



The Anatomy of Stereotypes: Reading Weike Wang's *Chemistry* as a Meta-Bildungsroman

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ABSTRACT

Traditional Chinese American coming-of-age bildungsroman appropriate Chinese culture to establish its reputation and distinctiveness. The paper shows that previous criticism of Chinese American literature mainly assumes that stereotypes are from public's perception and ignores the source of ethnic writing practice itself. The paper reads Chinese American writer Weike Wang's debut novel *Chemistry* as an atypical ethnic bildungsroman that challenges this subgenre's unconscious promulgating of stereotypes. I argue that the narrator's contemplation on Chinese culture in *Chemistry* deconstructs the stereotyped ethnic traits into universal human traits. Inspired by science's universality across cultures, the author reveals the shared emotions underlying the stereotypes. Ultimately, I show how Wang utilizes a dual narrative to motivate the narrator to contemplate on development process of various kinds, which constitutes a meta-bildungsroman where a identity without ethnicity and particularities emerges. By creating *Chemistry* as a meta-bildungsroman, Wang reveals ethnic identity is not only a construct, but fundamentally embodiment of humanity.

Keywords: *Chemistry*; Weike Wang; bildungsroman; aesthetic appreciation; stereotype.

Introduction

In a 2018 interview with Kyle Lucia Wu, the Chinese American novelist Weike Wang explicated why characters are left nameless except for Eric in her debut fiction *Chemistry* (2017). It is Wang's intention to "make it as universal as possible" and the feature is certainly acknowledged by becoming a best-seller and receiving the PEN/Hemingway Award, Ploughshares' John C. Zacharis Award and a Whiting Award. The novel depicts an unnamed narrator living in a seemingly perfect life: she is a PhD candidate in chemistry with a smart and supportive boyfriend. The navigation between ambitious Chinese parents and constant marriage proposal eventually pushes the protagonist to the extreme of ambivalence and a meltdown in the lab. *Chemistry*'s remaining plot majorly engages with the narrator's reevaluation of the past and present from a depressed patient's perspective. Despite being as a Chinese American writer, Wang's endeavor to make her novel as generic as possible anticipates Western critics' attitude towards another famous Asian Anglophone writer, Kazuo Ishiguro

by viewing his oeuvre as global English Novels. It is Britishness in Ishiguro's novels that typifies worldliness (Hu 124). By contrast, the anonymity of most figures in *Chemistry* does not signify the author's adoption of Englishness to create a sense of universality. Instead, Wang seeks to mobilize ethnic stereotypes including Asian, Chineseness and universality to mediate the narrator's identity that prevents "her race to define her entirely". Rather than sticking to oriental misrepresentation, Wang adopts the contradicted genre of *Bildungsroman* to negotiate her ethnic writer's position and pursuit of generality.

The coming-of-age story *Chemistry* tellingly shows the tension embedded in the mode of *Bildungsroman* itself. The first chapter of the novel fits into the generic rudiments of Classical *Bildung*: the nameless narrator's "aesthetic, moral, rational and scientific education" promises a harmony between "inner culture" and the social world as she moves (Martini 5). In line with classical mode of self-formation, the narrator's projected growth trajectory suddenly halts when she experiences an emotional breakdown and becomes incapable to cope with the depression and the ensuing decision to relinquish the degree and terminate the lab romance shows a further deviation. *Bildung* then arises as a crisis for the protagonist because of the emerging absence of self-consciousness of inner life in harmony with every aspect of life. In his study of modernist *bildungsroman* in negative dialectical fashion, Castle argues that it is the failure to conform to basic rudiments of classical mode of self-development that foreshadow "new narrative possibilities of representing self-formation and the temporality of inner life that organizes and sustains it" (144). In terms of *Chemistry*, the narrator's failure to grasp the achieved *bildung* forwards an alternative of self-development that challenges the *bildungsroman* tradition. After the suspension of a *bildung* in classical mode, the remaining plots substantially concern the protagonist's intrinsic self-formation with distorted temporality. As indicated by Etsy, "the genre-bending logic of uneven development" observed in static self-development in *Chemistry* takes on a form of modernism that shatters the privilege of including only coming-of-age stories of progress, but also of "stasis, regression and hyperdevelopment" (25). Moreover, through the utilization of a depressed narrator's eye, the novel's account of the transition between two self-development modes reveals the narrator's ideological mediation that motivates herself to contemplate on the very notion of *bildung* in ethnic context.

Chinese American *Bildungsroman* and Stereotype

As an immigrant daughter's coming of age story, *Chemistry* belongs to a subgenre of ethnic narrative of development. In this respect, Wang follows the footsteps of female Chinese American novelists' modification of classical mode of self-formation from exotic outsiders to national subjects. In her 1996 classical essay, Lisa Lowe interpellates the Anglo-American novel of formation as an institutionalized practice in "identification with an idealized 'national' form of subjectivity" where readers are instructed towards approved forms of subjectivity and exclusion of the marginalized (98). It has enormous effect on narration of Asian Americans in canonical and history writing who become racial others denied from access to the "imagined community" of the nation (Lowe 98). In response to the challenge, Chu argues that writers of Chinese heritage reinvented the genre by incorporating their stories to parallel the development of individual and the process of negotiating ethnic identity with the nation (67).

Hailed as "Mother of Chinese American literature" by Maxine Hong Kingston, Jade Snow Wang creates *Fifth Chinese Daughter* (1950) that purports to be the prototype of female *bildung* for Chinese Americans. Though the novel unfolds in a detached third-person narration, it records the author's struggling experience between her traditional life in Chinese American family and a racial biased working life, but Wang's famous publication of one paper and ensuing successful operation of a pottery shop finds heroine harmony with parents and American society that pride and respect Wang's achievement. This form of self-formation, to some degree, simultaneously disrupts the narration of gendered hierarchy in Chinese education convention symbolized by her parents, and privileged forms of subjectivity which excludes Asian Americans in Anglo-American context. In spite of her endeavor to complicate the classical *bildung* mode by inserting dense Chinese culture, the novel is generally criticized as, in essence, a "success story" where the protagonist acquires

subjectivity by embracing American value of promotion of success, mobility and independence. While in her 1976's controversial autobiography *The Women warrior*, Kingston provides an alternative form of coming-of-age in America what she refers as "the cultural translation" of English Chinese oral tales. Her attempt to translate resembles what Bolaki proposes as "bound motion", an intricate and dynamic practice that extends beyond a mere exchange and assimilation of dominant culture, which evidently differentiates that of Jade Snow Wang's narration of *bildung* (13). The final result is to claim the protagonist's harmony in accordance with ethnic identity through "hybrid spaces and boardland subjectivities" that unsettles the *bildungsroman* (Bolaki 15). For Chinese American writers, they seek to assert subjectivity by producing a dual narration of development with resources drew from Chinese culture, one in which they navigates individual development through constant dialogue with Chinese traditional culture and the other where they harness culture heritage to ground development process in spaces of America value or a third hybrid ones. However, it is my contention that previous ethnic female *bildung* renders Chinese heritage as a cornerstone that sustains the possibility of alternative forms of development, a strategy that contradictorily undermine writer's literary authority with unconscious intensification of diffusing mere distinctiveness in *bildung* plot. It is not my intention to discredit Chinese culture's role in helping to claim agency in Chinese American writer's narration, but to interrogate the conflicted effect brought by foregrounding how distinct alternative forms of self-formation embedded in Chinese culture is.

Chemistry's *bildung* process, is of course, considerably less assertive in defining its distinctiveness by merely highlighting culture disparity. Whereas the experience of majorly resolving culture differences modes heroine into character who combines modern skepticism, resourcefulness and independence of mind with traditional virtue of loyalty to family as well as literary, articulateness, the nameless narrator in Chemistry's education and similar confrontation have an opposite effect by becoming a depressed patient. By underscoring the frustration towards available modes of development, Weike Wang sharply differentiates her protagonist from matured individual in Kingston or Jade Snow Wang's novel even in their shared investment in narration of ethnic identity. Weike Wang's representation of an anti-heroine's static development challenges traditional *bildungsroman*'s depiction of self-realization as privileged forms of linear narration of progress. The narrator's developed "aesthetic of everyday life" as science artist lures her reflection of the notion of *bildung*, encouraging a refreshing mediation with multiple discourses within her growth trajectory. In what follows, I argue that the protagonist's journey of review of trauma, memory and identity in past and present *bildung* story helps to detect shared humanity trait underlying the distinctiveness that historically characterizes Chinese American *bildung* tradition. Ultimately, I show how Wang's harnessing of nameless narrator's self-playing mentor constitutes a genre of meta-*bildungsroman* that engenders the power of transformation from within instead of a extrinsic mechanical mode.

Portrait of a Science Artist Motif

Weike Wang's critique of the privileged forms of progress that dominates the literary canon in *bildungsroman* tradition becomes apparent in the unnamed narrator's personal and professional indecisiveness. The novel starts with a reply "ask me again tomorrow" that showcases the graduate chemist's lasting dilemma in face of repeated proposal by American boyfriend Eric (Chemistry 3). When pressures in academic work grows and passion for science is questioned, the narrator realizes emotional incapacity for solution and finally breaks down in "smashing five beakers on the ground" and "shout" with no words (29). The past experience of living on the cusp of perfect life renders a situation where she cannot locate any "self-consciousness of inner life in harmony with every aspect of life" (Castle 144). Being both devastated and yet liberated, the anti-heroine determines to relinquish the doctor degree and terminates the romance for her decline to remove with Eric's new employment. The sudden halt in narration of development, as opposed to natural acceptance of bright future promised by internalization of an idealized *bildung*, demonstrates the author's detection of the "crisis of *bildung* in modernism" because of the foreclosed possibility of harmony between the protagonist and classical *bildung* (Castle 144).

In sense of the complicated status, Wang distorted the linearity and progress that typify the narration of traditional bildungsroman, and maps the protagonist's mode of development into an interwoven narration of recollection and conversation. The anti-heroine in *Chemistry* assumes her bildung mainly through communication with friends, a mental therapist and parents, supporting her life by tutoring students. The evident lack of mobility and sparse action observed in the story remade the development plots to a stunted and stalled ones which constitutes what Esty claims as "heterochronic and multipolar" spaces of uneven development, breaking the temporality of the classical bildungsroman plots (95). The open and sustained violation of the paradigm of development plot can be further seen on *Chemistry's* exclusion of adolescence from dictates of a bildung with full growth trajectory. For Esty, by situating national referent in the matrix of colonial modernity, certain persons' destinies and represented people, "the genre bending logic of uneven development" breaks the allegorical promise of "an uncertain future of a colonial-world system"; and heralds an inclusion not only narration of progress, but also "stasis, regression and hyperdevelopment" (25). By contrast, I content that as a concept appropriated to characterizes the distinctiveness in Chinese American bildung, national referent in *Chemistry* is equally placed with other political or personal contexts that linked in an organic fashion for the shared humanity trait discovered in narrator's inspiration of an aesthetic life as a science artist.

The novel's name, *Chemistry*, encapsulates part of essential feature of the narrator's development process. In Chinese word, chemistry refers to the study of change and Wang perfectly infuses this layer of meaning into a different immigrant experience. Apart from that, scientific knowledge of chemistry, physics and biology permeates the story as well. After the first scene of declining a marriage proposal, readers are immediately allowed to probe into the female chemist's strange association of a new discovery by *New Scientist* which views "diamond is no longer the hardest mineral known to man", and lonsdaleite is harder "only when meteorites smashes themselves into Earth" (3). Many similar juxtapositions clips without any further explanation and seem to be only the protagonist's exuding of random feelings that instinctively recalls her science. As the narrator evaluates the definition of beauty in appearance, she mentions the endeavor to consume daily 10 percent of energy so as to keep "mouth in a straight line", which let her to perceive that "a short line may be the shortest distance between two points" to be no more fascinating (28). The upset embedded in this unreasonable connection may be easily interpreted as anti-heroine's doubt about the limited universality of approved knowledge, but on the contrary, the unfettered comparison engenders an deadpan humor that diminishes the seriousness of science and for a student accompanied by depression, the making of fun out of science mitigates academic pressure and springs optimism to forward life.

On quitting the school, the protagonist tries to provide for herself by tutoring students. Unlike any typical instruction, the female chemist always gets carried away by organizing critical answers from a scientific perspective to millions of questions raised by students, whether to be related to science or not, and the tutoring thus turns into a space where students are exposed to objectivity and thorough thinking embodied by science. The later correspondence with the majority reveals that students' life becomes different in the sense that it reminds them of the tutor whenever they think of "cloud, balloons, a running facet..." in life (181). The reminiscence, to some degree, indicates sessions' meaningfulness as much as an shard sense of reducing science into a way of living that captures the beauty out of banal life from a scientific eye. The protagonist's pursuit of an aesthetic practice echoes with what Oscar Wilde advance in as an aesthetic of everyday life by clamming that "all the arts are fine arts and all the arts decorative arts" through championing the beauty defined as practical, provisional and unimportant to be the milieu of everyday, the banal, the mere decorative art (361).

Wang's narration of an aesthetic experience of everyday life from a scientist's view thus purports to be what Castle advocates as "the portrait of the artist" motif (144). Drawing on ideas of Max Saunders' im/personality, Castle pinpoints the motif's concentration of "portraits of the artist are effectively accounts of the dynamism and expressive capacity of inner life", that is to say, alternative forms of portrait of bildungsheld's less desire to be artist or artist himself rather than the desire to live the aesthetic life (145). As one of architects of bildung, Friedrich Schiller notes in *Letters on*

the Aesthetic Education of Man that “to replace morals by Morality, happy events by Happiness, the facts of knowledge by Knowledge itself – that is the business of physical and moral education (313). To make Beauty out of a multiplicity of beautiful objects is the task of aesthetic education.” The latter aesthetic education, in Castle’s examination, stands at the heart of classical *bildung* and is inherited by modernist projects of development in delineation of formal or informal education that talks “art, literature, and the very fact of their aesthetic education” (148). The modernist portrait of the artist motif thus represents the experience of protagonists whose aesthetic appreciation of everyday life effectively challenges the *bildungsroman* by producing new possibilities for *Bildung* (Castle 151). In terms of Chemistry, Weike Wang departs the motif by interrogating the theme of aesthetic education: she avoids typical entrance into aesthetic education, replaces the facts of serious subjects by developing an aesthetic appreciation of everyday life from science instead mere art.

Merging life in a scientific mind, the quintessential feature in Chemistry, identifies with Wang’s intention to “to look at the characters from many facets, to look at a situation from many facets” by the aid of the author’s own academic background. In claiming the final work remains fictional, Wang admits the autobiographic elements by way of cutting off “pieces of myself to give them”, which are recognized probably most apparent in her ethnic identity to complete an undergraduate degree in Chemistry and a doctor degree in public health. The resemblance indeed nurtures the emergence of portraiture of an artist of different type, and by replacing the desire to be an artist or a scientist, the narrator’s mode of development becomes the desire to live the aesthetic life inspired by science. Additionally, by virtue of situating the portraiture in the depth of life specificity of fleeting moments, the novel provides a lucid presentation of how the linkage between science and life, rationale and emotion renders to be possible in the narrator’s portraiture of the scientist artist motif.

Transparent Identity

Similar to the permeation of thoughts related to science, Chemistry abounds with proverbs that influence the immigrant daughter’s choices of action, among which majorly concerns Chinese culture. Eric, the smart American boyfriend with a bright future, is regarded as an impeccable partner for the narrator, and on remembering a Chinese proverb that predicts that “for every man with great skill, there is a woman with great beauty”, the narrator’s behavior shows a clear transformation in that she purchases a qipao dress at sales’ acclaim of the slim figure and conducts the energy consuming practice to keep mouth in a straight line (27). The unconscious accordance to the proverb always ends a deadpan humor by leaving a mocking utterance that “if only we could find the gene for beauty and bottle it” (28). Proverbs in the novel not only includes popularized version also theories of family life patterns and belief. At the warning of “too much hair will suck nutrients away from the head and leave it empty” frequently lectured by the mother, the narrator in the salon requests more and more cut into a short hair only in hope for growing inspiration, a suggestion where she later finds frustration with zero help.

The less promising results in adhering to what her parents pedestal as sound theories is exhibited in her following father’s advice to pursue a degree in science. The decision to mater a doctor degree in chemistry, as argued by a labmate, requires unconditional passion and love, which astounds the narrator because she realizes that it used to be a choice concerns more on her parents’ delight and that the only fair explanation relies on her reminding that “Chinese proverb says that the mastery of three things will make you fearless anywhere in the world. They are math, physics, and chemistry” (110). In mastery of one of the three, the protagonist continues to ask herself “to be fearless means what” and “where do I find courage” (110). Contradiction thus exists between the narrator’s life experience and parents’ lifestyle filed with proverbs and invented theories and it is highly likely to invite an immediate critique of culture conflicts. The author, instead, chooses not to dramatize the story by narrating the daughter’s *bildung* to be neither American nor Chinese. While admitting her father’s “classical immigrant story”, the daughter proclaims that she is supposed to “leave America and colonize the moon” to resume the family glory tradition (26). The joke certainly emits a sense of pressure and reluctance to fully mirror the conventions in Chinese American

bildung. The deformation officially ruptures with an abrupt halt of idealized bildung typified by the narrator's father: the female chemist breakdowns in the lab and refuses to deal with her emotion mechanism until she embraces boyfriend's recommendation to a mental therapist. The liberated vacuum of not choosing in Wang's following delineation of a depressed narrator's aesthetic life stemming from science education, as I suggest, renders into place where the protagonist claims agency through a profound dialogue with inner self.

Through harnessing a different perspective offered by a depressed narrator, Wang challenges the stereotypes that cloud the distinctiveness of culture. During one introduction of a Chinese proverb to the narrator's boyfriend that "Outside of sky there is sky, outside of people there are people"; Eric observes the same underlying idea of infinity even in a story in Indian philosophy (16). While sensing the gender hierarchy in the field of science work, the protagonist amazes at the Chinese language's feature of neutral gender in everything. The chemist then justifies women's great capacity by referring that the founding president of China "Mao once said that women hold up half the sky" and further concludes that the referent of "women" or "men" weights nothing for the same basis "a person" (142). Nevertheless, the author's destructive agenda extends beyond merely detecting of one specific similarity or privileging Chinese language. When in college, the mother told the daughter a story that stunned her:

"Your father, as a boy, carried his youngest sister on his back to see the doctor. The doctor was many miles away. The sister was dying of consumption. He ran on dirt roads, as fast as he could. But before they could get to the doctor, the sister died. Still he carried her to the doctor's"(185-186).

The narrator is surprised to be informed of her father's sister existence for the first time, moreover, it stimulates her to understand her father, a belated awareness that it is Chinese way to bury all feelings inside and "build a wall that can be seen from the moon" (186). The hindsight lubricates a further realization that haunts the narrator's bildung throughout the novel: she becomes aware that the aim of her father's insistence of her studying science. Through a diligent study and granting a degree in science in America, her father finally obtained the courage to provide a stable life for the family in a different country. To be fearless represents the father's profound guilt and self-blaming for not saving his younger sister, but more importantly, a compulsory lecture that he deems as necessary for a daughter akin to his own experience of how to live in an immigrant country. The absence of explanation is a mere traditional way of concealing feelings deep inside. For the narrator, she later understands the Chinese way of love between family and it means "I hurt for you", an relieving idea that she is content to figure out as not a sharp contrast to American boyfriend Eric's family atmosphere but different implementations towards one goal. During an interview Weike Wang explicates her view of narration of the typical father-daughter plot :

They're in a new country, and they're trying to survive: obviously they're going to be strict, because they don't want you to be homeless. You're so close to homeless when you're here in the beginning! The closer you are to that, the more afraid you are of it. That's a human trait, that's not an ethnic or a gendered trait.

The author pinpoints "the human trait" that underlies life specificity to be irrelevant of ideological or oriental misrepresentation, which exactly shows an embodiment of the narrator's million ongoing understandings. Though in regret Weike Wang acknowledges the lack of clear explanation of shared humanity and it probably turns into a site of unconscious prorogation of stereotypes akin to any Asian Americans, I argue that the novel's narration of the tender interplay between science and life, the aesthetic eyes developed in science, evolves to be an uncanny practice that guides readers to discover instead of being simply informed truth of universality.

Interestingly, the preface of Chemistry illustrates nothing but a mathematical concept: Epigraphy, namely "the set of all points lying on or above a function's graph" (1). Epigraphy, as one of many similar examples of casual thoughts of science, helps narrator to form an aesthetic appreciation of everyday life, and in narrator's constant association of scientific facts, whether in deadpan humor, confusion or contradiction, readers are invited to comprehend the universality of science that accommodates not only in an immigrant daughter's life, but Eric's of American nationality, her

dog's of nonhuman place, and inanimate being's. As the novel progresses, the narrator's internal focalization invites readers to witness a construction of the generic permeation of science among people's life in spite of racial, gender and other disparity. The cooperation thus engenders the possibility of an mutual experience in detecting the universality that haunts life specificity of love, pain and happiness identified as racial stereotypes. The author's unconscious practice, in this sense, anticipates recent studies in affective science that discredits the contradiction between reason and emotion and forwards a complimentary relationship in which "theories of emotions...are helpful for scientific explanation" (Scarantino 3). The incorporation in *Chemistry* promises the possibility of "portrait of a scientist artist motif" and the linkage, I contend, indicates the author's critique of delicacy and instability of defining identities in the protagonist's bildung plots.

Wang's delineation of the narrator's emotion disorder serves as a vacuum where the protagonist is liberated from identity choosing. Instead of drowning the narrator in pure agony or despair, the author endows the chemist student with a noted optimism towards life. During many conversations with the therapist, Eric, confidant and the pet dog, the depressed student renders every discussion into a novel perspective by joining science which for the reader generates a deadpan humor, but for the narrator, a healing process where she is capable to claim agency by downplaying identity constraints. On one occasion when the narrator panicked because she cannot recall the word "sweater" in Chinese, she ponders on the same "identity crisis" in her pet dog's situation when he imitates the cat sometimes. While scolding the dog to "stop that" for behaving as a cat, the narrator simultaneously seems to hint herself to be carefree of identity obsession (158). As the story approaches the end, the immigrant daughter gained an air of maturity not in the sense that depression vanished and the protagonist figured out following plan, but in the way that clarity resides in heart that she demystifies the meaning to be fearless. To be Fearless, a sincere expectation out of parents' silent love, represents numerous ways of leading a life guided by premises such as "Epigraph" in science. With a "portrait of a science artist motif", she is now courageous enough to encounter life without the restraints of identity. However, the rhetoric gesture of mitigating the influence of identity equals no denial of culture difference. As indicated by the author herself, the narrator "does have a rich cultural history; she just doesn't necessarily remember it."

Wang's downplaying of particularities of identity anticipates the critique of ethnic identity crisis. Ethnic identity, the concept itself, has been questioned of its integrity for being ipso facto a "fiction" (Koshy 315). Entering the twenty first century, R. Radhakrishnan argues that ethnicity is of fluidity and without being motionless. More doubt arises when Asian American scholars formally examine the crisis of Asian American's cultural politics. Taken together, the constant interrogation towards the notion of ethnic identity foreshadows an era of identity without ethnicity or specificity. In this respect, Weike Wang's *Chemistry* joins the critique of identity that concentrates less on ethnicity, moreover, the identity of any ideological construction that constraints life. The linkage between science and life, reason and emotion, China and the world, human and nonhuman, coincides with Ma's study of one significant transformation in Asian American literature: a change from proclaiming America to be home to narration of linkage between Asian and America (138). For *Chemistry*, it transcends the gap without dramatizing the distinctiveness but by foregrounding the shared human trait that underpins the basic logic of being "a person" (139).

Conclusion: Towards a Narrative of Meta-Bildungsroman

In *Chemistry*, it lacks a formal closure that harmonizes the narrator with the surroundings. Wang upends the general expectation of bildungsroman where the heroine comes to terms with society by claiming subjectivity in an authoritative or hybrid space, and the narrator is stagnant in development plot even until the end. At first glance, the author seems to create a character whose life is inundated with failure: she foregoes the doctor degree and ideal romance and camouflages all the details of her life from immigrant parents.

While advancing a failing off anti-heroine, the plot development is observed to be undermined

by an “undercurrent” that dissolves the narrator’s failure into sanity and liberty (Shen 4). The contradiction anticipates what Shen theorized as “covert progression”, a parallel of plot development that conveys “contrastive or even opposite thematic significance, character images and aesthetic values” and possess the potential to “complicate reader’s response” in various fashion (2). In terms of *Chemistry*, the overt progression demonstrates to be the anti-heroine’s continuing failure in addressing chaos of degree, relationship with Eric and parents, a modernist bildungsheld’s departure from “social order” that critiques the approved forms of subjectivity in traditional Anglo-American texts. While the covert progression in the novel, namely an aesthetic appreciation of everyday life rooted in scientific education, undercuts the so-called failure narration by developing an epigrammatic humor that encourages the protagonist to resume life even in stasis, and most significantly, a reevaluation of bildung in the matrix of equal life specificity, which ultimately transforms the passive rebel into actively reinvented self with clarity and liberty. The narrator’s contemplation of bildung process of past and present, of classical and modernist, of ethnic and imperial constitutes a meta-bildungsroman where choices are withheld and possibilities of future life emerges. By publishing *Chemistry* despite her belated regret in unconscious promulgation of stereotypes that pervade ethnic literary practice, Wang recognized the universal human traits in reflection of the genre of bildungsroman, in which she portraits a science artist’s aesthetic appreciation of everyday life to engage in nothing less than a radical reconceptualization of human identity itself.

Notes

1. In an interview organized by Asian American Writer’s Workshop, Weike Wang recalled the writing process and explained the anonymity of most figures in *Chemistry*.

2. On winter issue in 2017, *Ploughshares* introduces the John C. Zacharis Award winner Weike Wang’s *Chemistry*, and it involves author’s intention, as in Wang’s phrase, “I believe that much of good writing is clarity and the author’s ability to look at the characters from many facets, to look at a situation from many facets. I think my research background has helped me with that.”

3. In her official interview with Hemingway Society, when asked about the autobiographic elements in the novel, Wang admits the the similar experience in studying chemistry and doctor degree in narration of the unnamed protagonist, in which the author feels a must to endow the character with a personal color.

4. This is the same interview conducted in Note 1.

5. This is the same interview conducted in Note 1.

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