

Reform or Revolution? Socialism from China to Asian Communities

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Abstract: “This article examines socialist ideologies in Asian American literature by comparing Karen Tei Yamashita's *I-Hotel* and H.T. Tsiang's *And China Has Hands*. Despite both novels centering on Chinese American experiences in the 20th century, they offer differing perspectives on socialism influenced by the authors' backgrounds and historical contexts. Tsiang's work, set in 1930s New York, portrays socialism as an experimental pursuit for Chinese revolutionaries amidst the clash between socialism and nationalism. Conversely, Yamashita's *I-Hotel*, set in 1960s and 1970s San Francisco, depicts Asian American characters influenced by Maoist socialist ideology, tempered by disillusionment with the Cultural Revolution. Through close analysis, the article examines how each author navigates characters' attitudes towards socialism. In *I-Hotel*, Yamashita critiques the Cultural Revolution's suppression of art and literature, exposing Maoist authoritarianism. Meanwhile, Tsiang's optimism towards socialism is reflected in characters like Fellow, expressing a longing for reform and unity within the proletariat. Both authors' personal experiences and historical contexts shape their narratives. Tsiang's immersion in New York City's political landscape during the early 20th century informs his advocacy for socialist reform. Similarly, Yamashita's upbringing in a Japanese American family during World War II informs her critique of authoritarianism and advocacy for equitable socialism. In conclusion, this comparative analysis highlights diverse interpretations of socialism in Asian American literature, emphasizing the interplay between personal experiences, historical contexts, and ideological frameworks. Through their narratives, Yamashita and Tsiang offer reflections on the potentials and pitfalls of socialist ideologies, urging readers to engage critically with questions of revolution and social justice.”

Keywords: Socialism; Asian American; Revolution.

1. Introduction

Both Yamashita's *I-Hotel* [1] and Tsiang's *And China Has Hands* [2] offer interpretations of socialism but the authors' attitudes towards socialism are different. Their attitude towards socialism vary according to the background of the times and is affected by the Asian American attitude towards revolution in both novels. While both novels deal with Chinese Americans in the 20th century, socialism has a completely different meaning in both works. Tsiang's *And China Has Hands* been written in the 1930s New York. At that time, Chinese youth were still looking for a suitable path for Chinese revolution. The collision between the advocacy of socialism and the advocacy of nationalism produces strong sparks, and Chinese youths are trying to open up a path for the Chinese revolution in these sparks. The founding of the Soviet Union allowed many Chinese people who advocated reform to see the dawn brought by socialism. Therefore, in the novel, Tsiang's attitude towards the development of socialism in China is more of an exploration and experiment. Karen Tei Yamashita's *I-Hotel* published in 2010 explores the lives and struggles of the residents around the International Hotel in San Francisco's Manilatown during the 1960s and 1970s. She portrays the characters in the Asian American community as deeply committed to building a better world for themselves and their world. The youth of Asian-American community in the United States is also be influenced by Maoist socialist ideology. And because they did not go to China to understand its negative effects, the students still had an illusion that socialism during the Cultural Revolution could have a great impact on Asian American community. Yamashita depicts a group of Asian American students who

were full of longing for the realization of the socialist movement but did not understand the distorted socialism during Chinese Cultural Revolution with a blind worship. Two different interpretations of socialism are influenced by different backgrounds of the times. The article will discuss how the two authors' interpretation of socialism is affected by the background of the times and analyze how these two socialisms affected Asian Americans in their community in the novel.

2. The Exploration Towards Chinese Socialism

In chapter two of *I-Hotel*, Yamashita uses the destruction of art and literature during Cultural Revolution led by Mao to criticize the socialism of China during that period, which was distorted by politics and Mao's dictatorship. “Mao Tse-Tung and the Cultural Revolution defined those words in the service of a political agenda. Poetry for the Marxist-Leninist must be written for the proletariat. Everything that Chen loved about art and literature had to be destroyed or changed. He knew this, but he didn't tell the students” (Yamashita, 26). This quote appeared after Chen taught the Chinese Revolution and Marxism to Asian American students and got the support of the students. The speaker in the quote, Mao Tse-Dong, was disguised in the second sentence by using the passive voice. Rather than explicitly claiming that Mao said this, the quote merely puts the notion forward without linking it to a particular person. The purposeful use of the passive voice here is to focus on the idea rather than the speaker. By putting the statement in this format, Yamashita highlights its importance and implies that it is relevant outside of Mao's

particular setting. At the same time, the use of passive voice serves to distance this statement from Mao's personal history and the political context in which it was made. This may be seen as a way of critiquing Mao's legacy and his role in Chinese Revolution, particularly given the critiques of Maoist ideology that are present throughout the novel. This is also a metaphor for the social environment of China under the dictatorship of the era. At that time, China appeared to be practicing socialist democracy, but in reality, it was Mao's own socialist dictatorship. The third sentence used the phrase "had to" to convey a sense of necessity and inevitability. By use this expression, Yamashita implies that the alteration or destruction of literature and the arts was a necessity that could not be avoided. It's also important to pay attention to the sentence's structure, which emphasizes the phrase "had to be destroyed or changed." Yamashita emphasizes this phrase's effect on the harshness of the Cultural Revolution by placing it at the conclusion of the sentence. The statement starts out by outlining Chen's passions for literature and the arts before going on to discuss why these things need to be eliminated. The fact that Chen's love was shattered added credence to the rumor that Chen had lied to his students.

The most crucial reason that Chen didn't tell the truth is that he didn't want to destroy students' enthusiasm for the revolution. "They all wanted revolution, but they didn't know what revolution was" (Yamashita, 26). The students knew almost nothing about the socialism theory practiced by the revolution. All they needed was a goal that could be pursued, albeit full of blindness, which could mobilize their enthusiasm for knowledge. Therefore, Chen played a key role in guiding their outlook on life and revolutionary goals. The beautiful blueprint of the Chinese revolution and Marxism he described gave the students fantasy and aroused their enthusiasm. In Mo Yan's novel *Fatigue of Life and Death* [3], he made a wonderful description of the Chinese revolution-only by experiencing such a change can he experience its pain more deeply.

Chapter 6 of *I-Hotel* describes a conversation between the Chinese returnee Lee and a train worker. Lee was one of the returnees who came with Chen Wen-Guang to visit socialist China and their motherland. Lee and several reporters interviewed a train worker on a train in China. The train worker explains that after graduating from high school four years ago, he has been working on this train, and Lee asked if he wished to go to college. "I applied, but it's my country's wish that I work here." (Yamashita, 67). The worker's answer omitted why he applied but failed to attend college. Instead, he kept repeating his answer on 'my country's wish,' highlighting the legitimacy and reasonableness of his decision not to attend college and instead work on the train. The using of the transitional word 'but' brought out the reason for the omission, emphasizing the primacy of 'my country's wish'. It was as if to say although I applied; unfortunately, I couldn't go to college and ended up working here. But working here is my country's wish, and as long as I can contribute to the country, my regrets can be ignored. By giving the conversation, Yamashita suggests that the train worker's decision to work on the train was not simply a personal choice but something imposed upon him by external forces such as the Chinese government. The worker's answer showed the characteristic of the Cultural Revolution of sacrificing the individual for the greater good. Chinese Communist Party stated that everyone should sacrifice their interests for the socialist cause to achieve the great rejuvenation of the

Chinese nation.

Yamashita also wrote about a speech given by a Chinese ICSA member at a student gathering in the Asian community in the first chapter, "Fiction is that the Chinese have never suffered as much as the black or brown communities. The fact is the Chinese community has basic problems. Difference is that we got the neon lights and tourist restaurants. Fact is the restaurants are staffed by illiterate Chinese who work fourteen hours a day, six days a week. Fiction is this is exploitation of Chinese immigrants who can only find work in sweatshops, laundries, and restaurants in Chinatown" (Yamashita, 15). The sentence used a series of parallelism and contrast. The student made a series of contrasting statements, pairing a "fiction" with a "fact" to point out the discrepancy between how the Chinese community is perceived by everyday society and the reality of their situation. The repeated "fiction is" and "fact is" emphasizes the contradiction between what is commonly believed and what is true. In the first sentence, it is "fiction" that Chinese people have not suffered as much as other minority communities, but then quickly follows up with the "fact" that the Chinese community has fundamental problems. This contrast highlights the misconception that Chinese people have not experienced discrimination or oppression. The second sentence continues the pattern of contrasting "differences" with "fact." Chinese community may have more visible signs of prosperity, such as neon lights and tourist restaurants, but then reveals the reality that the workers in these establishments are often illiterate and overworked. The final sentence again uses the contrast between "fiction" and "fact" to challenge the common perception of Chinese immigrant labor in Chinatown. The cruel truth is constantly exposed through parallelism, and the emotions gradually escalate. Yamashita portrayed an image of the Chinese community in urgent need of improvement in living standards and systemic reform, which needs to be brought to the public's attention. They needed a system that could change their lives, so the students, influenced by Chen's teaching of Marxism and the Chinese Revolution, began to reveal the problems and call for reform. Chinese Cultural Revolution gave these Asian American students a perfect example of building a community in San Francisco that was ruled by equity and proletariat.

3. Revolution in Asian Communities

Compared with *I-Hotel*, *And China Has Hands* is more optimistic about developing socialism in the United States. In chapter three of *And China Has Hands*, Pearl Chang met a fellow trying to sell his book, the author-stand-in character in the novel. When fellow and Pearl Chang were walking in the park, fellow recited a seemingly childish poem, "Slowly they walked through the park, it was not light, and it was not dark. Slowly they walked through the park, it was not light and it was a park" (Tsiang, 35). The poem has only four lines, and the repetition of the first and third lines creates a sense of rhythm and demonstrates the slow pace of "the walk." The second line contrasts with the first, using negation to describe the lighting conditions of the park. The fourth line is a repetition of the word "park," which not only reinforces the setting but also underlines the emptiness and lack of direction felt by the revolutionary youth of that time. The simplicity of the poem is a reflection of the uncomplicated desires of its author, Fellow. He longed for a revolution in Chinatown and China, and his poem captures his longing and frustration with the status quo. The repetition of "Slowly they walked through

the park" can be interpreted as a metaphor for the slow pace of change and progress in China and the Chinese American community. Tsiang expresses his expectations for reformation in the Chinese American communities through the character "fellow" and his poem. In chapter nine, Fellow declares that "his book is proletarian literature" (Tsiang, 84), representing the author's position as a representative of the proletarian class, such as Won Wan-Lee. At the beginning of the 20th century, the theory of Soviet proletarian socialism profoundly influenced China, which urgently needed reform and affected the Chinese community in New York. At the novel's end, Tsiang ends with Won Wan-Lee's roar, calling for China, the unity of the proletariat, and the reform of proletarian socialism. Resistance to aggression requires both system reform and national strength.

4. Conclusion

Tsiang and Yamashita share a common goal of seeking and advocating reform. Tsiang's experiences as an immigrant and a writer in New York City during the early 20th century were significant factors that shaped his views on socialism and reform. The early 20th century was a time of great political upheaval, with the rise of socialist and communist movements around the world. Tsiang, who was living in New York City's

Chinatown, would have been exposed to a range of political ideas and movements, including the ideas of the newly established Soviet Union. Similarly, Yamashita's experiences growing up in a Japanese American family during World War II informed her critique of authoritarianism and her advocacy for reform. The forced relocation and imprisonment of Japanese Americans was an extreme example of the dangers of authoritarianism and the erosion of civil liberties. Yamashita's story takes place during China's Cultural Revolution, and her criticism towards Chinese socialism under the Cultural Revolution is evident in the book, especially towards the Mao government's authoritarianism. I believe that she hopes that the Asian American community during that time would learn from this and pursue reform while avoiding authoritarianism and prioritizing both collective and individual interests.

References

- [1] Kei Ren Tei Yamashita. *I-Hotel*, Coffee House Press, 2010.
- [2] H. T. Tsiang. *And China Has Hands*, Kaya Press, 2016.
- [3] Mo Yan. *Fatigue of Life and Death*, Writers publishing House, 2012.