

A Postcolonial Study of Grace Li's *Portrait of a Thief* through Homi Bhabha's Theory

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Abstract

Grace Li's novel *Portrait of a Thief* (2022) describes five Chinese-American college students who embark on a mission to reclaim looted Chinese bronze zodiac heads from western museums. It resonates deeply with postcolonial discourses of cultural identity, historical injustice and power negotiation. This paper argues that Homi Bhabha's postcolonial theoretical framework, specifically his concepts of hybridity and the third space, offers a critical lens to reveal the novel's resistance against colonial power and the dynamic reconstruction of cultural meaning. By analyzing the protagonists' position as both insiders and outsiders within western society, this study demonstrates how *Portrait of a Thief* shows Bhabha's vision of postcolonial resistance as a creative process. Through detailed textual analysis, this paper explores how Li's narrative opposes essentialist notions of eastern and western cultures, revealing the third space as a site of dialogue rather than domination.

Keywords

Postcolonial theory; Homi Bhabha; *Portrait of a Thief*; hybridity, third space; resistance

1. Introduction

In the opening pages of Grace Li's *Portrait of a Thief* (2022), Will Chen, a Harvard art history student, stands before a Chinese bronze zodiac head in a Western museum which was looted during the Second Opium War. It is reserved as a universal treasure by the museum, while it bears the scars of colonial violence and it is a wound dressed up as art for Will. This contradiction demonstrates the postcolonial condition based on Homi Bhabha's theory. Bhabha, a key figure in postcolonial studies, who is against the confronting of colonial duality and emphasizes the interaction between cultures, the instability of power and the generative potential of liminal spaces. His concepts of hybridity and the third space provide a theoretical frame-

work to examine how marginalized groups negotiate, resist and redefine their identities under domination.

Traditionally, multiculturalism is usually used to analyze multicultural contexts, which adopts ethnocentric approaches “refer to the experiences of one’s own culture as ‘central to reality’” (Bennett 2004, p. 62). According to this approach, Donahue(2025) argues that the constructed nature of the cultural paradigm is often taken for granted rather than contextually accounted for. While Bhabha advocates the importance of context in different cultures. *Portrait of a Thief* offers a fertile ground for applying Bhabha’s framework. It describes a story about five Chinese-American youth stealing back looted Chinese relics from museums, trying to reconstruct the cultural sovereignty that has been deprived in colonial history.

Recent empirical findings demonstrate some of the weaknesses of the ethnic dichotomy, by stressing that actual experiences of culture do not simply fall into either of these two. Social psychologist Samuel Pehrson (2020) argues, for example, that popular conceptions of nationhood are much messier than the theory may lead one to believe. Azada-Palacios(2022) points out that by analyzing data from the International Social Survey Program (ISSP) modules on ‘National Identity’ conducted in 1995, 2003, and 2013, Pehrson found that a person may endorse both an ‘ascribed’ set of criteria (e.g. ancestry, birth, religion) for national identity as well as an ‘acquired’ one. Although critics have connected novels with postcolonial themes, few have systematically analyzed it with Bhabha’s specific theories of hybridity and the third space in Li’s *Portrait of a Thief*. This paper aims to fill this gap by analyzing characters in *Portrait of a Thief* and show Bhabha’s construct of postcolonial subjectivity, which means that they are neither fully assimilated into western culture nor rooted in Chinese culture. Instead, they exist in a dynamic pattern of cultural influences that empowers them to challenge colonial narratives of cultural superiority and ownership.

This paper is divided into three sections. The first section contextualizes Bhabha’s theoretical framework, focusing on hybridity and the third space as well as their relevance to diasporic literature. The second section analyzes how the protagonists’ hybrid identities shaped by their upbringing in the United States, their connection to Chinese heritage, and their immersion in western academic institutions. It reflects Bhabha’s conception of hybridity as a creative tool. Lastly, it explores the novel’s portrayal of the third space through the zodiac heads, which emerge as contested objects that resist fixed meanings of culture and promote the renegotiation of cultural belonging.

2. Theoretical framework

Homi Bhabha’s work *The Location of Culture* (1994) marks a transition in postcolonial study: from static power structures to the dynamic, negotiated one between colonial and postcolonial interactions. The center of his theory is the rejection towards

the idea that the inherent qualities of cultures, identities, or nations are fixed. Bhabha argues that cultural meaning always changes through encounters, conflicts and negotiations between different groups. This section reveals two key concepts in Bhabha's theory that are utilized to analyze *Portrait of a Thief*: hybridity and the third space.

2.1. Hybridity: beyond cultural purity

For Bhabha, hybridity refers to the creation of new cultural forms through the mix of different cultural traditions. Unlike earlier theories that considered cultural mixing as a form of compromise, Bhabha(1994) regards hybridity as a productive force. The concept of hybridity challenges the colonial logic which considers western culture as superior and eastern culture as inferior one. By blurring the boundaries between "self" and "other", hybridity exposes the instability of cultural identities and leaves room for alternative identities and narratives.

According to Bhabha(1994), cultural identities are not inherited but constructed through discourse and practice. In the postcolonial context, this means that individuals who live outside their ancestral homeland do not simply own their culture. Instead, their cultural identities are reshaped by their new environment. As Bhabha(1994) writes in his book, "the diasporic subject is... a subject that is always in transit, always in the process of becoming". This emphasizes hybridity is not a static state but an ongoing negotiation between multiple cultural influences(Wang, 2019). As he summarized, hybridity "is the sign of the productivity of colonial power, it's shifting forces and fixities. It is the name for the strategic reversal of the process of domination through disavowal, (that is, the production of discriminatory identities that secure the 'pure' and original identity of authority)." (Bhabha, 2004).

2.2. The third space: a realm of negotiation

The third space is a realm where cultural meaning is produced and contested beyond the constraints of binary thinking. It is neither the domain of the colonizer nor the colonized but a medium space where identities and discourses are renegotiated. In the third space, Bhabha(1994) argues that "newness enters the world", which means new forms of culture, identity, and resistance that cannot be reduced to either of the original traditions.

The third space challenges traditional opinions by refusing to accept east and west cultures as fixed and opposing categories. Instead, it emphasizes the interdependence of them. For example, western culture is not a pure and autonomous entity but has been shaped by its encounters with non-western cultures, which is similar to the phenomenon that non-western cultures have been influenced by western ones. This mutual construction means that cultural meaning is always partial and open to reinterpretation and reshape. For postcolonial identities, the third space offers a way to resist being defined by colonial discourses, allowing them to build their identities that are both rooted in their own cultures and their current contexts.

To conclude, the concept of hybridity and the third space provide a framework for understanding how postcolonial individuals resist power of western society. They highlight the agency of marginalized groups, which means they are no longer passive victims of colonialism but active participants in the process of creating new cultural forms and meanings. Under this theoretical framework, this paper will analyze Li's *Portrait of a Thief* to examine how characters in her novel embody these concepts and what their actions reveal about postcolonial resistance.

3. Hybrid identities: negotiating “Chineseness” and “Westernness” in *Portrait of a Thief*

The five protagonists of *Portrait of a Thief*—Will Chen, Daniel Liang, Lily Wu, Alex Huang, and Irene Chen—are all Chinese-American, born or raised in the United States, and educated at elite Western institutions. Their identities are marked by what Bhabha would call hybridity, which exist between Chinese and western cultural contexts, effected by both but belongs to neither. This section argues that their hybridity is not derived from confusion or weakness but strength, enabling them to overcome the limitations of both western and Chinese discourses and to seek alternative forms of culture.

3.1. Between two worlds: the protagonists' cultural navigation

Will Chen, the group's leader, exemplifies this hybridity. As a Harvard art history student specializing in Chinese antiquities, he is good at the language of Western art scholarship, including its methodologies, canonical narratives and emphasis on “objective” analysis. Yet his connection to Chinese culture is deeply related to his grandfather, a former art dealer who was involved in the illicit trade of Chinese artifacts. The history of his grandfather that haunts Will and fuels his desire to reclaim the zodiac heads. When he describes the bronze heads in the museum, his words shift between academic terminology like “cast in the Qianlong period” and emotional language like “they were taken from us, piece by piece” (Li, 2022). This ethnic dichotomy reflects Bhabha's concept of hybridity as a double perspective and refuses to be contained by a single framework.

Daniel Liang embodies cultural hybridity similarly. Daniel's parents are Chinese immigrants who prioritize academic achievement and assimilation to western culture, urging him to focus on his future rather than trapping in the past. Daniel is drawn to this action partly because he feels alienated from both his peers at Duke and from his family in China. The former thinks he is “too Chinese” while the latter views him as “too American”. His participation in the theft is a way of negotiation between them. He uses his medical knowledge, which stands for western culture, to disable museum security systems. While his motivation stems from a desire to honor his grandmother, who lost her family's heirlooms during the war. As he tells Will, “I don't know if I'm doing this for China, or for her. Maybe it's the same thing” (Li,

2022). Daniel's uncertainty about his motivation reflects the fluidity of hybrid identity.

Lily Wu and Alex Huang also illustrate Bhabha's concept of hybridity in practice. Lily is a dropout from MIT as well as a genius with code, which is a skill she learned in western technology and is used to target western institutions. She admits that she knows "more about Python than Confucius" (Li, 2022), yet she is moved by the stories of the artifacts' theft, seeing them as "proof that we were here, that we mattered" (Li, 2022). Alex is a mechanical engineering student at UCLA and is greatly obsessed with cars, which is of great importance to this theft because he modified cars to get rid of police's chase. His connection to China is rooted in pop culture. He grew up watching Hong Kong action films, which he describes as "my way of feeling Chinese when I didn't know how else" (Li, 2022). For both Lily and Alex, "Chineseness" is not an inborn trait but a mix of various influences that resulted from adaption.

Last character in the novel is Irene Chen, Will's younger sister and the group's grifter. As a student who majored at drama at Yale, Irene is good at performance. Therefore, she can be a wealthy socialite, a museum intern or a tourist, depending on the situation. Her ability to switch between different identities reflects her capacity to play under cultural contexts. As she explains, "Growing up, I learned to be whoever people wanted me to be—Chinese enough for my parents, American enough for school. Turns out, it's a useful skill" (Li, 2022). Irene's adaptability can be seen as a form of hybridity, which means she can embrace both Chinese and Western cultural features while her identity is not determined by either. Instead, she uses it as a tool, allowing her to enter spaces that be closed to someone perceived as "too Chinese" or "too Western."

3.2. Hybridity as a source of resistance

Bhabha (1994) argues that hybridity is subversive because it breaks the binary in colonial discourse, which holds the opinion that cultures are either pure or contaminated, superior or inferior. As is mentioned before, the protagonists of *Portrait of a Thief* embody this subversion. Their ability to change under different cultural contexts allows them to find the contradictions in both Western and Chinese narratives, and their hybrid identities give them the flexibility to challenge both.

For example, they disapprove the western museum's claim to be a neutral guardian of world heritage. As Will points out, "The British Museum talks about 'preserving' these artifacts, but they were stolen during a war. You don't preserve something by taking it by force" (Li, 2022). At the same time, they do not agree that recovery the heads as a matter of national pride. "This isn't about making China great again," Irene says. "It's about making things right for the people who lost them and for us." (Li, 2022). Their hybridity allows them to transcend these opposed kind of narratives, focusing on the ethical dimensions of cultural theft and recovery instead.

In this way, the protagonists' hybridity is not a passive condition but an active

choice, which refers to a refusal to be defined by others. The characters' hybridity in *Portrait of a Thief* reveals a form of cultural justice that neither belongs to assimilationist nor nationalist, while it is rooted in a recognition of shared humanity and historical responsibility.

4. The third space of meaning: the zodiac heads as contested objects

The bronze zodiac heads at the center of *Portrait of a Thief* are more than cultural relics itself, they are what Bhabha would described as third space that resist fixed meanings and become ways of negotiation between different cultural, historical and political narratives. This section argues that the heads' ambiguity, which means their inability to be fully claimed by any single group or discourse. It reflects the third space's role for creative possibility that allows the rise of new forms of cultural belonging and justice. Liang(2022) states that colonial rule is accompanied by increasingly frequent exchanges between different cultures. The cultural differences manifested in the process of communication were difficult to be mutually understood within one single cultural space. On the contrary, temporary understanding and consensus must be reached through negotiations in the third space. This eliminates the purity of a cultural identity, making it necessary for one's own culture to contact, communicate and integrate with other cultural discourses, which eliminates the possibility of any cultural discourse maintaining hegemonic status.

4.1. Beyond "east" and "west": the heads as hybrid objects

The zodiac heads are originally hybrid objects. They were created in 18th century China but they were designed by Giuseppe Castiglione, an Italian Jesuit missionary. Thus, it mixes Chinese artistic traditions with western techniques. Their appearance showed the hybridity. Though they are Chinese zodiac animals, they are made in a realistic manner with detailed fur, feathers and expressions that were unusual in traditional Chinese art. Since they are created with western technique of art, they are neither categorized to simply east nor west.

What's more, the history of theft and displacement further complicates their identity. Stolen from the Old Summer Palace during the Second Opium War in 1860, they were scattered across Europe and North America. For a long time, they were bought and sold by collectors, displayed in museums and debated by scholars, politicians or activists. Consequently, they bore various meanings. For the Qianlong Emperor, they were symbols of imperial power, while for the British and French soldiers who stole them, they were spoils of war. For Western museums, they are world heritage but for Chinese nationalists, they are symbols of national humiliation. And for protagonists in the novel *Portrait of a Thief*, they are reminders of unresolved historical injustice, which reflects their role as third space.

This multiplicity of meanings reflects Bhabha's concept of the third space as a realm

where “no meaning is stable” (Bhabha, 1994). The heads in the novel cannot be reduced to just one single identity and the meaning behind them is under negotiation. This ambiguity prevents any single narrative from dominant position and allows different groups to project their own narratives onto them.

4.2. The third space as a site of dialogue

In *Portrait of a Thief*, the heads function as a catalyst for dialogue between different perspectives. The protagonists’ debates about whether to return them to China, sell them, donate them to a neutral institution, or destroy them reflect the third space’s role as a site of negotiation. These debates are not resolved through appeals to essentialist truths that argues that they belong to China because they were made there, but through a process of listening, questioning and compromise.

For instance, when Daniel suggests returning the heads to the Chinese government, Lily argues that the government’s nationalist agenda is as limited as the museum’s colonial agenda. “They’ll just put them in a museum and use them to score political points,” she says, “That’s not justice. That’s just another form of ownership” (Li, 2022). Alex proposes to sell the heads and donate the money to organizations that help Chinese communities affected by cultural theft. “Maybe the heads themselves aren’t as important as what they can do,” he suggests (Li, 2022). And Will advises to donate them to a new, independent museum in Hong Kong, where both Chinese and western scholars work and are dedicated to exploring the complex history of cultural communication and theft. He claims that it is a place where they can be talked about without just being displayed.

The final proposal reflects Bhabha’s vision of the third space as a site of dialogue rather than domination. The independent museum is not a “neutral” space but a space where multiple narratives can coexist. They can discuss the history of the heads’ creation, their theft and their significance to different communities in the museum. It is a space that acknowledges the past without being trapped in it and honors the heads’ complexity without reducing them to symbols.

4.3. Reimagining cultural belonging in the third space

At the end of the novel, Will and the group donate the heads to the independent museum in Hong Kong, which suggests that the third space offers a way to reimagine cultural belonging. The heads are no longer owned by a single nation or institution but are held in a global community that recognizes its shared responsibility for historical injustice. This solution rejects both the colonial logic of possession and the nationalist logic of blood and soil and embrace a vision of cultural belonging based on dialogue, accountability and mutual respect instead. This is also reflected in the protagonists’ own sense of belonging. Although they have not resolved their hybrid identities in the end, they have come to embrace this flexible condition as a source of connection rather than division. Their acceptance of third space identities means

they recognize belonging is not about purity or ownership but a constant conversation.

In this way, *Portrait of a Thief* suggests that Bhabha's concept of third space is a way that allows for complexity, ambiguity and hope. The zodiac heads embody this reality vividly. They are not only the reminders of colonialism, but also shows the possibility of healing through dialogue. The concept of third space challenges traditional view that insist western and Chinese cultures are binary and makes people recognize that cultures are always in conversation.

5. Conclusion

This paper has argued that Homi Bhabha's concepts of hybridity and the third space provide a powerful framework for analyzing *Portrait of a Thief* and its postcolonial resistance. The novel's protagonists embody hybridity, moving between Chinese and western cultural contexts and rejecting essentialist notions of identity. And the zodiac heads function as a third space that resist fixed meanings and enabling a reimagination of cultural justice.

Through its engagement with these concepts, *Portrait of a Thief* offers a vision of postcolonial resistance that is not rooted in binary opposition but in creativity, dialogue and self-reflection. The protagonists do not seek to defeat the west or to return to the pure Chinese past but seek to create a third space where historical injustice can be well acknowledged and new forms of cultural belonging can be constructed.

This novel has provided implications for people to understand postcolonialism. In an era of increasing cultural communication and conflict, Bhabha's concepts remind us that cultures are not simply fixed or pure but are open to change. What's more, *Portrait of a Thief* captures that the resistance is not just about opposing colonial power but about using cultures to create a third space that offers opportunities for people of different cultures to communicate. Through a story of hope, the novel conveys the ideas that even the deepest historical wounds can be cured through dialogue and the third space that are always within reach.

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