertently starts a feud with another biracial warrior, Lin).[7]

When *MBE* begins, it is 1891 and the prologue has Ying-Hua on an England-bound ship in the midst of battling Lin and saving two British women. Soon after this incident, the first chapter shows her in London, now a demure figure posing as a recently arrived white British expat who is introduced to other genteel families there by the abovementioned ladies. Apart from the disconcerting contrast between her meek London persona and the warrior persona that readers saw in the prologue, Ying-Hua’s fake demureness (pointedly mimicking Anglo upper-class femininity) is also highlighted by her silent shock at meeting Captain Leighton Atwood, who only knows her in her warrior self. We soon learn that he was a former British foreign office staffer who was briefly her lover in China eight years ago and whom they both know she tried to kill.

The novel alternates from this narrative in 1891 England to flashbacks of that earlier period, when Ying-Hua lived in the northern province of Turkestan (Xinjiang) and often posed as a Kazakh man. In this male disguise, she used her martial training to spy on local warlords for her foster father.[8] (Addressed only by his noble honorific, Da-Ren, he was exiled to a governorship there by the Imperial Court and she joined him to escape Lin.) These 1883 Turkestan flashbacks also tell us about Ying-Hua’s increasing alienation, fueled not only by the early death of her mother, but also by her awareness of her mixed-race status and her hopeless quest for Da-Ren’s approval.

In other words, even before she comes to London in 1891, Ying-Hua is a misfit, an alien, in her native land, someone neither fully white nor fully Chinese—especially in terms of upper class gender expectations—due to birth, personal inclination, and a Western education. What is more, being Han Chinese under a Manchu dynasty puts her at a disadvantage even without her mixed birth.[9] Her name itself testifies to her alien status per Ahmed’s definition: as noted in *MBE*, and reiterated by Thomas in a Twitter exchange, “Ying is the word for England, and Hua for China”—Ying-Hua is the outsider within (254). Her martial arts training separates her further from Chinese gender roles, and her later decision to use that training to aid her father figure puts her at odds with the life of gentility she was raised to assume. Instead, as noted above, she dons the persona of a gruff Kazakh man and lives roughly in the desert. The flashbacks tell us that this state of alienation, wandering, and non-belonging appeared to be ending when she and Leighton, the novel’s hero, met and fell in love in 1883. However, a subsequent misunderstanding about each other’s true missions there—she thought he was a British spy, while he thought she was a Qing spy—led to their eight-year separation and their baby’s murder by Lin.

When the novel’s 1891 action in London begins, Catherine/Ying-Hua is on a mission for Da-Ren and her intent is to complete her search and to return to China, but the encounter

with Leighton soon after she arrives brings all her conflicting selves, loves, loyalties, and missions to a head. Even worse, she realizes that Lin survived their ship-board fight and is working as a mercenary to destabilize the British. He wants to end her life by fomenting fears of a conspiracy against the British Empire, and his plan is to expose the fact that she is not a British expat and have her arrested as a Chinese spy.

While not an authorized secret agent, the peculiar kind of racial/class passing that Ying-Hua practices in London is a version of what spies may do as part of their jobs. Her passing is to aid her in her quest to locate a Buddhist artifact in London, which might help Da-Ren fund China's rise against the encroaching British. So she conceals her past self while she acts the role of the British woman taught to her by a visiting English tutor who worked in her Peking/Beijing home. She is also able to pose as a white British woman newly arrived from overseas because of her appearance—Thomas indicates that Ying-Hua does not fit physical stereotypes of Chineseness, having dark hair but slate-blue eyes and red lips, and the acquired ability to speak the Queen's English.[10] The disguise trope is frequently used in romance novels, particularly the commoner imitating a lady (or, as I argue in a forthcoming work, women passing for whatever version of womanhood is idealized in a particular moment), but Ying-Hua's performance is distinctive because of the wuxia and biracial narrative underneath.

She displays the manners and mannerisms prized by the British upper classes so she can move in their circles and complete her mission while hiding her mixed blood ancestry and Chinese upbringing. She knows she would pay a price, socially and legally, if her heritage, athleticism, or lethal skills came to light.[11] When asked to describe how she saved the British ladies on the ship, for instance, Ying-Hua is relieved that no one witnessed "the details of [her] strength and dexterity," and she downplays the incident with, "I had the advantage of surprise on my side, a great deal of luck, and the experience of taking a pot to a miscreant's head once in a while" (Thomas, *MBE* 17). Her former lover, who knew her as a deadly Central Asian warrior disguised as a coarse horseman, observes her well-mannered female persona in disbelief. He cannot fathom her being a lady in any culture:

[T]o experience her speaking the Queen's English almost without accent and in general conducting herself with ladylike modesty—his disorientation, fierce to begin with, turned dizzying... He could not place her in [China], a place that hid its women behind walled courtyards and covered litters. Could not imagine her without a fast horse and a gleaming sword. It would be like locking a wolf in a broom cupboard... He could not get used to her demureness: The most decorous of spinster aunts would barely rival her in propriety. (Thomas, *MBE* 38-39)

Ying-Hua has become an alien to Leighton, both in terms of gender presentation and ethnicity, and is unnerving to him because her mannerisms resemble those of the British ladies he knows. But she doesn't see it as a contradiction. She herself believes that if he had not abandoned her, she could have fit easily into his British world despite her martial qualities because of

the long years [in China] confined behind high walls, the sea of etiquette through which she swam daily, the elaborate pretense she was capable of

putting on, to appear the most docile and ladylike of creatures. She would not have had a bit of trouble negotiating the relatively uncomplicated English rules of politesse. (Thomas, *MBE* 76)

In other words, Ying-Hua has been passing *all* her life in terms of gender role conformity, which is in fact what allows her greater skill in racial passing. Forced to present as a genteel Chinese lady at home before and even after she becomes a warrior, the text suggests, has given her the ability to assume different ethnicities in China and in Britain.

But despite her skilled performances, Ying-Hua feels herself to be miscultured in all cultures, an oddity who violates gender, class, and ethnic norms, and exhibits a facade, a simulation of the authenticity that she has been unable to acquire from the land of her birth through a natural osmosis or from the imagined one of her paternal ancestry through tutoring. In other words, what we have is a woman who has straddled cultures and gender roles since birth, a nomad and an alien. Time and geographic journeys have only magnified the seeming mutual exclusivity of her identities, alienating her from different communities even as she successfully passes in all. The novel's foregrounding of her diverse selves, as noted earlier, echoes one of the preoccupations of the genre, resonating as it does with the predominantly female readership and its familiarity with being forced to choose between different false binaries of appropriate gender roles. Thomas goes a step further, casting Ying-Hua's selves across ethno-national lines as well as infusing wuxia elements into the novel, subsequently modifying the genre into a more transcultural one.

Wuxia and *My Beautiful Enemy*

An old form of storytelling in China, wuxia rose to prominence in the twentieth century while relating tales of a fantastic past. Thomas mentions the genre on her website as an inspiration for these novels and we can see her fusing the tenets of historical romance with the hallmarks of wuxia and wuxia pian (wuxia cinema). In drawing on wuxia, Thomas brings to romance new possibilities of female agency as well as plotlines based on notions of duty and happiness from another literary and cinematic culture, thereby stretching the romance genre past its current circumference. *MBE* shows a sophisticated cultural fluidity that goes beyond the inclusion of the names and descriptions of non-white/Anglo characters' skin/hair/cuisine/clothing/exotic ethno-cultural festivals, which is otherwise the primary mode of exhibiting multicultural elements in the genre.

In explaining the etymology of the term wuxia, William Leung notes that “[t]he word wu refers to a kind of cultivated martial arts skill, while the word xia refers to a type of ancient mythical hero,” resulting in a “narrative where traditional ideas about good and evil are played out in the stylish adventures of skillful, spiritually attuned warriors” (43). He also lists “larger-than-life heroes, inventive rewriting of historical events, celebrations of heroic comradeship and dazzling fighting sequences” as key features (43). Stephen Teo explains that “xia is a noun to denote a breed of male and female ... warrior figures in the Warring States Period (403 BC-221 BC) whom we may loosely call ‘knights-errant’” (3). Wuxia spaces and encounters occur in what is termed *jianghu* (literally “lakes and rivers”), loosely meaning an underworld distinct from the quotidian political state, itself called *jia guo*.

Thomas highlights Ying-Hua's position between these two worlds throughout the novels. The martial training Ying-Hua started as a teenager and her later decision to use that training to aid Da-Ren leads her into *jianghu*. The flashbacks to 1883, when she fell in love with Leighton and thought of marriage and a family, tell us that she might have exited *jianghu*, but their misunderstanding and its consequences have meant her continuing isolation in this underworld, outside of national belonging and in conflict with existing state powers. Thomas deploys additional elements of wuxia throughout the duology, such as the kind of fight scenes that involve swords and a manipulation of *qi* or energy. Indeed, in distinguishing wuxia cinema from kung fu film, Stephen Teo notes that wuxia is associated in Chinese film mythology with developing one's *qi*, which allows for flight, and with sword play, as well as the use of other weapons (5).

Thomas's *qi*-warrior heroine is constructed in this mold. She is a righteous knight errant using martial means that are almost supernatural. To be sure, William Leung has noted that female xia (*nuxia*) were secondary to the Confucian prioritization of the male hero's adventures, despite having appeared in the literature since the tenth century. But as with Leung's own object of analysis (*Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*), Thomas's novel rejects the stereotype of the woman as lesser or less central to the story even as it maintains some *nuxia* conventions, such as in the origin story of the heroine: similar to the story of *nuxia* Nie Yinniang recounted by Cai, *THB* documents that Ying-Hua's life in *jianghu* began during childhood by stumbling into a feud as mentioned earlier.

Moreover, Thomas begins her story in a world whose gender conventions are those of wuxia tales (though she alters them as the plot unfolds). Initially, the novel establishes a gulf between living a warrior life and the traditional feminine one, a theme many wuxia scholars have noted is common in *nuxia* stories. The theme is congenital to Anglo romance as well; novels often have heroines who chafe against gender prescriptions, physical and economic. As with western gender norms, there is a binary at play in wuxia that *MBE* first stages—a warrior woman cannot be sexual or a mother. Instead, she must be a wanderer without a home, living for honor and conflict alone, a nomad whose relationship to the official nation and community is nebulous. As Rong Cai observes, women warriors in wuxia are frequently divested of the feminine because they fall outside gender expectations; subsequently, they are often divorced from domesticity and family (446-48):

To maintain gender coherence, the woman has to renounce the essence of femininity, motherhood, thus avoiding a dangerous confusion and impasse. Although female knights-errant in *wuxia* fiction take part in fighting and may consequently cause death, they are rarely mothers. (448)

He also says that the old "martial arts imagination" de-eroticizes the woman warrior: "A defeminized being vacated from the conventional pattern of domesticity, feminine charm, and sexuality, the woman warrior is neither enchanted nor disenchanting by love" (Cai 448). Teo notes that female knights-errant often don masculine garb and indeed that "a woman, in order to be seen to have the attributes of *wen* [the civilian-scholar quality] and *wu* [the martial quality] applied to her self, must first be transformed into a man [in the genre]" (118).

Thomas starts our heroine's journey in *THB* from this convention that warrior and womanliness do not go together, and the flashbacks in *MBE* show it enacted in her life as a

young woman. Losing Leighton and her baby further underlines her separation from traditional womanliness. As also mentioned above, the issue of the incompatibility of femininity and “masculine” action recurs in exactly the opposite way when she is in England—while living the *jianghu* warrior life in China means she can’t have a traditional woman’s life there, posing as a gentlewoman in Britain means it is necessary for her to conceal any martial or androgynous qualities.

But this linking of the warrior heroine to solitude and celibacy is incompatible in the long term with the tenets of romance fiction. Therefore, since wuxia dictates a solitary life for the *nuxia* or complete dissociation from *jianghu* if she begins a family, and romance aims for a happy pair-bonded life for the heroine, Thomas creates a blended narrative that alters the conventions of both parent genres a little in this respect. She remaps both the trajectory of lonely vengeance and righteousness that is dictated by wuxia for the female knight as well as the traditional markers of settled couplehood dictated by Anglo romance. She permits Ying-Hua her revenge against the man who killed her baby but also allows her to enter a stable relationship with Leighton once they resolve their past misunderstandings. She does this without reintegrating Ying-Hua into a prescribed gender role. Androgyny or presenting as male, which is a commonplace of *nuxia* stories, is a prominent feature, as is a rejection of other traditional feminine traits. While romance does not typically permit crossdressing or masculinized gender behavior as anything other than a temporary episode, usually in the first half of a story, Ying-Hua not only dresses as a man when she and Leighton meet and have an affair in China, but she is depicted as the less voluble and less overtly nurturing or emotional partner throughout *MBE*. It is Leighton who has the traditionally feminine role; he takes joy in cooking and caring for her, both during their initial affair in 1883 and after they reunite in 1891. Additionally, we never learn if the couple have another child, skirting one of the seminal expectations of the genre—the heteronormative family centered around romanticized motherhood (Kamblé 141). Moreover, Ying-Hua goes on a solo mission in China with her father to complete her quest for the artifact mentioned above after she and Leighton reconcile in England; this structure preserves her natal national allegiance and the warrior self she built in her time as *nuxia* even after their betrothal.[12]

The mission is also in keeping with Rong Cai’s claim that wuxia stories have the tint of a fight for a larger just cause, despite being about personal feuds for wrongs done. Ying-Hua is embroiled in a personal and national struggle in parallel with the romance plot. Thomas brings these themes of ethnic and national identity and its struggles to the forefront in her novel, preserving a wuxia theme. Scholars argue that the genre has been about Chinese nationalism and establishing authentic Chineseness since its start. For example, Stephen Teo writes, “Within wuxia literature itself, it has long been the practice to regard xia as a concept often equivalent to a declaration of the national” (10). He points out that wuxia cinema expresses China’s “industrial nationalism” alongside a desire to articulate Chinese nationalism through “traditional, native genres” (10, 41-42).[13] In other words, wuxia cinema’s “historicism” uses costume drama to create a Chinese identity based on the past but ultimately one containing a modern, transnational (diasporic) layer as well.

Ethnic and national identity are crucial in *MBE*, as seen in Ying-Hua’s hybrid self of English and Chinese heritage and her involvement with nineteenth-century Chinese national politics. The latter leads her on a larger quest for her community as represented by the reformist Da-Ren (versus the short-sighted ruling Manchus). In this, Thomas has her fulfill the wuxia feature of “[t]he xia or knight-errant [acting] as an agent of history, conscious of

his or her role in shaping events and the destiny of the nation” (Teo 7). While Ying-Hua is obligated to act with righteousness in service of this cause, her mission gets muddled by non-Chinese political actors in the form of Leighton (a representative of the British Empire spying in 1883 Turkestan).[14] The deserts of Turkestan—a fantastic enough setting that allows romance readers, unused to the locale and history (and perhaps unacquainted with contemporary Xinjiang politics), to suspend disbelief—function effectively as *jianghu*, while Ying-Hua in a male persona first encounters Leighton in a tavern and then grudgingly allows him to accompany her on her journey.[15] But their national differences mean that the couple’s continued acquaintance in *jianghu* goes from love to heartbreak. In effect, Thomas achieves the complication of Ying-Hua’s affair with Leighton by using cultural as well as political factors that put multiple national loyalties at cross-purposes.

For Thomas to centralize the issue of nationality—making it the impetus for the point of ritual death in the story—is understandable. Ken-Fang Lee argues that the wuxia genre, especially its wandering knight, is key for the Chinese diaspora to imagine a China they cannot access because they or their parents emigrated from the mainland to Taiwan—after the Communist revolution—or elsewhere. As he puts it, “[T]his wandering spirit can be seen a [sic] specter of the modern Chinese diaspora. Those Chinese émigrés leave native homeland and inhabit another world (Ng 1999: 601–602), but still feel affiliated with Chinese culture” (286). This tension is dramatized as Ying-Hua’s national self being divided, with the Chinese half warring with the Anglo one, the latter being projected onto Leighton, the British Empire’s representative. Moreover, she must deal with fractures and disagreements among her Chinese compatriots over national vision and the strategies to build a stronger China, a struggle in which she employs tactics not authorized by the existing Chinese government (a wuxia trait). The theme of conflicting national identities crops up in romance regularly as well, women’s citizenship and political identity having always been contingent and precarious and therefore of concern to the woman-centric genre. As Tammy M. Proctor notes in her study of women’s lives in Britain in World War I, women who married men from other nations or had family in other countries became suspect during the war and their allegiance was questioned. *MBE*’s take on this niggling problem as refracted through wuxia conventions permits the romance reader another route to imagining its resolution. In eventually reuniting Ying-Hua with Leighton in England and having her return to China and succeed in her mission to regain a lost piece of Chinese religious history, the novel proposes a dialectically chosen identity for the biracial, alienated heroine.

The last trait that shows the stamp of wuxia in the novel is the narrative drive, which is based on the concept of *bao*. Karl Kao observes that xia tales use two kinds of reciprocity, termed *bao* and *baoying*; the former suggests repayment for good or bad deeds (while the latter is a kind of divine reflexive action). Ying-Hua’s actions stem from *bao*, while also reflecting two related elements that Rong Cai lists as wuxia features: “loyalty to one’s master and friends” and “chivalric justice” (445).

Ying-Hua’s loyalty to her foster father and her personal vendetta drive the plot, with the former leading to a larger social quest involving her community, and the latter leading to the private pursuit of justice against an evildoer. Ying-Hua feels like she owes Da-Ren her loyalty for having supported her even after her mother’s death, and this propels her spying in Turkestan and her dangerous mission to Britain and finally to Ning-Hsia province in north-west China. *Bao*, grateful recompense, is thus the key motive for her actions in this sphere. While there are several examples of a similar sense of obligation felt by romance heroines in

many mass market romances, the wuxia tradition casts this first obligation in her life as the most important one, placing family and filial piety above the romance in the wider arc of the duology. Thus, an element of Ying-Hua's Confucian Chineseness is prioritized over the affective individualism that marks romance fiction and is foundational to the post-Enlightenment Anglo-European self.

Personal vengeance is the driving force of Ying-Hua's actions toward Lin after he murders her baby, and she kills him at the end. This motive and its fulfilment at the heroine's hands is less common in romance (especially non-paranormal historical romance) and also represents *bao* as enacted in the wuxia tradition. Moreover, Thomas infuses the romance with echoes of a conflict about righteous action outside personal interest as well. The flashbacks in *MBE* tell us about a second manifestation of *bao* that is unusual to the romance tradition: Ying-Hua's poisoning of Leighton in 1883.[16] Her action is brought on by her sense of justice when she believes he toyed with her while he was following his own national agenda that seemingly ran counter to hers. It is an error stemming from an extreme application of wuxia principles: punishing someone who not only betrays the knight herself but also appears to threaten a larger just cause—in her case, her father's vision of a strong China. She comes to regret her action and believes that her childless state is a form of punishment for her unjust act. She wanders for eight years, devoting herself to her father's goals while believing herself the murderess of her baby's father. *MBE* thus allows three kinds of narrative paths or agency for Ying-Hua: acting per grateful *bao* in a plot about filial piety, expressing vengeful *bao* in confrontations with her old nemesis, and a mix of both kinds toward her lover. Having done Leighton harm, when she meets him years later, she attempts to practice beneficent *bao*: lessening the pain of his disability by manipulating his *qi*, protecting his fiancée, and even withholding from him the crushing revelation of their child's short life and murder. This mix of two kinds of *bao* toward the same man is an innovation that combines the two parent genres that the novel descends from, with Thomas's deft weaving of romance and wuxia techniques making for a richer novel.

Conclusion

Thomas's use of wuxia makes *MBE* an innovative transcultural addition to romance fiction, marrying as it does an integrally Chinese popular genre (though influenced by Hollywood in its cinematic form) and the structures of the internationally dominant mass-market Anglo-American historical romance. With its unusual heroine and setting, neither of which is fully Western, Thomas's duology broadens the possibilities of cultural representation in romance fiction to foreground not just women of previously elided races and ethnicities, but also other genres with their own cultural and literary traditions, possessed of their specific limitations and strengths. Late Qing China and the politics of imperial Europe shape Bai Ying-Hua into a multi-faceted protagonist; she is neither the subservient Oriental figure that is still the dominant stereotype of Asian women, nor the frivolous or genteel Anglo-European associated with the Victorian Angel in the house, nor the nonconformist or bluestocking more usually found in historical romance. As a *nuxia*, she brings the authority of another genre from a different culture to the romance heroine and a capacity to expand the romance form's narrative boundaries. In writing a wuxia romance, Thomas thus writes both eastward, toward the Chinese genre, as writers in the Chinese

diaspora have done since the 1930s, and westward to romance, expanding its narrative landscape and the possibilities for national identity and heroic action by the heroine.

Her skillful blending of wuxia traditions and that of Victorian romance deepens the diversity of romance fiction far beyond the token inclusion of racial minorities. This distinction is to clarify that the novel does not fall into “benevolent multiculturalism,” that is, the tendency to valorize plurality without taking issues of structural inequality within and outside a marginalized group into consideration (May 200). “Benevolent multiculturalism” is rightly criticized as it “need not change the identity of the dominant culture in such a way that there can be genuine negotiation with “minorities” about matters social or symbolic or economic” (Kalantzis & Cope 274). Instead, Thomas’s work, which has been published within mainstream romance, invigorates the genre structurally (in terms of narrative drive and tropes) and thematically (such as the complex emotional and physical struggle that women experience from being marginalized for one’s national or ethnic identity). In this, it exhibits R. Mohan’s understanding of a more critical conception of multiculturalism, which “takes as its starting point a notion of culture as a terrain of conflict and struggle over representation—conflict for which resolution may not be immediate and struggle that may not cease until there is a change in the social conditions that provoke it” (May 201).

Ying-Hua gets a happy ending in both romance and wuxia terms but without glossing over the real heartbreak and long struggles around bicultural and biracial identity in a world that continues to be marked by the intersecting legacies of colonialism, racism, and sexism. As noted earlier, the novel confronts the reality of gender prescriptions in different cultures. Moreover, Ying-Hua’s biracial birth and facades provide a reminder not just of colonial histories but also of the continuing political and cultural impact that the British Empire and the Global North have on populations across the globe, especially women consumers of Anglospheric media (from all classes).

MBE also confronts the truth of the Othering of the self for the woman from the Global South living in the Global North by foregrounding Ying-Hua’s status as an outsider in the British Isles. When innocently asked by Leighton’s brother why an Englishwoman like her waited so many years to come to England from the Far East, she speaks tellingly of the very alienation that Ahmed conceptualizes: “Sometimes, I, too, wonder why I didn’t venture out of China sooner—I’d always wished to see England, and in China I will always remain a foreigner. But the familiar does have a powerful hold. And part of me was afraid that perhaps in England, too, I would always be a foreigner” (Thomas, *MBE* 14). She is not wrong to fear that she would be an alien there. Her physical traits, as listed earlier, mean she can evade European racist discourse, but she occupies a precarious state as a mixed-race person passing as fully white and upper class in England. Her Othering in China, for racial and gender reasons, is done by her intimates, while in the British Isles, the care that she and Leighton take to not reveal her Chinese and *nuxia* identity highlights colonial structural inequality and throw Britain’s class hierarchies and racialized political machinations into stark relief.

It is an inescapable fact at the end of *MBE* that Ying-Hua’s true self, Anglo and Chinese, may never be fully expressed outside of her marriage if she and Leighton are in England or China. But the novel does not sacrifice one for the other—she was and continues to be a *nuxia* with a Chinese mother, a British father, and a Chinese foster father. She may have to continue to wear many faces, masking all but one at any given time, yet at least with the hero she can be all of them, especially if they choose to live outside of *jia guo* (in the far reaches of China and north India). Moreover, the wuxia-infused novel’s very existence has modified the

genre's components in favor of transculturalism, "a process the elements of which are altered and from which a new, composite and complex reality emerges; a reality that is no mechanical mixture of characters, nor mosaic, but instead a new, original and independent phenomenon" (Onghena 183). In the traits Thomas introduces to the genre, particularly from wuxia, she moves romance fiction closer to productive transculturalism.

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[1] See Bennett-Kapusniak and McCleer.

[2] Today, Xinjiang is the site of sporadic violence involving the Uighur minority and violent repression by the government. The dissidence goes back centuries, with the *World Terrorism Encyclopedia* listing Islamic holy war as a reason for pre-twentieth century conflict (Ciment), while Larsen notes that Xinjiang was once Turkestan, and was colonized and subdued into province status by the Qing Empire in the eighteenth and nineteenth century (199, 499-504). Rogers says the current clashes are inspired by the events of Tiananmen Square, the local population's contact with madrasas in Pakistan, and the increased Han presence in Xinjiang, whose influx in the region has been the result of large mining and industrial projects by Beijing (199, 413-31). Yeoh believes the state's extreme response is leading to more "reethnicization and polarization among ethnic minorities or even ethnogenesis," i.e., inadvertently constructing a sense of Uighur (and other) minority identity in opposition to a Han Chinese one (228-29). Thomas's choice of setting thus evokes the layers of ethnic identity and history that get cloaked by a nation-state label and how state power is always hegemonic and contested.

[3] As Dados and Connell note, the use of the term "Global South" (and by extension, Global North) instead of "Third World" or "Periphery" highlights "geopolitical relations of power" rather than development or cultural difference (12). The "Global South" covers parts of Asia, Africa, Oceania and Latin America. The term was brought into use when economically and politically marginalized countries saw their interests as being in conflict with both First and Second World industrial countries. It became even more common in academic circles as the Cold War ended and there was growing resistance to the economic might of the "old imperial centers" (13). Dados and Connell note that the term "references an entire history of colonialism, neo-imperialism, and differential economic and social change through which large inequalities in living standards, life expectancy and access to resources are maintained" (13).

[4] Numerous studies have examined this phenomenon, often in terms of the effect of the hegemonic status of Anglo beauty standards on Hispanic, African, African American, and Asian women and of the spread of Western values in general. In her dissertation on the influence of global media on South Korean women, Jong Mi Kim provides numerous examples of how women can potentially feel themselves to be Other and perhaps inferior to Western women (128, 135, 138).

[5] Also see Joan Judge's review of how Chinese women who became radicalized in the early twentieth century looked for models in the West, and often turned away from their own compatriots as "abhorrent" (798-99).

[6] Thomas has mentioned this in many interviews (such as “Guest Author Day: Learning English the Passionate Way by Sherry Thomas”).

[7] Lin and she are both outsiders in Chinese society because of their biracial status. While this could have been grounds for solidarity, their training by different masters/factions pits them against each other, a common trope in the wuxia genre. In the novel, his status as her nemesis could also be read as an allegory for an internal struggle about “Eurasianness” experienced by biracial Chinese. As Vicky Lee notes, biracial Chinese inhabited a fluctuating social position in port cities like Shanghai versus foreign settlements in places like Chengdu in the late nineteenth century, some enjoying privileges when the British Empire was powerful. But in other cases, biracial persons found themselves ostracized and/or in danger when anti-foreign sentiment was high and forced to change their names and/or choose one ethnicity at the cost of the other (23-24).

[8] The Hua Mulan legend is an allusion, but there is no explicit mention of Mulan as an ideal Ying Hua aspires to during her own upbringing. Her martial qualities, and the Chinese genre and heroines that inspire them, have more immediate historical sources.

[9] Is the novel alluding to the fact that the current Han majority in China did not always have power and should perhaps not be so heavy-handed in exercising it in Xinjiang and Mongolia? More likely, it is a reminder of China’s ethnic diversity (as opposed to the rhetoric of Han purity) and its long history of power changing hands from one group to another.

[10] The novel itself tells us that many ethnic groups, with vast physical variations, populate Chinese territory.

[11] Ying-Hua’s concealing of her mixed ethnicity or her relationship with Leighton was not technically illegal under Victorian British law. But as Roxann Wheeler notes in her study of the representations of racial mixing in the English mid-eighteenth century novel, social acceptance of interracial sex (between an English and a non-slave non-English person, termed “amalgamation”) and any resulting children declined in the nineteenth century. Public opinion became more racist and there was a reactionary opposition to “miscegenation” (particularly when it came to relationships between white Britons and Africans), even though it was not illegal in Britain and the Marriage Act of 1753 forbade marriages between people mainly on the basis of *religious* difference (143, 145). Wheeler also finds that marriages between British working-class men or army officers and Asian women in late eighteenth century British India were viewed positively and “Eurasian” male children had more privileges than native males, but this situation changed in the nineteenth century (166). In late nineteenth-century China, argues Emma Jinhua Teng, mixed-blood (*hunxue*) was lauded as a desirable state in the writing of many late-Qing eugenics philosophers, who saw white and yellow as superior (and proximal) races and the creation of a hybrid Eurasian race as the way for China to get to the top of a racial hierarchy.

[12] I can only think of one other example of this in contemporary romance—Alyssa Locke in Suzanne Brockman’s *Troubleshooters* series’ short story “Waiting”.

[13] Though it borrowed from Hollywood techniques and was always already transnational as well.

[14] In placing her wuxia story in this time and place, Thomas is hinting at the somewhat apocryphal idea of the Great Game, allegedly an espionage struggle between the British and Russia over Central Asian land and power in the nineteenth century.

[15] Teo identifies taverns as the entry into the *jianghu* world, but even readers unfamiliar with wuxia pick up on the cues that the landscape provides (of the suspension of expected social norms that would otherwise fetter a purely realist or historically grounded narrative) (118).

[16] Loretta Chase's novel *Lord of Scoundrels* is a famous and aberrant example of a heroine doing a deliberate physical injury to a hero.

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