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A Study of the Construction of Lily's Cultural Identity in Timothy Mo's *Sour Sweet*

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ABSTRACT

Existing studies of Timothy Mo's *Sour Sweet* have largely examined Chinese diasporic experience, cultural conflict, and Confucian culture, while paying less attention to Lily's construction of cultural identity as an individual diasporic subject. Focusing on Lily, this study employs close reading and textual analysis, drawing primarily on Stuart Hall's theory of cultural identity and using intersectionality as a complementary perspective. It examines how Lily's early family life and martial arts training shape her cultural identity, how migration and changing familial and economic roles affect her position in Britain, and how later family rupture complicates her attempts to reconstruct her cultural identity. The findings show that Lily's martial upbringing provides her with bodily strength and discipline while also subjecting her to paternal control, making her early cultural identity internally complex rather than culturally fixed. After migration, her increasing involvement in household finance and the family business gives her a greater role in family decision-making, while earlier familial values continue to shape her responses to new circumstances. Chen's disappearance disrupts the family structure within which this position has developed, yet Lily does not respond to this rupture passively. Through memory, family responsibility, and her changing relationship with Man Kee, she continues to reposition herself and gradually reaches a new equilibrium, although this reconstruction remains limited. Her cultural identity is continually reconstructed through her responses to changing familial, economic, gendered, and diasporic conditions.

Keywords: Cultural identity, *Sour Sweet*, Stuart Hall, Timothy Mo

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INTRODUCTION

Chinese settlement in Britain had a long history, but a particularly important change occurred in the 1950s and 1960s, when large numbers of migrants from Hong Kong's New Territories arrived in Britain. Benton and Gomez (2008) note that this arrival transformed the existing Chinese communities, which had previously been relatively small and centred largely on port cities. Unlike many earlier Chinese settlers, who had entered Britain through maritime employment, post-war migrants from Hong Kong increasingly built their lives around land-based occupations and family networks. Their arrival represented a new stage in the formation of the British Chinese community.

The expansion of Chinese migration during this period was closely connected with changes in Britain's post-war economy. Commercial catering grew rapidly in the 1950s, as rising household incomes, the end of food rationing, and changing consumer tastes encouraged people to eat out more frequently. The arrival of Chinese from Hong Kong in Britain "coincided with the start of a Chinese catering boom, as a result of a general boom in commercial catering and the British discovery of a taste for the exotic" (Benton & Gomez, 2008). Many initially worked in established Chinese restaurants before setting up their own businesses, frequently drawing on kinship or village connections to recruit workers and support further migration. "The Commonwealth Immigration Act of 1962 temporarily strengthened these chains by introducing a voucher system that made new immigrants dependent on the patronage of established immigrants" (Benton & Gomez, 2008), reinforcing the concentration of Chinese migrants in the catering sector.

The changing composition and expansion of Chinese communities in Britain also provided an important social context for the development of British Chinese literature. According to Xiao (2020), although Chinese writing in Britain can date back to the early twentieth century, it has remained relatively marginal within the British literary sphere. Its development became more notable in the 1980s and 1990s, with the establishment of British Chinese Writers Association and British Chinese Artists' Association (Xiao, 2020). Timothy Mo was among the most prominent in this period, and his works have been listed in *The Cambridge Guide to Literature in English* (Xiao, 2020). British Chinese literature is also characterised by the heterogeneous backgrounds of its writers. Despite their different geographical and migratory experiences, such writers often engage with "Chineseness—whether through language, heritage, or cultural memory" (Xiao, 2025). At the same time, their different geographical and historical affiliations resist an understanding of British Chinese literature as a single or static category, instead contributing to its "dynamic, evolving and plural character" (Xiao, 2025).

Within this broader social and literary context, *Sour Sweet* (1982), a novel by Timothy Mo, turns to the everyday life of

a Hong Kong Chinese immigrant family in Britain. Shortlisted for the Booker Prize, the novel centres on the Chens, whose experiences unfold through their work, family relationships, and encounters with a new social environment. The Chens' livelihood is closely connected with the catering trade. Chen initially works as a chef in a Chinatown restaurant, and the family later open a takeaway in a London suburb. This trajectory shows a broader pattern of post-war Chinese settlement in Britain described by Benton and Gomez, in which catering employed many migrants from Hong Kong, some of whom later established their own restaurants and takeaways. As a wife, mother, and immigrant, Lily is central to the family, and her position within it is gradually reshaped by the changing economic and social circumstances. Although she continues to fulfil her female responsibilities within the new household, she also takes an increasingly active role in family decisions and in managing their new life. Lily's changing position makes her relevant to an examination of how cultural identity is continually negotiated and reconstructed within shifting familial and social conditions.

Existing studies have approached the novel from a variety of perspectives, including the representations of Confucian culture, Chinatown, the Hung Sect, family relations, and collective Chinese identity. These studies have provided important insights into this novel, but less attention has been paid to how Lily's cultural identity develops over the course of the novel. In particular, the connections between her early martial arts training, her changing position within the family, and the social conditions she encounters after migration have not been fully examined.

To address this gap, this study focuses on the construction of Lily's cultural identity in *Sour Sweet*. It traces how her early family experiences and martial arts training shape her cultural identity, how migration and changing familial and economic roles reposition her in Britain, and how later family rupture leads to further identity reconstruction. Particular attention is paid to the roles of gender, family relationships, and economic circumstances in this process. By considering Lily's individual experiences in relation to the historical and social context of British Chinese migration, this study moves beyond readings centred primarily on Confucian culture or generalised diasporic experience. It highlights the complex relationship between Lily's personal choices and the familial and social conditions that shape her cultural identity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sour Sweet portrays the struggles and hardships of first-generation Chinese immigrants in British Chinatown and is regarded as a representative work in British Chinese literature. Scholars have interpreted it through writing techniques, thematic analysis, language features, cultural study, and so forth. In terms of cultural elements in this novel, Rothfork (1989) and Tao (2012) study how Confucianism is manifested in the text, paying special attention to the portrayal

of the *hsiao*, or filial deference. Lim (1996) examines how patriarchal structures are deconstructed within traditional Confucian culture in the immigrant Chinese family. Ho (2000) further adopts a defamiliarisation approach to analyse the family and social spaces in the British Chinatown in the novel, revealing how cross-cultural context reshapes the power order of the immigrant family. Jin (2026) analyses the Chinese Pidgin English used by the non-whites in this novel.

Another group of studies focuses on immigrant individuals and their adaptive experiences in the novel. Suprajitno (2002) discusses how different personal traits influence the major characters' attitudes and coping strategies when they face an unfamiliar Western social and cultural environment. Çelikel (2010) points out that food and the body mark immigrant identity and serve as important channels for cultural exchange, cultural translation, and cultural transformation in *Sour Sweet*. In a more recent study, Zhai and Wang (2025) offer a detailed study of the relation between thing narrative and immigrants' cross-cultural adaptation.

While previous research offers valuable insight into this novel, it still has noticeable limitations, creating gaps worthy of further exploration. First, most studies rely on conventional ethnic literary frameworks to describe immigrant Chinese or Confucian culture in the text, with limited close reading of how diasporic Chinese negotiate and reconstruct their cultural identities in the British context. Second, previous studies tend to prioritise collective experiences of diasporic Chinese in Britain while neglecting individual differences in their cultural identity construction. Although existing studies have examined manifestations of the protagonists' identity crises, particularly their cross-cultural conflicts, less attention has been paid to how their cultural identities are initially formed and subsequently develop. Accordingly, the underlying cultural driving forces and the dynamic process of identity construction remain underexamined. These gaps leave space for further in-depth textual analysis of this novel.

Due to these limitations, this study examines the dynamic process of Lily's cultural identity formation mainly through Stuart Hall's theory of cultural identity. Hall argues that cultural identity is "a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'" and is "subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power" (Hall, 1990). His distinction between "similarity and continuity" and "difference and rupture" further shows how identity is shaped through both connections with the past and subsequent breaks and differences. Intersectionality offers a complementary perspective on how Lily's gender, migration, familial roles, and economic position interact at different stages of her identity construction. In this way, the study provides a closer examination of Lily's changing cultural identity within the specific familial and diasporic conditions represented in *Sour Sweet*.

Theoretical Framework

Hall puts forward two perspectives on cultural identity first in *Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation* (1989). It was later revised as *Cultural Identity and Diaspora* (1990), becoming one of the most highly cited works in cultural studies. Hall first distinguishes a position that understands cultural identity in terms of continuity and shared experience. From this perspective, cultural identity reflects "the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as 'one people', with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning" (Hall, 1990). Meanwhile, Hall's second position brings historical difference, transformation, and rupture into the understanding of cultural identity. He argues that identities have histories, but they are also subject to continuing transformation. Rather than being fixed in an essentialised past, an identity "belongs to the future as much as to the past". They are formed by how individuals are positioned within changing historical and cultural circumstances.

The emphasis on difference also leads to Hall's discussion of rupture. In his account, Hall (1990) describes how the ruptures and discontinuities constitute precisely the Caribbean's uniqueness. Rupture does not simply mean the loss of an original identity. Rather, it points to the historical breaks and differences that prevent cultural identity from remaining continuous and unchanged. Experiences such as displacement, migration, and changing social relations may alter the positions from which individuals understand their past and locate themselves in the present. Continuity and rupture are not mutually exclusive. A sense of connection with the past may persist even as new circumstances disturb earlier forms of identification and produce new differences. Cultural identity develops through this tension between what is retained and what is changed.

Hall (1996) further develops his understanding of identity in *Who Needs "Identity"?* by arguing that identity should be understood as "a strategic and positional one" (Hall, 1996). Here, identity takes shape through particular positions and is articulated within specific historical and discursive conditions. Hall also stresses that identities are "never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions" (Hall, 1996). This formulation further complicates any attempt to understand diasporic identity through a single cultural origin. Historical and cultural attachments remain important, but their meanings may change as subjects occupy different social positions and encounter different discourses and relations of power. Identity, in this sense, involves "using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being" (Hall, 1996).

Hall's emphasis on difference and positioning remains useful for understanding cultural identity, and later scholarship has highlighted the multiple social positions through which identity is formed. Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality

challenges approaches that treat race and gender as mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis (Crenshaw, 1989), drawing attention to the ways different forms of social difference and inequality intersect. Later scholars further develop intersectionality into a broader theoretical and methodological field, shifting attention from identity categories themselves to the social dynamics and relations through which subjects are constituted (Cho et al, 2013). Such perspectives complement Hall's theory of cultural identity by highlighting how gender, ethnicity, economic position, and migrant status may interact under particular social conditions.

Altogether, these perspectives provide a framework for examining the construction of cultural identity. Based on this, the study examines how Lily's early family experience and martial arts training shape her cultural identity, how migration and changing economic and familial roles affect her position in Britain, and how family rupture challenges her previous sense of identity and leads to further reconstruction.

METHODS

This study uses close reading and textual analysis as its core methods. It employs Hall's cultural identity theory as the primary framework to examine the construction of Lily's cultural identity in *Sour Sweet*. Following Hall's interpretation of cultural identity, this study considers identity in relation to historical continuity, difference, positioning and rupture. An intersectional perspective is also used as a supplementary approach to examine how gender, family roles, economic position, and migration interact in Lily's identity construction.

Hall's theory of cultural identity provides the main theoretical basis for the textual analysis. While the first position draws attention to shared histories and cultural continuity, the second emphasises difference, transformation, positioning, and rupture. Close reading is used to trace these processes through Lily's actions, interactions with other characters, and significant experiences in the novel. Particular attention is given to Lily's early family experience and martial arts training, her changing familial and economic position after migration to Britain, and the later rupture of her cultural identity. The analysis considers how she responds to changing social and familial circumstances and how intersecting conditions shape her possibilities for action.

First, in terms of the historical formation of identity, close reading examines how Lily's early family experience and martial arts training provide important resources for her cultural identity. In this sense, cultural tradition can provide a point of identification for her, but its meaning remains subject to reinterpretation as her circumstances change.

Second, in terms of identity positioning after migration, this study draws on Hall's theory to examine how Lily responds to the changing social, familial, and economic conditions of migrant life in Britain. Particular attention is paid to how she draws on existing cultural resources while taking

on new roles in the family and its business. An intersectional perspective further helps to consider how gender, family roles, economic position, and migration interact in shaping Lily's cultural positioning.

Third, the study examines the later development of Lily's cultural identity as changes in her family relationships unsettle the position she has established in Britain. Close reading is used to analyse how she responds to Chen's disappearance and her changing relationship with Man Kee, and how these experiences alter her position within the family. Particular attention is paid to the new equilibrium Lily seeks to establish through memory and familial responsibility, as well as the possibilities and limits of her later cultural position.

This study follows a text-based approach. The analysis is grounded primarily in textual evidence from the novel and is supplemented by relevant historical and social contexts of Chinese migration to Britain. The analysis does not rely on Mo's biographical information to explain the character or the novel.

In conclusion, this study combines close reading and textual analysis with Hall's cultural identity theory, supplemented by an intersectional perspective. The analysis examines Lily's cultural identity through its early historical and familial formation, her changing position after migration, and the later processes of rupture and reconstruction. This approach allows the study to explore both Lily's responses to changing circumstances and the social, familial, and economic conditions that shape the possibilities and limits of her identity construction.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Martial Arts, Family, and Lily's Early Cultural Identity

Sour Sweet depicts the diasporic experience of the Chens, a Hong Kong Chinese family consisting of Chen, his wife Lily, and her sister Mui, who settle in Britain in the mid-twentieth century. Lily's cultural identity, however, is formed by a particular familial and social history before migration. Her childhood martial arts training, upbringing, and experience of wartime displacement provide the early foundations for her cultural identity.

Born in rural Kwangsi, China, Lily grows up in a household without a male heir after her mother dies giving birth to Mui. Her father responds by deciding that he can "pretend Lily was a boy" (Mo, 1982). This decision places Lily in a different position than her elder sister. While Mui is associated with flower arrangement, embroidery, and other activities arranged for her as a girl, Lily is directed towards the "sterner pursuits" of martial training. The contrast between the sisters shows that her gender does not simply determine Lily's early identity position. Rather, it develops within the specific structure of her family and through her father's decision to assign her a role unavailable to her.

The particular form of martial arts Lily learns further reveals the gendered nature of her father's arrangement. The narrator makes this distinction explicit by contrasting

the martial arts chosen for Lily with the "soft" or "internal" styles usually associated with female practitioners:

> No "soft" or "internal" style for Lily, with the passive, yielding techniques girls usually studied. Lily was not to learn one of the suitable systems such as the eight-diagram palm, the supreme ultimate fist of tai chi. White Crane fighting, or the speedy, economical system invented by the Buddhist nun Yim Wing Chun in the late eighteenth century. Instead, she was to be versed in all the pristine rigour and southern form of siu lum temple boxing.
>
> (Mo, 1982)

The contrast between these different styles makes her father's choice significant. Rather than seeing Lily as a common female practitioner, he subjects her to a more rigorous form of training. His decision reflects not simply the transmission of martial tradition, but the distinctive role he assigns Lily within the family. At five, Lily is required to remain in a low crouch for an hour while balancing a wine jar on her head and enduring repeated blows to her shins. The image of her continuing the exercise in tears reveals the severity of the discipline imposed on her. Martial arts give Lily unusual bodily strength and discipline while also placing her body under strict paternal control. This combination of empowerment and discipline becomes an important part of her early cultural identity.

However, such upbringing does not give her a stable position within the family. The same paternal authority that makes her exceptional also sets clear limits on her position. When Lily reaches puberty, her father abruptly ends her martial training. Significantly, his decision does not arise from "any tardy recognition of his daughter's gender" but from his dissatisfaction with the changes in her martial movements (Mo, 1982). The training consequently ends "as arbitrarily as it had begun" (Mo, 1982), which reflects the father's control over Lily's position. He first allows her to cross the gender distinction established between the two sisters and then withdraws that exceptional role according to his own judgement.

Lily's family history is further disrupted by political upheaval and war. In the final stage of the Chinese Civil War in the 1940s, her father joins the retinue of a local landowner and is killed three months later while attacking fortified positions (Mo, 1982). The narrator places his death within a wider historical change, observing that boxers who had previously played an important role in the "patriotic rising of 1900" had by the middle of the century been "overtaken by an interpretation of history" (Mo, 1982). With the death of her father, the practice that had structured Lily's childhood is no longer transmitted through the immediate master-disciple and father-daughter relationship. Lily and Mui are subsequently left to make their way alone, turning the martial and familial world of Lily's childhood into part of a disrupted past.

Seen in relation to Hall's distinction between cultural continuity and rupture,

these experiences provide an important historical basis for Lily's early cultural identity. Her martial upbringing connects her to her father and family history, but this inheritance is formed by gendered difference, paternal authority, and historical disruption. Martial arts give Lily bodily discipline and a distinctive position within the family. Yet, the abrupt end of her training and the later loss of her father prevent this position from becoming stable. Thus, her early cultural identity is historically formed and internally complex rather than culturally fixed.

Migration and the Repositioning of Lily's Cultural Identity

After migrating to Britain, Lily has to adapt her earlier cultural practices and family values to a different social and economic environment. At the beginning of *Sour Sweet*, the Chens have lived in Britain for four years, long enough to have "lost their place in the society from which they have emigrated but not long enough to feel comfortable" in Britain (Mo, 1982). This leaves the family with an even more unstable sense of cultural belonging. For Lily, migration does not erase the familial practices and bodily knowledge formed during her childhood. She continues to draw on them in managing her domestic life, but their meanings are increasingly shaped by the circumstances of migrant life in Britain. Her cultural identity after migration develops through the interaction between inherited cultural resources and the new social positions available to her as a wife, mother, and member of a migrant household.

The new family's economic status also shapes Lily's position after migration. Chen works long hours in a Chinese restaurant, spending fifty-six hours a week at work and considerably less time with his wife and son. Although his wages are described as "spectacularly good", "the money came at a cost" (Mo, 1982). This working pattern reflects the economic circumstances of post-war Chinese migration to Britain. As Benton and Gomez (2008) propose, the expansion of Chinese catering in the post-war decades provided an important source of employment for migrants from Hong Kong, many of whom initially worked in the restaurants as cooks and waiters before seeking opportunities to branch out on their own For Lily, Chen's long working hours mean that relative economic security comes with greater responsibility for everyday family life. She manages the household largely in his absence and gradually assumes a more important role in family decisions. Chen's employment is significant to Lily's identity construction because the economic conditions of migrant life also reshape her position within the family.

Lily initially performs this domestic role through practices she understands as appropriate to family life. She prepares a snack for Chen when he returns after midnight and watches closely to ensure that he finishes it. The narrator connects her behaviour to knowledge inherited from her father, including ideas about bodily balance and yin and yang. These details show that Lily continues to rely on the cultural knowledge she acquired earlier. Yet she is

far from an obedient wife. Even apparently conventional acts of care contain an element of control, as Chen finds Lily's "reproachful eyes" sufficiently powerful and intolerable to make him finish food he does not want. Domestic responsibility gives Lily a sphere in which her inherited knowledge, care, and authority can overlap. Her later rise within the family does not emerge suddenly from cultural adaptation but develops from a domestic position she has occupied from the beginning.

Outside the household, however, Lily is less familiar with the rules and conventions of British society. This becomes clear after she begins learning to drive. Her confidence in driving is closely connected with what she has learned from her father. When Mui worries about her driving, Lily recalls a principle repeatedly taught to her in childhood: "It's not hurry which makes speed, elder sister, but coolness" (Mo, 1982). Yet Lily also assumes her ability to drive matters more than formal recognition. She has no intention of taking a driving test and tells Mui, "I shall put a little tea money in a plastic folder. That'll be my licence" (Mo, 1982). Mui immediately warns her that "You can't get away with that sort of thing here" (Mo, 1982) and reminds her of the possibility of fines or even imprisonment. The disagreement shows that Lily tends to handle unfamiliar situations through the experience and judgement she already possesses, rather than immediately accepting rules that are new to her. This tendency may also relate to the family outlook she formed during childhood. Her belief that family members should remain united against "a hostile conspiring world" suggests that she has learned to rely strongly on the family and its own ways of confronting external difficulties (Mo, 1982). Her loyalty to her father and her reluctance to follow British regulations are not necessarily contradictory. The former belongs to the familial authority and disciplines she has internalised since childhood. In contrast, the latter belongs to an unfamiliar social system whose rules she does not yet fully accept. Her earlier cultural experience still influences how she responds to life in Britain, but familiar ways of dealing with problems do not always fit the new social environment.

Chinatown provides a different kind of encounter because it brings Lily into contact with a cultural practice familiar from her earlier life. Watching a public Chinese boxing demonstration, she does not simply recall her past but evaluates what she sees through the martial knowledge acquired in childhood. She becomes critical of the performers' techniques, noting that "their balance was single-weighted on the leading foot, cardinal error which could lead to broken legs in combat; the shadow boxing sets left out moves, and so on" (Mo, 1982). Her judgement shows that martial arts remain part of the knowledge through which she understands what she encounters after migration. In this sense, her earlier cultural experience continues to shape her diasporic life, while taking on new significance in a different social setting. It reactivates the special knowledge acquired through childhood training and

allows her to judge the performers from the position of an experienced practitioner. The distinction between spectator and expert temporarily changes her position in the public space of Chinatown. Martial arts, which her father had imposed on her through paternal discipline, then becomes a resource through which she exercises judgement independently of her father. The episode shows that Lily's earlier cultural experience has not simply disappeared. She retains embodied knowledge from her past but uses it from a different social and historical position.

A more consequential change occurs when Lily begins to intervene directly in the family's economy. The Chens' decision to establish their own business needs to be read against the structure of Chinese catering in Britain. Benton and Gomez (2008) note that independent proprietorship became an important aspiration among Chinese catering workers, and that personal savings and family labour played a major role in making such businesses possible (pp. 123-124). The novel also places the Chens directly within this pattern. Long before the family faces the risks of running its own establishment, Lily has been "scrimping on her diet" and steadily accumulating capital from the household budget (Mo, 1982). Her saving is not simply an act of thrift, but an effort to "insure against disaster or make a new future" (Mo, 1982). By carefully managing the household budget and accumulating savings, Lily gradually takes on a greater role in the family's financial affairs. Her contribution also strengthens her position in family decisions as the Chens move towards establishing their own business.

The move into family business also complicates the gendered division that had characterised the household. Benton and Gomez (2008) show that family labour gave Chinese takeaway businesses important economic advantages, and that husband-and-wife teams initially established many takeaways after working together and accumulating savings. From an intersectional perspective, Lily's growing economic role is closely connected to her position as a wife, mother, and member of the diaspora, as her involvement in the family business develops alongside her responsibilities within the household. Similar economic pressures shape the Chens' experience. When they inspect possible premises, Chen initially wants "a more cautious, less obtrusive start", whereas Lily is less willing to retreat from the risks involved (Mo, 1982). Chen's exposure to British society through restaurant work has made him acutely conscious of hostility outside the household. Lily, by contrast, has had less direct exposure to such encounters and approaches the new business with a different perception of risk. Their disagreement reflects more than a contrast between a cautious husband and a more assertive wife. Their different experiences of work and public life in Britain shape how they understand the risks involved in starting their business.

As the business develops, Lily becomes increasingly involved in the family's economic affairs. Her savings, labour, and

involvement in financial decisions give her a more direct stake in the household economy. At the same time, the business depends heavily on family cooperation. Her growing authority reflects both her commitment to the family and her increasing role in family decisions. Her efforts focus on the family's economic well-being, which also strengthens her voice in decisions conventionally associated with Chen as husband and breadwinner.

The dispute over remittances further reveals that Lily's economic authority is tied to her understanding of family obligation. When Chen proposes temporarily stopping payments to his parents, Lily regards the suggestion as a violation of "everything she believed in" and insists that the money should continue even if the family itself has to endure hardship (Mo, 1982). When Chen asks "Who is head in our family? You think wife tells Husband what to do?", Lily lowers her eyes but remains determined to disobey him. The scene makes the redistribution of domestic power explicit. Lily does not directly challenge Chen but does so in defence of a familial obligation she considers necessary to fulfil. Her insistence on family obligation does not make her submissive but gives her a reason to challenge his decision. The same commitment to family responsibility that might appear conservative gives Lily grounds to contest her husband's decision.

Lily's increasing involvement in managing family finances and running the family business give her greater influence over important family decisions. At the same time, she continues to draw on the familial values formed through her earlier experiences, as shown by her insistence on sending money to Chen's parents. These earlier values take on a different significance as Lily assumes greater economic and familial responsibilities in Britain. Her cultural identity is repositioned through her changing role within the family and the new economic circumstances of migrant life. This process reflects Hall's understanding of cultural identity as continually positioned and repositioned within changing historical conditions.

Yet Lily's cultural identity is repositioned more within the family and its economic life, and does not extend to the wider social sphere. The family business gives her greater influence over financial and domestic decisions, but her social contacts remain limited. Chen's work and concealed involvement with the Triad expose him to relationships and dangers of which Lily hardly knows. The limits of Lily's position become increasingly visible as tensions within the family intensify, and its previous stability begins to break down.

Family Rupture and Lily's Cultural Identity Crisis

The family occupies a particularly important place in Lily's life after migration. The novel describes her as moving within a "restricted circle" consisting largely of herself, Mui, and Man Kee. At the same time, her English neighbours and the Polish doctor remain little more than acquaintances (Mo, 1982). With much of her everyday life centred on

this small circle, the relationships within it become closely connected with the position Lily establishes in Britain. As tensions gradually emerge among Lily, Chen, Mui, and Man Kee, the family can no longer provide the same sense of order and stability. These changes prepare the way for a more serious crisis in Lily's cultural identity.

After several disagreements over Man Kee and Mui, Lily begins to feel that the other family members are turning against her. This sense of isolation is clearly shown in the dinner-table scene. When Chen takes Lily's usual chair, she finds herself "ranged on her own at the table", while Chen, Mui, and Man Kee sit together opposite her. The arrangement "mirrored the rift of feeling in the family" (Mo, 1982). The scene makes Lily's growing isolation within the family visible. Although she has gained a stronger voice in family decisions, her relationships with other family members have become increasingly strained. Her stronger position within the household does not necessarily bring greater understanding or closeness among members.

Her conflict with Man Kee exposes this limit more sharply. When her son says that he wants to become a gardener, Lily immediately asks whether he wants to become "a coolie" and reminds him of the labour and educational investment the family has made on his behalf (Mo, 1982). Her anger reflects her economic aspirations as a first-generation migrant parent who sees education as a means of securing upward mobility for the next generation. Yet Lily converts this aspiration into parental authority, insisting that Man Kee "must do what his parent says" (Mo, 1982). The disagreement reveals a growing conflict between Lily's expectations for her son's future and Man Kee's desire to make his own choices.

Lily's response to this disagreement turns the conflict over Man Kee's future into a physical struggle. According to the text, Lily goes into the garden, grips the mango plant, and tries to pull it from the ground. "She strained, fighting the plant with her whole body. With louder vegetable groanings, it began to come out of the earth. Another long pull and then the plant was uprooted with a single loud snap that seems to come out of her own body" (Mo, 1982). The scene recalls the bodily force developed through Lily's martial arts training, but it is then directed toward something cultivated by her son. The mango plant has grown successfully in a new environment Lily had considered unsuitable. Its unexpected growth parallels Man Kee's increasing independence and his desire to make choices beyond Lily's expectations. By uprooting the plant, Lily attempts to resist a change within the family that she finds difficult to accept.

Yet the final "snap", which comes from her own body, also connects the destruction of the plant with her own emotional strain. The episode reveals a growing tension in Lily's cultural identity. The martial strength and familial authority that have helped her establish her position within the family can no longer secure the same authority over Man Kee. Her position as a mother

then conflicts with her established role as the family's decision-maker. From an intersectional perspective, these positions do not operate separately but converge in her response to Man Kee, making his growing independence both a familial challenge and a challenge to the position Lily have constructed after migration. As Zhai and Wang propose, things (including the mango) serve as repositories of deep psychological truths, amplifying character traits and acting as powerful catalysts that propel the tragic figures toward their inevitable downfalls (Zhai & Wang, 2025).

Chen's subsequent disappearance turns these family tensions into a deeper rupture. His absence confronts Lily with a situation she cannot manage through the familial authority she has established. More importantly, the family structure on which her position in Britain has depended is suddenly disrupted. Although Lily has often challenged Chen and taken a leading role in family decisions, her roles as wife, mother, and manager of the household have all developed within their relationship. His disappearance affects more than her personal life. It further unsettles the familial position through which much of her cultural identity has been formed after migration.

This moment reflects Hall's distinction between "similarity and continuity" and "difference and rupture" (Hall, 1990). The rupture does not erase Lily's earlier identity but changes the conditions under which she can maintain it. Without Chen, the family relationships and roles that previously supported her position can no longer function in the same way. Lily must reposition herself within a changed family structure, while Man Kee's growing independence further complicates the process.

Lily does not respond to Chen's disappearance passively. She searches for him and tries to find out what has happened, but much of his life outside the family remains unknown to her. This situation marks a clear departure from the pattern established earlier in the novel. Within the family, Lily has usually responded to difficulties through her own decisions and actions. Chen's disappearance, however, confronts her with a situation that she can neither control nor resolve. How she has previously maintained family order is no longer sufficient, leaving the position she has established in Britain increasingly unstable.

The family rupture reveals the limits of the position Lily has constructed after migration. Her martial arts training, domestic authority, financial management, and commitment to family obligation have helped her establish a position within the household. Still, they cannot protect that position from changes in family relationships. Her conflict with Man Kee shows that she cannot simply pass her values and expectations on to the next generation. At the same time, Chen's disappearance demonstrates that authority within the family does not give her control over the circumstances beyond it. Lily's identity crisis emerges as the relationships that have supported her position begin to change or

disappear. From Hall's perspective, rupture does not erase her earlier cultural identity, but requires Lily to reposition herself when the values, relationships, and roles that previously supported it can no longer function in the same way.

The Limits of Lily's Cultural Identity Reconstruction

Chen's disappearance does not bring Lily's identity construction to an end but changes the conditions under which she continues to reposition herself. In Britain, Lily must continue the business and everyday family life without the relationship that had previously shaped her position within the household. She cannot simply recover her earlier position but must respond to these changes. Her subsequent reconstruction reflects the continuing process of becoming described by Hall, while also revealing the difficulties of repositioning herself after the family rupture.

One of Lily's responses is to reconstruct Chen through memory and imagination. During his lifetime, their relationship is marked by disagreements and repeated conflicts over family decisions. After his disappearance, however, these tensions fade when Lily talks about Chen to Man Kee. In her memory and imagination, Chen becomes "far-sighted, strong, resolute, kind, magnanimous, and brave; he was also considerate, unselfish, sympathetic, tender, and gentle" (Mo, 1982). This idealised image differs noticeably from the Chen presented earlier in their married life and allows Lily to preserve a positive image of the absent father for Man Kee.

Lily is not simply recalling the past as it was but reshaping her memories in response to the family's changed circumstances. As Man Kee grows up without his father, this idealised image of Chen helps her maintain a sense of family connection after the earlier family structure has broken down. At the same time, this reconstruction shows how Lily attempts to reposition herself after the rupture by giving new meaning to a relationship that can no longer continue in its previous form.

However, the limits of this reconstruction also become clearer when Lily's different social positions are considered together. Chen's absence affects not only her position as a wife but also the familial and economic responsibilities she must then assume. As subjects are constituted through intersecting social dynamics and relations (Cho et al., 2013), Lily's identity reconstruction must be understood in relation to her position as a mother, the family's sole supporter, and a Chinese immigrant in Britain. These overlapping positions increase her responsibilities while limiting her options for rebuilding her life after Chen's death.

Man Kee further complicates Lily's identity reconstruction after Chen's disappearance. As a second-generation Chinese who grows up in Britain, he develops preferences and expectations that do not always correspond with Lily's own. Lily nevertheless continues to fulfil her maternal responsibilities and passes on to him the family memories she has reconstructed after Chen's disappearance. In this sense, her role as a mother helps her

maintain family ties and cultural memory under changed circumstances. Her continued love for Chen, her belief that he may one day return, and her insistence on sending money to his parents back in Hong Kong further show that she does not abandon the relationship after his disappearance. By presenting a more positive image of Chen to Man Kee, Lily gives the absent husband and father a new place within the changed family.

Man Kee's growing independence places limits on Lily's reconstruction of her cultural identity, as she can no longer organise family life entirely according to her own expectations. Yet this does not diminish the active role she has come to play within the family. After Chen's disappearance, Lily continues to raise her son, manage family responsibilities, and maintain the values and memories she considers important. At the same time, she gradually accepts that Man Kee may make choices different from her own. Lily's later cultural identity represents neither a return to her earlier position nor a collapse after rupture. Instead, she begins to "find the still point of equilibrium" (Mo, 1982) between her attachment to the past and the changing realities of her family life. This equilibrium remains open to further change, showing that Lily can reposition herself through loss, motherhood, and ongoing family responsibility rather than being passively defined by them.

Taken as a whole, Lily's reconstruction after family rupture is neither a return to her earlier identity nor a passive response to the loss of Chen. Through her idealisation of Chen, her continuing commitment to family responsibilities, and her changing relationship with Man Kee, she actively repositions herself within the altered family structure. From an intersectional perspective, her positions as a mother, family organiser, financial decision-maker, and Chinese immigrant interact in this process, shaping both the possibilities and limits of her reconstruction. Lily gradually reaches a new equilibrium between her attachment to the past and the realities of her changed family life. Yet this equilibrium remains limited, as she cannot restore the relationships that have been lost or determine how Man Kee, as a second-generation Chinese person growing up in Britain, will understand the family history and values she passes on. Despite these limitations, Lily's reconstruction shows that rupture does not end her cultural identity formation, but may open new possibilities for her to reposition herself under changed circumstances.

CONCLUSION

Drawing on Stuart Hall's theory of cultural identity and supplemented by an intersectional perspective, this study examines Lily's cultural identity construction in *Sour Sweet* through close reading and textual analysis. The analysis shows that her cultural identity is shaped by both historical continuity and changing familial and social conditions. Her early martial arts training remains an important part of her cultural experience, while migration, changing family relations, and increasing economic responsibilities alter

the meanings attached to that experience. Lily's cultural identity construction is not a passive cultural adaptation. Instead, it develops through continuous repositioning between inherited values, changing social positions, and moments of rupture.

The study shows that Lily's cultural identity is better understood by bringing cultural continuity, gender, family roles, economic responsibilities, and immigrant experience into the same analysis. Hall's theory helps explain the changing and positional nature of her cultural identity, while an intersectional perspective shows how gender, family roles, economic position, and immigrant status shape both her choices and the constraints she faces. This reading also moves beyond approaches that treat Lily mainly as a representative of Chinese tradition and draws attention to how her identity develops through specific experiences and changing relationships. In this sense, the study offers a more character-centred understanding of identity construction in *Sour Sweet* and contributes to discussions of British Chinese diasporic literature.

This study focuses primarily on Lily and does not provide an equally detailed analysis of other characters whose experiences also contribute to the novel's representation of cultural identity. Its focus on a single character in a single text also limits the extent to which its findings can be applied to Mo's novels more broadly. Future research could compare Lily with other female characters in Mo's other novels to examine how different familial, social, and migratory circumstances shape cultural identity in different ways. Such comparative work may provide a broader understanding of the varied forms of identity construction represented in Mo's novels.

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