

H-Net Reviews

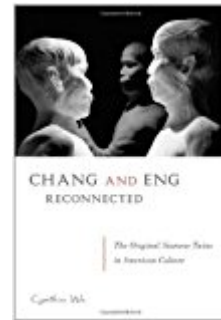
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Cynthia Wu. *Chang and Eng Reconnected: The Original Siamese Twins in American Culture*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012. xiii + 203 pp. \$84.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4399-0868-6; \$28.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-4399-0869-3.

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Beyond Chang and Eng Bunker

The title of this book, *Chang and Eng Reconnected: The Original Siamese Twins in American Culture*, suggests a revisiting of the conjoined twins from Siam who became celebrities in the nineteenth century. Brought to the United States for their extraordinary body, the brothers appeared at sideshows around the world before they settled on a farm to live a middle-class life in North Carolina. Within the field of disability studies, in which freakery as a discourse was intensively explored during the 1990s, renowned scholars such as Rachel Adams and Elizabeth Grosz have analyzed the display of the Bunkers. However, Cynthia Wu does not attempt to historicize or personalize the twins' experience or examine their particular condition as freak show scholars of the 1980s such as Leslie Fiedler and Robert Bogdan have done. Instead, Wu undertakes a much larger project, her aim being to "reveal how dimensions of power operate within American cultures by providing a transhistorical analysis of materials from the nineteenth, twentieth, and early twenty-first centuries that feature the Bunkers" (p. 2), bringing together disability studies and Asian American studies as well as literary criticism, cultural theory, and anthropology.

The book is divided into three parts. The first part provides a close reading of archival material which is not merely summarized, but deconstructed and analyzed. The second part looks at issues of representation, focus-

ing on literature and visual cultures, never just analyzing a representation but revealing its impact by regarding it as part of a larger context. The third part consists of an anthropological adventure that explores kinship ties in contemporary American society. The three parts are not only based on a distinction of material and method, but they also are set in chronological order covering the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries.

Much of the nineteenth-century material about the Bunkers has already found its way into publications, but in her first part, "Locating Material Traces in the Archive," Wu makes a careful and innovative selection of letters, the dissection protocol, and museum material. A close reading of Chang and Eng Bunker's letters concerned with business matters allows Wu to discuss issues surrounding Asian Americans, disability, race, and class as well as citizenship and individuality. While Wu proves that the twins were absorbed into white America through marriage and property, she does not overlook the fact "that they themselves probably did not regard their personal histories in -this manner" (p. 28). Having dealt with immigration laws and economic issues in chapter 1, Wu focuses on science, particularly medicine, in chapter 2. Focusing on the twins' autopsy, Wu critically discusses Michel Foucault's concept of the medical gaze with respect to social hierarchies, race, class, and gender as embedded in the mystery of Eng's death. The third chap-

ter then deals with the cast of the body of the conjoined twins as exhibited in the Mütter Museum in Philadelphia. The interesting dimensions of Wu's writing become most evident in this chapter, in which she explores the cast historically, concluding her discourse with the twins' death and dissection. She also discusses their museum display and two artworks involving the cast (thus representations about a representation). Again this leads to brilliant insights about the sometimes difficult relationship between science and aesthetics as well as agency and interpretation—not forgetting the troubled issue of human remains in museum contexts when it comes to the twins' liver reminding the reader of the corporeal body that is the subject here.

Part 2, "Reading Literature and Visual Cultures," turns "attention from the physical, anatomical presence of Chang and Eng Bunker to their ethereal traces in the arts and culture of the United States" (p. 81). Here Wu departs from focusing on nineteenth-century cartoons and illustrations that deal with the political issues of immigration, race, and citizenship. At the center of the chapter called "Late-Nineteenth-Century Visions of Conflict and Consensus" is Mark Twain's fascination with conjoinment. Again, Wu does not repeat any of the previous analyses of Twain's texts (e.g., *The Extraordinary Twins*) although it is obvious that she knows them all. Instead, she connects his texts on conjoined twins with writings about Chinese laborers, illustrations, and the works of Thomas Nast. This enables Wu to discuss Asian Americans in connection to labor and labor movements, which again leads her to the issue of class (and not disability or race) as the main marker of social distinction. In her chapter "Asian Americans Bare/Bear the Hyphen," Wu explores the issue of racial identity by analyzing the appearance of Chang and Eng Bunker in Maxine Hong Kingston's *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book* (1989); and the discussion of problematic double identity in Monica

Sone's *Nisei Daughter* (1953) and Hualing Nieh's *Mulberry and Peach: Two Women of China* (1981), in which one of the protagonists doubles her personality as a reaction to state policies in Asia and the United States. Chang and Eng Bunker here become a powerful metaphor for narratives about "the composition of the nation and the state" (p. 120). The next chapter deals with female sexuality in the examples of David Cronenberg's *Dead Ringers* (1988) and Mark and Michael Polish's *Twin Falls Idaho* (1999), which "exemplify best the tension issuing from concerns about white women who exercise their economic and sexual independence" (p. 124). Wu's most fascinating analysis of *Dead Ringers* succeeds in joining medical metaphors, issues of reproduction (rights), and female sexual independence that led to fundamental changes for (white) women in contemporary society.

The last part of the book is called "Observing and Participating," in which Wu explores the kinship ties of the descendants of the Bunker twins. Based on observations at the annual family reunion, Wu works with ethnographic methods to reveal the construction and dynamics of family identity and kinship ties in contemporary America. This last chapter gives Wu's book a very innovative twist, reminding the reader of the actual presence of the Bunker twins throughout while understanding their imprint and metaphorical as well as critical potential for contemporary issues of race, gender, and class.

Cynthia Wu has written a brilliant book. It is not only enjoyable to read while revealing new insights and interpretations on the particular case of Chang and Eng Bunker, but it also challenges academic disciplinary perceptions in innovative ways. Scholars of disability studies, Asian American studies, transnational studies, anthropology and cultural analysis, as well as those interested in literature, film, law, museums, and art, will benefit from the book.

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