

Research on Siamese twins demonstrates how paradox of American identity played out in bodies of Chang and Eng

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Cultural scholar Cynthia Wu has spent years studying Chang and Eng Bunker, a pair of Asian-born, co-joined, entrepreneurial, self-promoting "human marvels." "The Bunker twins," she says, "have served for more than 100 years as metaphors for the paradox that while 'individualism' is what makes Americans stand apart from Europeans, unity is equally valued."

Wu, PhD, assistant professor of American studies at the University at Buffalo, says much has been written about the twins' unusual talents, intelligence, fame, far-flung travels and precocity. But her interest lies in the fact that in literature, cultural studies and art the twins have been used to represent the quintessential American struggle between otherness and sameness, unity and diversity, exoticism and normalcy -- concepts that historically play out in the very bodies of major popular culture icons. Michael Jackson, [Lady Gaga](#) are just two contemporary examples.

A specialist in disability studies and comparative ethnic studies, Wu focuses on this embodiment in her upcoming book "National Conjoinments: The Siamese Twins in American Literature and Culture," due out in 2012 from Temple University Press.

"The Bunkers represented more than who and what they were as actual people," she says, "They were 'symbols' for many like Mark Twain and 19th century cartoonist Thomas Nast, who used them to work out the

tricky difference between difference and unity in [national culture](#).

"The twins came to represent unity from difference for many reasons," she says, "one of which is that even though they shared a body, they were far from identical individuals.

"Each of them possessed many discrete traits that opposed those in the other in important ways," she says.

"Chang Bunker was friendly, outgoing, alcoholic, shorter in stature and had a temper; for instance, while Eng was a quiet, withdrawn teetotaler with wider intellectual interests. One body, two individuals," Wu says, adding that their differences extended to different physical peculiarities and reactions to physical stimuli, a fact that fascinated physicians.

"Even in terms of their shared traits and identity," says Wu, "they repeatedly confounded public assumptions about their origins, physical abilities and social selves." The public contradictions and convolutions so like those of the American body politic, begin with their moniker.

"The Bunkers (like many American immigrants, they adopted a new name) were popularly known as 'Siamese twins,'" says Wu, "in part because to Westerners, Siam represented a mystical place as isolated and impenetrable as they took these brothers to be. Although they were actually Malaysian and Chinese, the Bunkers willingly employed the term 'Siamese' to promote the very mystery they were selling.

"Another paradox," says Wu, "is that as migrants from Asia, Chang and Eng inhabited a subjugated position in the racially stratified United States. Many Asian immigrants were financially exploited by corporate and individual interests in the early 19th century and, when they arrived here, the Bunkers were no exception.

"But they took hold of their own lives," she says, "and ultimately assumed considerable class privilege in the antebellum South, where they married white sisters, had 21 children between them (all double cousins), operated a family plantation and owned slaves themselves.

"Another incongruity," says Wu, "is that, in that era, anatomically anomalous subjects were considered weird, even frightening and were often hidden away. Not the Bunkers. They used their 'mysterious origins' and physical anomaly for profit, creating considerable wealth from the deliberate and self-orchestrated display of their bodies before audiences around the world."

Contemporaneous entertainers who made their living as "freaks," were usually indentured to employers or agents who exploited them for their own financial gain, she says. The Bunkers upended that practice as well, hiring their own managers, running their own entertainment enterprise and benefitting financially from their business acumen.

Wu says, "We have a lot of evidence of how they were perceived, how they behaved; how they were discussed, because even in their lifetimes, they were enormously well known. There are a vast number of newspaper accounts, advertising posters, souvenir booklets, trading cards and portrayals of the twins in song, drama and fictional prose and, of course, family stories, documents and letters to inform our understanding.

"Possessed of some qualities that could have left them economically marginalized and socially dispossessed, these exotic, 'disabled' oddities used other qualities to become agents of their own success," says Wu "and because of that, artists and writers in their own day and afterwards have used the Bunker twins to 'think through' the paradox of 'otherness and 'difference' that operated and continue to operate within a society that celebrates assimilation."

Provided by University at Buffalo

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