

# Reimagining Heroes in Selected Asian American Literature Through the Lens of Wuxing

Zhongjie Li

Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi, Malaysia

Ravichandran Vengadasamy

Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi, Malaysia

Shanthini Pillai

Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi, Malaysia

**Abstract**—This study applies Chinese Wuxing theory to analyze heroes in Asian American literature, focusing on works by Maxine Hong Kingston, Chang-Rae Lee, and Viet Thanh Nguyen. It examines how the five elements—Wood, Fire, Earth, Metal, and Water—are manifested in character traits and interactions. The research investigates how protagonists embody and balance these elements when facing challenges and conflicts. The study explores how these qualities contribute to their narrative arcs by identifying predominant elemental traits in each character. This approach provides insights into how contemporary Asian American literature engages with and subverts traditional Orientalist discourses. The findings contribute to discussions on cultural hybridity, identity formation, and the deconstruction of stereotypes in literary representation while demonstrating the potential for cross-cultural analytical approaches in literary studies.

**Index Terms**—reimagining heroes, subverting stereotypes, cultural hybridity, Wuxing theory, Asian American literature

## I. INTRODUCTION

With globalization and social progress, American society has made significant strides in understanding and embracing different races and cultures. Nevertheless, long-standing stereotypes like the notions of “yellow peril” (Tchen & Yates, 2014) and “model minority” (Keith, 2013) continue to linger and negatively impact Asian Americans, which refers to individuals residing in the United States who trace their ancestry to Asia, including the Far East, Southeast Asia, the Indian subcontinent, and Pacific Islands (Lee et al., 2021). The “yellow peril” is a Western concept about the fear and anxiety against Asian people and their influence. At the same time, the “model minority” describes the minority group in American society perceived as more successful than the majority. Asian American literature encompasses works by writers of diverse Asian backgrounds, including Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, Korean, and Southeast Asian origins, focusing on their experiences and identities in the United State (Kim, 1984). It has long been a testament to the communities’ strength and resistance in response to trials and tribulations. From obscurity to prominence, this genre has become one of the leading voices in American fiction, a tradition richly informed by historical occurrences and migration patterns alongside cultural movements.

Those with a strong sense of self are more prone to embracing proactive coping strategies (Yoo & Lee, 2005) and are more likely to show a strong tendency towards outwardly manifested issues (Lee et al., 2015). In other words, a strong identity can assist Asian Americans when facing discrimination and award them with the ability to adapt successfully within their society. The concept of identity is complex, incorporating individual characteristics and societal influences (Vignoles, 2018). According to Layder (2004), individuals' distinct attributes, convictions, principles, and life events form their personal identity, setting them apart from others. This idea includes how we see ourselves and where we fit in the world. Shaped by internal factors like thoughts, feelings, and memories, as well as external ones such as social interaction, cultural norms, and living experiences, it is not a static thing but changes over the years and never settles. Social identity develops from association with family, friends, and various groups such as workplaces or clubs. This part of identity includes dimensions such as origin, ethnicity, occupational role, and other collective memberships, such as gender roles or whether the person feels a sense of belonging to larger social systems. Personal and social identities are mutually linked with each other. In Asian American literature, identity frequently intersects with race, culture, and gender.

This study believes that one reason Asian American individuals are still confronted with discrimination and prejudice in contemporary society is the lack of a robust and cohesive identity, particularly in the form of visible and influential heroes. Asian American literature has emerged as a rich field with such heroes, illuminating the multifaceted experiences of individuals navigating the complexities of identity. These heroes provide an excellent opportunity to examine the influence of heroes on Asian American individual life.

Academic research has been frequently conducted on identity in Asian American literature, mainly through the lens of food, gender, politics, interracial intimacy, etc. For example, Ho (2013) and Xu (2007) investigated the constitution of what it means to be Asian, mainly through the lens of eating and consumption practices. Lee (1999) explores the link between gender and vulnerability, rooting feminine identity in corporeal frailty, which overlaps with racialized and class-based vulnerabilities. According to Nindyasmara (2015), Chinese American identity is constructed through the reenactment of ethnic roots and adaptation to mainstream American cultural values, and compared with Native Americans, Chinese Americans are more inclined to blend into mainstream American culture.

Seldom research has been conducted through the lens of heroes, who challenge existing stereotypes and offer alternative narratives that disrupt and subvert the dominant discourses concerning Asian American identity. In contrast to essentialized and simplified portrayals of Asian Americans, heroes in Asian American literature emphasize resilience, agency, and the multifaceted nature of the ethnic group. This study aims to fill this gap by exploring identity through heroes constructed in Asian American literature. After examination of the characteristics of heroes in Asian American literature, we can get a deeper understanding of how these characters influence individual lives.

For literary work selection, texts should represent the diverse range of contemporary Asian American literature, with protagonists embodying the defined characteristics justified in the literature review: Ordinary individuals who rise above challenges, overcome adversity, and inspire others through their actions and personalities while also holding certain degree of importance and influence within a community or society. *The Woman Warrior* (1989) by Maxine Hong Kingston weaves together tales of the narrator's family history, Chinese myths, and her own coming-of-age experiences, examining themes of gender roles, cultural expectations, and the power of storytelling. *Native Speaker* (1995) by Chang-Rae Lee follows Henry Parker's professional life and troubled marriage, exploring themes of assimilation, belonging, and the complexities of language and communication in immigrant experiences. *The Sympathizer* (2015) by Viet Thanh Nguyen is a gripping tale of a half-French, half-Vietnamese communist double agent who escapes to America after the Fall of Saigon. It explores themes of identity, loyalty, and the Vietnam War's aftermath, offering a unique perspective on the conflict and its impact on Vietnamese refugees in the United States. The 20-year time span of the corpus provides diverse historical contexts, a broader scope of analysis, and a chronological perspective on hero archetypes, reflecting the evolving nature of Asian American literature.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The focus on the hero has become an important research topic. This section reviews and critiques the sub-literature on heroes, assessing past studies on identity in Asian American literature and *Native Speaker*, *The Woman Warrior*, and *The Sympathizer*, respectively. In this review, the author will compare and evaluate different studies to provide a comprehensive perspective on hero research and position this research within it.

### A. *The Concept of Hero*

The concept of heroes has been studied in academia for many years. In lectures entitled *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* (1993), Thomas Carlyle expands this by pointing out iconic figures with a critical position across various eras. Carlyle says heroes have inborn characteristics such as steadfast resolution, undying courage, and a sense of mission. Nonetheless, other researchers do not always endorse this perspective; Tourret (2011) suggests that a hero inspires admiration for his or her deeds and virtues. Kinsella et al. (2015) argue that the most defining characteristics of heroic behavior include integrity, honesty, bravery, altruism, self-sacrifice, and firm conviction. These studies focus on different aspects, but we can see that a hero is usually defined in two dimensions, individually or socially; a hero either rises above challenges, overcomes adversity, and inspires others through their actions and personalities or holds significant importance and influence within a community or society, or both. Based on the points above, the hero in this essay is defined socially and individually, which means an ordinary individual who rises above challenges, overcomes adversity and inspires others through their actions and personalities while also holding a certain degree of influence within a community or society.

### B. *Past Studies on Identity in Asian American Literature*

There has long been academic interest in identity in Asian American literature, with a greater emphasis on some of these areas. The first bracket is gender. Lee (1999) explores the relationship between gender, vulnerability, subordination, and resistance, emphasizing the association of femininity with bodily vulnerability and the intersection of gendered vulnerability with racial and class vulnerabilities. Bhattacharya (2019) questions the notion that Asian American identity is predominantly male, demonstrating how writers express Asian American women's subjectivity by voicing their desire for liberation from the oppression of both American and Chinese/Indian patriarchy. Political factors associated with the main characters are also extensively examined. Yi and Museus (2015) argue that the model minority image is a stereotype, arguing it is an inaccurate representation that distorts reality regarding Asian American experiences by highlighting community-wide success over challenges encountered with other communities of color or minimizing significant disparities among these groups. The white, college-educated heterosexual professional has increasingly become the archetypal figure of hegemonic masculinity, which forms both the desired and achievable subject position for Japanese (Tsuda, 2020). Nindyasmara (2016) proposes that Chinese American identity is grounded

in reconnecting with ethnic heritage and adapting to mainstream American cultural values. In contrast to Native Americans, Chinese Americans are more likely to integrate into mainstream American culture.

Previous research explores identity in Asian American literature through various lenses and informs the study of individual experiences and broadly how “Asian Americanness” is represented. Since few of these studies have been done through the lens of hero, and every individual needs a figure against whom to measure himself or herself when confronting life’s struggles and foes, hence there is an exigency that can be sated only by undertaking a systematic inquiry into the modern heroes present in Asian American literature.

### C. Past Studies on the Corpus

Regarding research on *The Woman Warrior* by Maxine Hong Kingston, scholars have focused on various aspects. Some on gender problems. For example, Ahokas (1996) investigates the connection between gender oppression and racism. He (2019) views *The Woman Warrior* as a shared memory of trauma that happened to Chinese-American women who were in the diaspora. The constructions of identity are highlighted in others. For example, Gupta (2021) examines identity-formation processes through an inquiry into the constitution and growth of identity, especially when it comes to how individuals struggle with finding cohesion around who they are.

Research on *Native Speaker* by Chang-rae Lee can be categorized into three types: Some focus on the political factors; for example, Huang (2006), concerning John Kwang, analyzed the politics of consent, while Vermeulen (2010) investigates the politics of melancholia. Other studies fall under the umbrella of sociology. Rashid (2021) considers the English language used among Korean Americans and Native Americans as it sows tension. Aprilia et al. (2019) investigate the relationship between Henry Park and his white wife. The rest focus on constructions of identity. Hurst (2011) compares *Native Speaker* and *The Hundred Secret Senses* by Amy Tan (1995), focusing on speech/silence as it relates to Asian American Identity. Bhandari (2022) investigates the development of multiple and hybrid identities in Henry Park.

*The Sympathizer* by Viet Thanh Nguyen has attracted attention from many scholars despite being published more recently. Relevant research centers on the Vietnam War, narratives, and politics. Liu (2019) calls for deploying tactical interventions and provocative engagements that confront hegemonic discourses framed by institutions to legitimate war. Bosman (2019) claims that Nguyen deploys ghosts in *The Sympathizer* to illustrate how the narrator is capable of heinous violence, thereby portraying him as a fully autonomous individual. Bosman (2021) further examines how the novel challenges racial stereotyping, gendered identities, and familiar structures and portrays migrant experiences as diverse and heterogeneous.

## III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### A. Wuxing Theory

Wuxing originates from *I Ching (Yi Jing)*, a comprehensive philosophical work exploring balance, harmony, and transformation in the natural world and human life. The first English translation of *I Ching* was made by James Legge and published in 1882. Subsequently, European scholars and sinologists conducted more translations and studies of the *I Ching*, contributing to its growing popularity and influence in Western intellectual and philosophical circles. Wuxing is a way of understanding the five essential elements or energies (Wood, Fire, Earth, Metal, and Water) and their cyclical interactions and transformations. Wood fuels Fire; Fire goes to Earth(ashes); Earth creates Metal (minerals); Metal condenses Water, Water irrigates Wood; Wood fixates Earth (by roots); Earth blocks Water (by dams); Water extinguishes Fire, Fire melts Metal, Metal separates Wood (Wilhelm et al., 2001). The five elements have their attributes and correlates connected to the change processes in nature and human life.

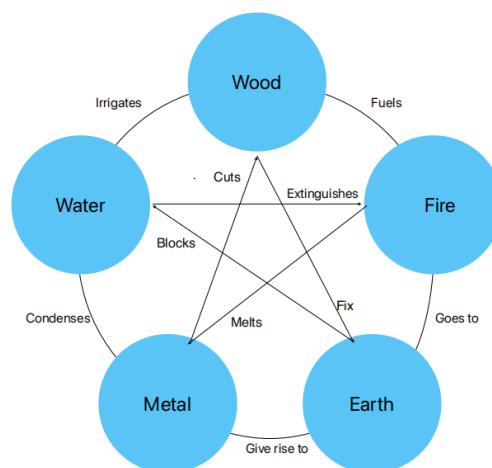


Figure 1. The Interaction of Five Elements in Wuxing

According to Wilhelm et al. (2001) and Ni (1995), every element stands for some traits that assist in the cohesion and balance of one’s inner being. Wood is associated with flexibility, adaptability, and resilience due to its nature of growth and ability to bend without breaking. Fire is linked to joy, warmth, and passion because of its energetic, vibrant, and transformative nature. Earth represents nurturing, caring, stability, and groundedness, reflecting its role as nature’s foundation and source of nourishment. Metal embodies orderliness, righteousness, strong ethics, and self-discipline, mirroring its structure, refinement, and durability properties. Water symbolizes wisdom, calmness, and sound perception, reflecting its fluid nature, depth, and ability to take the shape of its container while maintaining its essence. Wood’s balanced adaptability allows for the nurturing and complete expression of Fire’s passionate, joyful nature. Balancing Fire energy is warm, enthusiastic, and supportive, which helps establish a nurturing, rooted Earth personality. A robust and well-grounded earth attitude is necessary to grow the sword-like Metal quality of principles and self-discipline. Ethical standards and an orderly lifestyle allow insightful clarity in Water and space to subtle, soothing wisdom. The deep self-knowledge and quiet observation of well Water inform Wood’s psychologically solid flexibility and resilience traits.

In a controlling way, an excessive Wood personality can control and temper overthinking or worry proclivity of the Earth element. Earth can then serve as an anchor against Water’s favor for fear, isolationism, and emotional suppression. Of course, the reflective wisdom and chillness of balanced Water can harness and calm down the aggressive, wildfire energy that causes one to be psychologically ill. Fire’s balanced, productive passion can calm and soften rigidities in Metal with quick-witted, joyous strength and heat. The self-disciplined architecture and ethics of the Metal personality can harness and contain within boundaries these Wood tendencies towards unbridled adaptability and improvisation. As a result, each type has its opposite function; thus, when balanced, one will lead into the other and still serve as a check to prevent imbalances or produce excesses within their corresponding dominant expression. This dynamic interplay enables a healthy, integrated expression of the elemental energies in an individual's psychology and behavior over time.

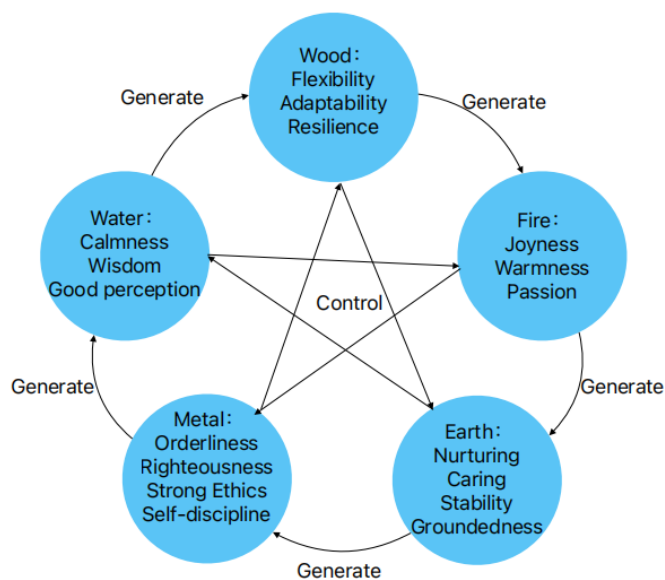


Figure 2. The Interaction of the Five Kinds of Qualities in Wuxing Framework

**B. Orientalism**

Edward Said’s influential work on Orientalism provides a valuable theoretical framework for analyzing the characteristics of hero archetypes in Asian American literature. Orientalists turn the Orient into something exotic by portraying Eastern figures as “others” and claim an impassable gap between East and West (Said, 1977, p. 23). However, in Asian American literature, heroes are portrayed by Asian American authors who occupy a space that is neither an “Oriental” East nor an Occidental West and thereby undo this binary construction of the “Self” as opposed to the exogenous “Other.” Said’s Orientalism helps to unpack the complexities of heroes in Asian American literature by emphasizing the power dynamics surrounding representations of the Orient. Heroes like those seen in Asian American literature draw this parallel, harmonizing tradition with the expectation to fit seamlessly into white society and dividing their heritage from a distinct Americanness. Deconstructed and, to a certain degree, subverted, the heroes in these new Asian American novels accurately represent how stereotypes affect real lives.

**IV. METHODOLOGY**

The literary texts selected represent the Asian American protagonists proposed to meet this definition: ordinary individuals who rise above challenges, overcome adversity, and inspire others through their actions and personalities

while holding a specific degree of importance and influence within a community or society. The selected works come from various periods, cultural backgrounds, and narrative styles, giving us a diverse look at the Asian American experience. All three works are considered Asian American literature; they are authored by descendants from different Asian countries and represent diverse experiences and perspectives. *The Sympathizer* is created by Vietnamese decedent Viet Thanh Nguyen, *Native Speaker* by Korean decedent Chang-Rae Lee, and *The Woman Warrior* by Chinese decedent Maxine Hong Kingston. While *The Woman Warrior* is based on memoir and folklore, interested in identity from a Chinese American perspective, *Native Speaker* approaches political espionage through life as a Korean American; *the Sympathizer* complicates questions of war mixed with cultural duality for Vietnamese America. Every novel contains characters with conflicting identities, cultural conflicts, and personal difficulties that position them well for analysis within the Wuxing system. Additionally, these works are well-esteemed as literary achievements and landmarks in Asian American literature. These differences in experiences and backgrounds of the main characters enable a detailed exploration of how varying Asian-American identities are represented, especially when confronted with Orientalist discourses.

## V. FINDING AND DISCUSSION

The analysis aims to examine the characteristics of heroes in the selected Asian American literature based on Wuxing theory. Specifically, it detects the challenges and conflicts heroes face, qualities exhibited based on Wuxing elements, and elements leading to success or failure. Then, it compares the heroism displayed by each of these heroes, looking at what they have in common, where they differ, and how this contributes to or breaks down Orientalist discourses.

### A. Findings

#### (a). *The Woman Warrior*

The narrator of *The Woman Warrior* suffers from issues and crises regarding cultural identification and self-expression. This inner battle projects into the difficulties she faces communicating/finding her authentic voice in both cultures. The novel follows the narrator as she maneuvers her way through intricate family politics and societal rules in which one is not even certain of one's place. Enter the legendary woman warrior Fa Mulan, and she questions cultural roles and gender norms. The main challenge is that she must demonstrate her skill as a warrior, striking at the traditional place of women. She would have to find an equilibrium between existing duties from her family and possible future career greatness. She was encountering physical and emotional demands as she fought against the odds to gain acceptance and acknowledgment in a world that routinely underappreciated her talents. The narrator's mother, Brave Orchid, struggles with the issues of immigration and acculturation. She is a well-educated and intelligent woman. However, as an immigrant from China, her skills and experience command little respect in the US. On the other hand, she faces the challenge of keeping her fundamental Chinese heritage and values while living in an alien culture. Nevertheless, she has to square the idea of shoving her kids into a world very different from the one she used to know, where half the challenge is reconciling miscommunications and strife within her family.

Maxine Hong Kingston features a range of characters whose attributes can be easily taken apart by the tenants of Wuxing theory. The narrator embodies a powerful blend of Wood and Water with an incredibly balanced use between navigating Chinese and American contexts (Wood) and deep narrative introspection through cultural stories/myths interpretation (Water). Her determination to navigate cultural friction and her knack for re-imagining ancient stories illuminate the Wood in her, revealing Water concerning insightfulness. The Fa Mulan character is mainly based on Metal and Fire elements with a few touches of Wood. Her warrior code of honor and dedication to her training suggest vital Metal elements, whilst the love she bears for those close to her family, along with enduring Fire traits.

On the other hand, Mulan demonstrates Wood in her ability to fit into a dominating warrior culture of men and Water with her practical planning. Brave Orchid, the narrator's mother, clearly embodies the qualities of Earth and Metal. Her nurturing and protective qualities towards her family and her attempts to bridge a connection between her kids and their Chinese side demonstrate Earth. The traditional values and orderly life track her adherence to Metal. Through her aggressive storytelling and her firm will survive in America, Brave Orchid embodies Fire and Water from accumulating experiences throughout life.

The success or failure of characters in *The Woman Warrior* can be analyzed through the generative and controlling cycles of Wuxing elements, revealing character relationships and plot outcomes at a deeper level. The cycle of generating is exemplified in the narrator's journey. The narrator's Wood-like nature creates a Fire-like desire to explore her identity. Her passion indirectly forms the womb for her earth-like stability, arising from their culture. This confirmed understanding generates Metal's determination to find the truth about her bicultural condition as Water. This is a cycle that contributes to her overall success with identity challenges. Also crucial is the controlling cycle. The Metal quality of the narrator controls her Wood quality as she has problems completely giving up on assimilating while also providing the flexibility that preserves cultural heritage. Her Earth-type desire for finding sense and belonging keeps her Water-type reflection and observation under control so that she does not become submerged in the fluid swirl of this cultural identity but roots herself in a land-based connection with material beings. As Brave Orchid's character shows, success and failure can be caused by imbalances in the Wuxing cycle. Her strong Earth qualities of groundedness and tenderness give her a restraint that reflects Metal discipline, which she has significantly applied as a medical

professional in China. So, in turn, it creates wisdom that helps her negotiate with entities present throughout her life in America. However, her Water quality sometimes cannot hold down her Fire-like fervor, clashing with the children more Americanized than she is. Her achievements in keeping Chinese culture alive within her family were counterbalanced by a sense of lostness, exemplifying the requirement for all to be in harmony.

The growth and prowess that Fa Mulan achieved as a legendary warrior happens when the Wuxing cycle is in perfect balance. The iron-like discipline of Metal training brings a Water-like calmness to battle. This forward lean creates fluid Wood-like strategies with Fire-like passion for her cause. This village-centered commitment, in turn, nurtures Earth-like stability for her passion. Equally significant are the controlling aspects: her Fire-like passion softens her Metal-like righteousness, preventing blind adherence to rules, while her Metal-like firmness controls her Wood-like flexibility, ensuring she does not lose sight of her ultimate goals. Moon Orchid's failure to thrive in America illustrates the consequences of a stagnant Wuxing cycle. She is over-attached to Earth-based values of the past but without the depth of context of living in a less familiar circumstance. However, with a lack of Wood-like flexibility, she cannot fire up Fire-element excitement for her new life and eventually breaks down.

(b). *Native Speaker*

In Chang-Rae Lee's *Native Speaker*, Henry Park and John Kwang are confronted with situations that test their five elemental qualities outlined in the Wuxing. Henry's soul-searching nature conflicts with the profession of a spy, causing some moral quandaries for him. Adaptability is needed for Henry's struggle to reconcile his Korean roots with his American identity. Being married to Lia and having taken the job shadowing John Kwang pose specific issues about where he belongs. John Kwang faces external forces from his own public life and political aspirations. The cruel realities of politics are constantly breaking his nurturing leadership style. Although Kwang is charismatic, passionate, and gifted in all the ways that make a compelling leader, he also makes himself an easy target to attack. The same charisma and fervor that makes Kwang an engaging figure also open him to intense scrutiny and potential scandal. For Kwang, it is a great success in building a solid reputation and enhancing his community bonds as he navigates the treacherous Water of New York politics. While confronting heightened expectations as Asian Americans, they sift through the difficult decisions on duty versus authenticity. These tensions reveal the unresolved dynamic of individual ambition versus any collective responsibility, illuminating complex interplays between elements in Wuxing that mold Asian American experiences and offer new Orientalist challenges.

When we look at the elements that drive Henry Park and John Kwang in *Native Speaker* through Chinese Wuxing theory, their characteristics are among many complex interplays. Henry Park leans very much towards the qualities of Wood and Water elements. His Wood-like qualities manifest as he is incredibly flexible and adaptable. Henry is the master of becoming anyone or anything he needs to be, a trait indicative of Wood. It also extends to his personal life, where he handles the complications of being a Korean-American and married man to his white wife. Another quality that is equally important to Henry is Water. His gentle, intuitive nature correlates with the wisdom and reflection of a Water element. Henry finds his way out of every conversation, distancing himself from everyone in an aloof and often philosophical pose. As expected, his narrative voice is more careful and thoughtful, showcasing Water's attributes. As a more minor role, Henry also shows some Metal qualities. As a spy, his job is to be disciplined and work under some moral framework. This indicates the Metal personality traits of being orderly and ethical, yet these qualities can always be seen fighting against his more fluid Wood and Water nature. John Kwang, however, is primarily a fire and earth person. In his Fire avatar, he is a charismatic politician. Besides, Kwang is full of warmth, enthusiasm, and pleasure, which widely affects the people around him. The excitement he creates in those who rally behind him and the sense of optimism his presence conveys perfectly represent that Fire element: inspiration and change. The Earth qualities of Kwang complement his fiery nature — essentially grounding passion in a sense of consistency and care within the community. He shows a caring concern for his constituency and is very outwardly nurturing towards the Korean-American community, which symbolizes stability and groundedness as both of these traits are typically associated with Earth Element. His work shows the nurturing side of Earth as he tries to create a feeling of inclusion and care for his people. Interestingly, Kwang also exhibits some Metal qualities, especially in his public profile. His unwavering sense of honor and passion for the organization in political life suit Metal more. However, these are overshadowed by his more vital Fire and Earth elements. The assessment of Henry Park and John Kwang via the Wuxing perspective gives depth to their complex character charts.

Henry Park is primarily defined by Wood and Water attributes, which account for most of his success. His Wood qualities allow him to blend in and take on multiple personas, which is crucial to his professional success as a spy. He can get into whatever environment comes his way and completely change himself to be able to take on any suit. This flexibility enables him to find engagement in the complicated landscape of his Korean-American identification, providing for a life lived on both sides without struggling against one or perhaps the other. Henry's Water personality helps him gather information and observe the intricate levels of human behavior at play. His introspective nature helps him think and analyze scenarios into which he can get more understanding not only in his professional life but also in his personal stuff. However, such factors can plant the seeds of Henry's failures. Wood's over-permissiveness may sometimes appear as lacking personal substance and exuberance, causing Henry to struggle with his sense of self and authenticity. His marital problems with Lelia and his ambivalent attitude to his work support this assessment. As the Water attributes get introverted, it can lead to a sense of emotional emptiness and an inflexible refusal to connect

genuinely, which we see in Henry's dysfunctional relationships with his father and wife. Most of John Kwang's accomplishments can be traced to his Fire and Earth qualities. He became a rising political star partly because the fire element is linked with passion and charisma. The unique power of inspiring and encouraging others establishes him as an inspirational leader. He exudes love and happiness that directly appeal to people, building a community of friends who will be there for his endeavors. Kwang's Earth attribute represents stability and groundedness, qualities that balance his Fire nature, which appeals to others. His selflessness and community-driven spirit have helped him build a dedicated fanbase, including the favor of many Korean-Americans. However, the very artifices of those factors ultimately lead to his demise. Fire has a fantastic passion and intensity, but when out of balance, these energies can cause recklessness and poor judgment. Like Kwang's underhanded secret money deals and affairs ultimately end him politically. The shadow side emerges naturally when the Earth's expressions have been pushed to their extremes—most and manifest in paternalism, which results in doing questionable things to protect the community. The components behind Henry Park and John Kwang's successes and failures in *Native Speaker* are a relatively accurate reflection of Asian American life.

(c). *The Sympathizer*

In Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer*, the unnamed narrator struggles with several dilemmas and internal conflicts. Walking a fine line through a minefield of wartime morality and personal identity crisis, the character was designed to embody competing cultural, political, and ideological allegiances. For the nameless captain, the biggest concern is that he is a communist spy, breaking bread with the South Vietnam army as an undercover agent. The inner conflict from his moral ambiguity in his circumstances rules his life, and he cannot choose a single side to support during the Vietnam War. Externally, he has to keep up appearances while serving a South Vietnamese general in America, requiring him to be watchful and make ethical compromises. Always concealing his alter-ego adds another level to his already split sense of self. The stakes for these conflicts are made exponentially higher by the protagonist's life in exile. Witnessing the brutal violence and hypocrisies of the political chaos that descends, his dedication to the ideals of the revolution begins to wane. He has to confront more and more the gap that yawns between idealist revolutionary principles and the cloud of violence and power struggles. Furthermore, the fact that the protagonist is French Vietnamese enhances his sense of displacement and identity dilemma. He feels split in a way, rooting neither with the Vietnamese nor having any real connection to Americans. This liminal sense of self adds to an internal conflict, leading him to ponder whether he is coherent. The narrative unfolds as he grapples with his loyalties, moral quandaries, and racial identity. Various conflicts form the experience managing Asian American subjectivities, primarily as they exist in diaspora and political instability.

Examining the qualities of *The Sympathizer*'s protagonist through Chinese Five Phases archetypes makes it a practical exercise to trace how the complex interplay of elements defined his personality and actions throughout the novel. The protagonist initially has Water and Wood tendencies but with a significant quantity of Metal. Most visible is likely to be the Water qualities of wisdom, tranquility, and foresight. He is a spy with the power to see and understand human behavior and political Justice. His meditative temperament and philosophical reflections throughout the story illustrate how deep and adaptable the Water element can be. It is one of his attempts to constantly deconstruct what identity, revolution, and belonging culture mean to him in a conflicted way. The Wood element is equally important in the protagonist's character. His incredible ability to adapt and endure allows him to make it through as a double agent. He is adept at moving between the various cultural terrains with which he is involved — Vietnamese, American, communist, and capitalist — changing his behavior and character as needed. This Wood-like quality enables him to blend into several environments, from the South Vietnamese army to refugee communities in America. The protagonist manifests a smaller percentage of the Metal element, which is essential to his character. It shows up in his moral code and consistent struggle with ethical dilemmas. Even with his actions as a spy being morally problematic, he abides by a strict personal code of ethics and his ideological credo. This Metal character often conflicts with his more fluid Water and Wood natures, generating internal tension that drives a decent chunk of the story. Interestingly, the main character shows fewer noticeable traits of Fire and Earth. Perhaps due to the work he does and the trauma he has gone through, he often represses the warmth and joyous energy that Fire is so closely associated with. However, flashes of Fire appear in his fanatic dedication to those ideals, and during a few fleeting seconds, he experiences harmony with others. The Earth element symbolizes stability and nurturing, which is probably one of the aspects least seen in his character. His life as a double agent and split loyalties keep him from fully embodying Earth's archetypal stabilizing, nurturing aspects. His constant need for belonging and his attempts to protect his friends could also be seen as signs of a deprived necessity for Earth-like security.

This character analysis of the unnamed protagonist in *The Sympathizer* shows that his dominant Wuxing elements explain why he succeeds or fails at every step throughout the novel. Much of the protagonist's victories depend on his powerful Water and Wood affinities. The wisdom, serenity, and sensitivity ascribed to his Water are vital for his survival as a spy. These give him the weapon to navigate a treacherous political jungle, figure out what drives people, and keep face in high-stakes conditions. He remains alive and able to achieve his mission mainly because he is able to keep a cool head, even if he is being interrogated and threatened. The Wood element is almost as important in the main character's achievements due to its versatility and changeability. His chameleon veracity, from combat in the South Vietnamese army to post-war life as an American refugee, is a testament not only to his strength and resilience but also

to his sheer will to survive. It allows him to gather intelligence, continue his double life, and survive in hostile environments. However, the same elements that made him succeed also caused his downfall. This high degree of watery fluidity can lead to moral ambiguity and, in the worst cases, is perilously weak on principle. That comes across in the hero's divided loyalties and battle to reconcile his beliefs with those surrounding him. His multiple perspectives can be beneficial but often result in indecision or betrayal of those around him. Equally, the adaptability of Wood's element is essential to ensure his survival, but it also gives rise to an experience of being ungrounded and having no fixed identity. Although the protagonist should adapt to his environment, he comes home as a ghost because such shifting leads him to lose portions of his identity and grapple with otherness. While less dominant, Metal is heavily involved in the protagonist with both his triumphs and disasters. A high standard of ethics and personal discipline helps him to avoid detection long enough to complete the undertaking despite this adversity. However, we also see the cost of this rigidity associated with Metal, which can come across as an inflexible view of himself, resulting in conflicts with friends and allies. The underdevelopment of Fire and Earth elements in the protagonist is another reason for his failures. Without Fire's joy and passion, it may be harder for him to form connections or find fulfillment beyond his mission. This emotional aloofness, efficacious as it is for work, can only bring about personal unhappiness and ruinous ways with the people he cares for. Without Earth attributes, the protagonist finds himself in a world without loyalty or real grounding. This goes some way towards explaining his perpetual identity crisis and the related issue of feeling unsettled in any one place or community.

### B. Discussions

This theoretical framework of analyzing hero archetypes in Asian American Literature through Chinese Wuxing can potentially dismantle Orientalist paradigms. Edward Said introduced the concept of Orientalism for the oriental and exoticistic perceptions Western cultures imposed on Asia (Said, 1977). Using the five elements to analyze hero characters allows for dismantling this shallow representation. It provides an opportunity to present more profound, authentic depictions of life as an Asian American. Traditionally, Orientalism has seen Asian representation as either inscrutably mysterious or bound to their discipline with no place for emotion. However, the Wuxing model is broad enough to accommodate some aspects of all five elements, such as a hero showing Wood-like qualities, adaptability, and resilience that can defy the stereotype of a rigid or tradition-bound Asian character. This depiction demonstrates that we can evolve and develop while dispelling stereotypes of Asian cultures as unchanging or obstinate. It represents growth and change that defies popular depictions of Asian cultures as stagnant or reluctant to evolve. Likewise, another character representing Fire's passion and joy is a twist on the usual stoic, repressed Asian type found in Western media. The Earth, maternal, and grounding elements in this synthesis challenge the stereotype of Asian family members.

Seeing characters aligned with Earth, instead of the oppressive "tiger parent" or submissive mother figure, provides a more rounded view of nurturing and moves in to illustrate some diversity in Asian relationships. The metal ethos of right and wrong gives Asian American heroes a way out beyond "model minority" or exotic villainy as many of these characters are defined ultimately by their honor or sense of Justice. Instead of being an example of cultural essentialism, these characters convey a significant moral compass. The traits of Water can, in turn, be exploited to represent Asian roles as wise and profound without having to write them exotic or cryptic. It was a base upon which we could develop heroes of thought and contemplative action who would not be seen as impenetrable or exotic. Moreover, the interplay between these interactive elements of Wuxing provides a flexible and vibrant depiction of character progression beyond Orientalist stereotypes. As each element generates and controls the other, Asian American heroes represent complex characters capable of evolution, adaptation, and contradiction. This multiplicity contradicts the uni-dimensional depictions of Orientalist narratives. Thus, employing the five elements as a prism to understand how these heroes face adversity and deal with love and family demonstrates that Asian Americans are not a monolithic group. It accounts for the weight of cultural background but respects human autonomy and subjective experience regarding how specific acts manifest when portrayed by different people from different backgrounds. The Wuxing system of creation through balance and harmony also serves as a lens to investigate intersectional themes central to dual identity Asian American narratives. This integration of Eastern and Western influences tests the limits to our belief that cultures are irreconcilable, as represented by heroes who manage well in their pairing elemental traits.

## VI. CONCLUSION

Using the Chinese Wuxing theory to examine heroes in selected Asian American literature leads to several implications for literary analysis and understanding of cultural diversity. First, the study clearly illustrates that Asian American heroes are represented in a diverse and complex manner that does not fit simply into any ephemeral whole categories of identity. Characters are brought to life as complex admixtures of elements rather than the one-dimensional stereotypes all too often propagated by Orientalist discourse. The narrators in *The Sympathizer*, *Native Speaker*, and *The Woman Warrior* illustrate a varied mix of Water (wisdom), Epistemic Wood, and Ethical Metal, which paint a complex picture of the Asian American experience. Second, the studies also revealed the diversity of Asian American heroes. While several characters have high rates of Water and Wood elements, the way this is present on each one makes it look quite different. Its distinctiveness helps to highlight the greater complexity of Asian American identity, which is far more intricate and less reductive than it appeared in the eyes of Orientalists. The study reveals how elemental balancing

and interaction influence character growth and plot development. This approach offers a new framework to consider narration and character motivation within Asian American literature. Furthermore, the research illustrates how Asian American writers counter Orientalist stereotypes through complex character-based rhetorical tactics. More specifically, the legendary woman hero Fa Mulan in *The Woman Warrior* is a non-stereotypical Asian woman as she embodies both Fire (passion) and Metal (discipline). In the case of the works discussed here, Wuxing offers an engaging interpretive framework through which to analyze cultural hybridity negotiations. As the characters all demonstrate a mixture of binary features associated with the East and the West, it speaks to the fluid states accompanying agency in identity formation beyond reductive binarisms between Eastern and Western components. In addition, this approach reveals many alternative forms of communal reading experience in different cultural settings. Linking the Eastern and Western reading methods with a philosophical trajectory of Chinese classical thoughts and modern Asian American literature thus presents an advanced literary critical methodology that maintains cultural integrity.

In conclusion, this study offers valuable insights by employing Wuxing theory to understand the complexity and cultural hybridity projected onto Asian American heroes and its potential for subverting stereotypes. It points out that reverting to conventional Eastern philosophies, highly suitable as complements in Western literary analysis, can help provide alternative views on Asian American literature. The results shed light on heroes in Asian American literature and demonstrate how cross-cultural literary analysis may extend to broader cultures and literature spheres.

#### REFERENCES

- [1] Ahokas, P. (1996). Maxine hong kingston's the woman warrior: Constructing a female Chinese-American subjectivity\*. *NORA - Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research*, 4(1), 3-15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08038740.1996.9959685>
- [2] Aprilia, N. H., Priyatna, A., & Adji, M. (2019). Maskulinitas Laki-Laki Korea Amerika sebagai Liyan dalam Native Speaker Karya Chang-rae Lee. *Atavisme*, 22(1), 101-112.
- [3] Bhandari, N. B. (2022). The Making of Immigrant Identities in Chang-rae Lee's Native Speaker. *SCHOLARS: Journal of Arts & Humanities*, 4(2), 65-73. <https://doi.org/10.3126/sjah.v4i2.47429>
- [4] Bhattacharya, R. (2019). Negotiating the gendered ethnic self in selected fictions of Amy Tan and Bharati Mukherjee. *Neohelicon*, 46(2), 435-462. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11059-019-00499-w>
- [5] Bosman, S. J. (2019). Nguyen's ghosts in *The Sympathizer*: Collapsing binaries and signalling just memory. *Scrutiny*, 24(1), 3-12.
- [6] Bosman, S. J. (2021). *Rejection of Victimhood in Literature: By Abdulrazak Gurnah, Viet Thanh Nguyen, and Luis Alberto Urrea* (Vol. 96). Brill.
- [7] Carlyle, T. (1993). *On heroes, hero-worship, and the heroic in history* (Vol. 1). Univ of California Press.
- [8] Gupta, J. (2021). The mother–daughter relationship and the quest for identity: a study of Maxine Hong Kingston's *The woman warrior* as an ethnic female Bildungsroman. *Social Identities*, 28(3), 365-382. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13504630.2021.2016387>
- [9] He, Q. (2019). Reconstructing the Past: Reproduction of Trauma in Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 9(2), 131-136.
- [10] Ho, J. (2013). *Consumption and identity in Asian American coming-of-age novels*. Routledge.
- [11] Huang, B. (2006). Citizen Kwang: Chang-rae Lee's Native Speaker and the Politics of Consent. *Journal of Asian American Studies*, 9(3), 243-269. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jaas.2006.0026>
- [12] Hurst, M. J. (2011). Balancing Self and Other through Speech and Silence in Chang-rae Lee's Native Speaker and Amy Tan's *The Hundred Secret Senses*. In *Language, Gender, and Community in Late Twentieth-Century Fiction: American Voices and American Identities* (pp. 77-102). Springer.
- [13] Keith, K. D. (2013). *The encyclopedia of cross-cultural psychology*. Wiley-Blackwell Chichester, UK.
- [14] Kim, E. H. (1984). Asian American writers: A bibliographical review. *American Studies International*, 22(2), 41-78.
- [15] Kingston, M. H. (1989). *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*. 1976. New York: Vintage.
- [16] Kinsella, E. L., Ritchie, T. D., & Igou, E. R. (2015). Zeroing in on heroes: a prototype analysis of hero features. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 108(1), 114-127.
- [17] Layder, D. (2004). *Social and Personal Identity: Understanding Yourself*. SAGE.
- [18] Lee, C.-r. (1995). *Native speaker*. Penguin Books.
- [19] Lee, J., Mannur, A., Ho, J. A., Cheung, F., & Schlund-Vials, C. (2021). *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Asian American Literature and Culture*. Oxford Research Encyclopedias.
- [20] Lee, J. P., Lee, R. M., Hu, A. W., & Kim, O. M. (2015). Ethnic Identity as a Moderator against Discrimination for Transracially and Transnationally Adopted Korean American Adolescents. *Asian American journal of psychology*, 62, 154-163.
- [21] Lee, R. C. (1999). *The Americas of Asian American literature: gendered fictions of nation and transnation*. Princeton University Press.
- [22] Liu, Y.-y. (2019). Gesturing beyond the frames: post-apocalyptic sentiments in Viet Thanh Nguyen's *the Sympathizer*. *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 20(4), 541-551. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649373.2019.1685745>
- [23] Nguyen, V. T. (2015). *The sympathizer: A novel (Pulitzer Prize for fiction)* (Vol. 1). Grove/Atlantic, Inc.
- [24] Ni, M. (1995). *The yellow emperor's classic of medicine: a new translation of the neijing suwen with commentary*. Shambhala Publications.
- [25] Nindyasmara, K. R. (2015). *Negotiation of Identity in Diasporic Literature: A Case Study in Amy Tan's The Hundred Secret Senses and Leslie Marmon Silko's Ceremony*. Yogyakarta: Unpublished.
- [26] Nindyasmara, K. R. (2016). Negotiation of Identity in Diasporic Literature: A Case Study on Amy Tan's *The Hundred Secret Senses* and Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*. *Rubikon: Journal of Transnational American Studies*, 3(1), 57-68.
- [27] Rashid, A. (2021). Language, Cultural Identities, and Multiculturalism in Chang-Rae Lee's 'Native Speaker': A Sociological Perspective. *International Journal of English and Comparative Literary Studies*, 2(1), 1-12.

- [28] Said, E. W. (1977). Orientalism. *The Georgia Review*, 31(1), 162-206.
- [29] Tan, A. (1995). *The hundred secret senses*. Ivy books.
- [30] Tchen, J. K. W., & Yates, D. (2014). *Yellow Peril!: An Archive of Anti-Asian Fear*.
- [31] Tourret, M. (2011). What is a hero? *Inflexions*, 16(1), 95-103.
- [32] Tsuda, T. (2020). What makes hegemonic masculinity so hegemonic? Japanese American men and masculine aspirations. *Identities*, 29(5), 671-690. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1070289x.2020.1851005>
- [33] Vermeulen, P. (2010). "Remember, or now know": Chang-rae Lee's Native Speaker and the Politics of Melancholia. *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik*, 58(2), 143-158.
- [34] Vignoles, V. L. (2018). 12 identity: Personal and social. In M. S. Kay Deaux (Ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Personality and Social Psychology* (pp. 289). (Oxford University Press)
- [35] Wilhelm, R., Baynes, C. F., & Jung, C. G. (2001). *I Ching: Book of changes*. Grange Books.
- [36] Xu, W. (2007). *Eating identities: Reading food in Asian American literature*. University of Hawai'i Press.
- [37] Yi, V., & Museus, S. D. (2015). Model Minority Myth. In *The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Race, Ethnicity, and Nationalism* (pp. 1-2). <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118663202.wberen528>
- [38] Yoo, H. C., & Lee, R. M. (2005). Ethnic identity and approach-type coping as moderators of the racial discrimination/well-being relation in Asian Americans. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 52, 497-506.

**Zhongjie Li** was born in Xinyang, China in 1990. She received her master degree in English language and literature from Huazhong University of Science and Technology, China in 2014. She is currently a Doctor candidate in Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. Her research interests include English language teaching, English literature and Inter-cultural communication.

**Ravichandran Vengadasamy** (Ph.D) is a senior lecturer in the School of Language Studies and Linguistics, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. His Main research directions are stylistics, Malaysian Literature in English, Postcolonial Literature, Academic and Business Writing.

**Shanthini Pillai** holds a PhD in Literary Studies from the National University of Singapore. She is currently an associate Professor in the School of Language Studies and Linguistics, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. Her research interests are anchored primarily in cultural studies with particular reference to diaspora and transnationalism, ethnic diversity, and religious mobilities, especially in the context of global South Asian communities.