



Journal of Arts & Humanities

Volume 14, Issue 05, 2025: 29-35

Article Received: 20-11-2025

Accepted: 01-12-2025

Available Online: 10-12-2025

ISSN: 2167-9045 (Print), 2167-9053 (Online)

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.18533/journal.v14i5.2633>

The influence of community on identity construction in *Our Missing Hearts*

Chonglin Yan¹

ABSTRACT

In contemporary multicultural societies, ethnic minorities frequently face cultural marginalization, structural inequality, and selective silence, and such factors continually undermine their identity and sense of belonging. *Our Missing Hearts*, written by Chinese-American author Celeste Ng, dramatically portrays this predicament against the backdrop of a dystopian America: cultural suppression and state surveillance tear apart the identity construction of individuals and communities. This study employs community theory as its framework to explore how identity can be reconstructed through community within an unequal multicultural context. This paper aims to analyze community construction and its impact on identity reconstruction. Through close textual analysis, the study reveals differences between institutionalized communities and spontaneous communities in terms of normative control and creative participation; altruism manifests not only in material actions but also exerts influence at cultural and spiritual levels; and a sense of belonging is reconstructed through the interaction between individuals and cultural communities, all of which make a difference for identity reconstruction. This paper reveals that individual identity is profoundly shaped by multi-cultures, particularly mainstream culture, yet community provides crucial ethical spaces for minority groups to reconstruct their identities.

Keywords: Community, identity, *Our Missing Hearts*, empathy, altruism, sense of belonging.

This is an open access article under Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License.

1. Introduction

In an era of intensified globalization and cultural tensions, the issues of community and identity have emerged as a central focus in contemporary cultural studies. Celeste Ng's novel *Our Missing Hearts* foregrounds these concerns by exploring how communities reshape cultural memory and personal identity.

Existing researches have examined political discourse, racial identity, and familial trauma within the novel, yet have paid insufficient attention to the role of community structures in characters' identity construction. In particular, the contrast between institutionalized community such as PACT and

¹ Sultan Idris Education University, Malaysia. Email: 465511180@qq.com

spontaneous community formed by artists and underground messengers has not been systematically analyzed.

This study aims to fill this gap by examining how different community forms operate in the novel and how they influence the protagonists' psychological transformations and identity reconstruction. Drawing on Tönnies' distinction between *Gemeinschaft* (Community) and *Gesellschaft* (society), this paper focuses on how empathy, altruism, and belonging function as communal forces, enabling Bird and Margaret to reconstruct their identities under cultural oppression.

By adopting community as an analytical lens, this paper offers a new theoretical perspective for interpreting *Our Missing Hearts* and further advances discussions on community and identity reconstruction within minority literature studies.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 Tönnies: Community vs. Society

Ferdinand Tönnies' distinction between *Gemeinschaft* (community) and *Gesellschaft* (society) provides the structural foundation for this study. In *Community and Society*, Tönnies conceptualizes community as a form of social relationship built upon emotional bonds, shared values, and long-term interdependence, which "depended on feeling rather than reason since the first communal ties among human arose from a feeling of silent understanding" (Tönnies, 1887, p. xv). Its typical forms include the family or closely connected cultural groups. In contrast, society is organized around principles of rational contracts, functionalized roles, and instrumental relationships, commonly embodied in bureaucratic institutions or modern political structures.

This binary framework reveals the fundamental contrast of the two networks in *Our Missing Hearts*—such as the artists' collectives and underground messengers, and the highly institutionalized, disciplinary logic of PACT. Whereas community relies on ethical reciprocity and cultural affinity, society prioritizes control, regulation, and utilitarian purpose. Tönnies' model therefore clarifies how different social forms shape the characters' possibilities for belonging, agency, and identity reconstruction in the novel.

2.2 Empathy as emotional foundation

Empathy is "an ability to know another person's inner experience" (Buie, 1981, p. 282), constituting the emotional foundation for the emergence of spontaneous communities. Within community theory, empathy facilitates affective bonds among members, supporting the formation of mutual assistance, solidarity, and shared identity. It also serves as the precondition for prosocial behaviors such as compassion, care, and moral responsiveness, thereby strengthening the community's emotional resilience.

In *Our Missing Hearts*, Margaret's sensitivity to cultural suffering and her recognition of the plight of oppressed children embody this form of empathy. Her poem becomes an emotional vessel and symbol for marginalized individuals, and on this basis, street artists construct a spontaneous community that transcends spatial boundaries. This empathetic mechanism directly corresponds to the first analytical section of this study, which examines how emotional resonance enables spontaneous communities to resist institutionalized communities.

2.3 Altruism as communal ethics

Altruism is "a desire to benefit someone else for his or her sake rather than one's own" (Batson, 2011, p. 3), constituting the ethical dimension of community, and is fundamentally grounded in respect for and empathy toward the lives of others. In this study, altruism is defined as an ethical orientation directed toward the well-being of others—namely, the willingness of individuals to act for the benefit of others or the collective even at potential personal cost. Within community theory, altruism sustains members' sense of responsibility, reciprocity, and collective care. Under oppressive conditions, it becomes especially critical, as ethical action often entails resistance, risk-taking, and cultural preservation.

Margaret's actions in the novel embody this ethical altruism. Her choice to leave her family to protect Bird, her taking risks to collect stories of separated families, and her creation of a megaphone to

advocate for marginalized groups all demonstrate her ethical practice of sacrificing personal interests for collective justice. The second part of this paper takes this as its core argument: altruistic behavior constitutes an ethical counter-structure to the instrumental logic of PACT.

2.4 Belonging as psychological grounding

Belonging serves as the psychological anchor of communal identity and “an important component in identity and object relationships” (Hagerty et al., 1992, p. 173). In community theory, belonging is regarded as a fundamental human need, as essential as safety and stability. It enables individuals to construct meaning, maintain psychological integration, and regain a sense of self after experiencing institutional violence.

This dynamic process is central in *Our Missing Hearts*. Both Margaret and Bird experience profound dislocation under PACT, yet they gradually reconstruct a sense of belonging through cultural symbols, shared narratives, and entry into spontaneous community, moving from being erased to reconnecting. The third section of this paper examines how communal belonging facilitates identity reconstruction.

In summary, empathy, altruism, and belonging constitute the three dimensions of community, which directly correspond to the three analytical structures of this paper, thus revealing how the characters in *Our Missing Hearts* negotiate their self and reconstruct their identity under oppression.

3. Institutionalized community versus spontaneous community

Compared with Celeste Ng’s earlier works, *Our Missing Hearts* presents a more ambitious narrative, expanding the setting from family conflicts to the level of state mechanisms and social systems, and focusing on the tensions between re-ethnic identity, speech censorship and cultural repression. Therefore, from the perspective of community, it can reveal more deeply the relationship tension and identity conflict between different communities in the text.

3.1 PACT: An institutionalized community

PACT functions in the novel as a state-engineered institutionalized community that constructs national cohesion through exclusion and cultural scapegoating. Rather than confronting the structural causes of the economic collapse, the state redirects public anxiety toward Asian immigrants, reinforcing claims that “the crisis was China’s doing...all their manipulations, their tariffs and devaluations” (Ng, 2022, p. 138). Such rhetoric allows PACT to transform economic fear into ethnic blame, manufacturing unity through the production of an external enemy. As Anderson (2006) notes, even “the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (p. 6). PACT relies precisely on this imagined solidarity, sustained not by shared values but by exclusionary narratives that define who must be cast out.

The emotional and ethical violence of such a community becomes evident in the policy of family separation, which removes children from homes “deemed un-American” (Ng, 2022, p. 144). By framing cultural difference as a threat to national stability, PACT transforms children into instruments of ideological regulation, denying them emotional subjectivity and dismantling relationships that constitute the foundations of community life. The state’s justification— “that all tools should be used to safeguard national security, that nothing should be off the table” (Ng, 2022, p. 149)—reveals an ethos in which the rhetoric of protection legitimizes the erosion of empathy and the normalization of institutional harm.

Beyond physical separation, PACT extends its authority through linguistic and cultural erasure, reshaping public space and collective memory. The novel’s observation that “once, all these signs bore two languages. Someone—everyone—has tried to make the Chinese disappear” (Ng, 2022, p. 97) illustrates how the state eliminates minority visibility to construct a monolithic national narrative. This symbolic cleansing transforms multicultural coexistence into ideological conformity, revealing a deeper form of misrecognition that denies Asian Americans cultural agency and the right to be seen.

Viewed through Tönnies’s framework, PACT embodies a rationalized *Gesellschaft* held together by surveillance, coercion, and ideological discipline rather than affective bonds. By severing familial ties, suppressing cultural expression, and erasing linguistic presence, the policy exposes the incompatibility

between authoritarian state structures and the ethical foundations of community, ultimately revealing the fragility and violence inherent in an imagined national unity built on exclusion.

3.2 OMH: A spontaneous community

In contrast to the institutionalized community constructed by PACT, the activists of “Our Missing Hearts” form a spontaneous community grounded in empathy, cultural memory, and voluntary risk. Their collaboration reflects what Tönnies describes as a *Gemeinschaft*-like bond, in which individuals are “brought together by shared ideals and common purposes, establishing ‘friendships’ of the same kind” (Tönnies, 1887, p. 67). Through street art that transforms Margaret’s words into a shared emotional language, the slogan “DON’T FORGET OUR MISSING HEARTS” appears across public spaces (Ng, 2022, p. 17–18), reawakening social attention to families erased by state policy. These installations function as “half protest, half art,” capturing public attention and “forcing them to take note” (Ng, 2022, p. 188), thereby turning aesthetic expression into an affective intervention.

Unlike PACT’s emotional deprivation, OMH’s practices reconstruct communal bonds by activating empathy as a catalyst for ethical life. Their installations interrupt everyday urban space, creating what Jameson (1981) describes as “a free space in a world of ideological closure” (p. 79), a breach through which suppressed emotions and memories re-enter public consciousness. The artwork forces passersby to confront lives the state attempts to silence, transforming aesthetic expression into an affective intervention. Even when authorities swiftly erase these interventions— “The next day, the graffiti was painted over, the posters replaced, the pamphlets swept away like dead leaves. Everything so clean he might have imagined it all” (Ng, 2022, p. 18)—the emotional resonance persists, converting discomfort into recognition and ethical reflection. In this sense, the disappearance of the art only intensifies its symbolic force, revealing how suppressed memories return as affective traces that resist institutional forgetting.

Thus, OMH represents a counter-community that rebuilds what PACT destroys. Its affective solidarity demonstrates that empathy, when collectively mobilized, carries ethical force—showing that “empathy can lead to anything more than superficial helping” (Hoffman, 2008, p. 444). Through shared artistic expression, the community reclaims the emotional foundations of social life and restores the conditions for ethical relation.

4. Empathy toward the silenced and the missing

Margaret’s actions are driven by a form of empathy grounded in emotional resonance and ethical presence. Her response to the stories of families who lost their children exemplifies what Batson (1987) describes as empathy “produced by witnessing another person’s suffering” (p. 20). Each account she encounters revives her resolve— “jump-started her again when the journey and the weight of the stories had nearly drained her dry” (Ng, 2022, p. 190), indicating an affective responsiveness akin to the mechanism Singer and Lamm (2009) identify, in which “the observer partially feels the target’s emotional state” (p. 82).

Yet Margaret’s empathy extends beyond emotional contagion. She embodies what Rogers (1975) termed entering “the private perceptual world of the other” (p. 4), not only listening to grief but allowing it to shape her understanding and actions. Her conviction that “she feels this in her bones: certain things must be done in person... Some things need to be witnessed” (Ng, 2022, p. 227) suggests that she views presence itself as an ethical obligation. In this sense, her empathy aligns with Araneta’s (2020) argument that genuine empathic engagement generates “a sense of moral responsibility toward others” (p. 112).

Through witnessing, recording, and carrying these stories, Margaret transforms empathy into a sustained ethical practice. Her journey shows that to her, empathy is neither sentiment nor abstraction but a lived commitment to recognize and respond to the suffering of others.

5. Altruistic response to collective suffering

Margaret leaves home with a clear sense of what her presence might cost her family under PACT, and this decision grows out of something larger than fear. Her care for Bird widens into an awareness of the many families who have been forced into silence. She goes around collecting stories of children

resettled in the PACT system, “One by one she searched out the families whose children had been taken... Until they trusted her. Until they wanted to speak. Until they wanted their stories to be told”(Ng, 2022, p. 183). In doing so, she takes on the role of a witness—someone who preserves what the state tries to erase. MacAskill (2017) describes this kind of sustained commitment to others as a form of serious altruism (p. 2), and Margaret’s work aligns closely with that idea.

Her choices carry risk, yet she continues. The bottle-cap transmitters she releases across the city send these stories into public space, making it harder for the official narrative to hold. She understands the likelihood of being exposed, but the conviction that “some things need to be witnessed” (Ng, 2022, p. 227) keeps her moving. Wilson’s (1975) definition of altruism as “self-destructive behavior performed for the benefit of others” (p. 578) helps clarify the ethical stakes of her actions. Margaret steps into danger just out of a commitment to those whose voices have been taken from them.

The emotional weight Margaret carries gradually becomes part of the way she acts in the world. By giving shape to the experiences others cannot voice, she creates openings for listeners to respond. After hearing her broadcasts, many find that “Margaret’s voice still lodged in the crevices of their brain, the stories they’ve heard a pin completing a circuit, lighting up feelings that have long lain dark” (Ng, 2022, p. 249). Her work may continue to move through others even when she is no longer present. What takes shape here is an altruism charged with ethical weight and personal risk. Margaret’s commitment is not merely kindness; it asks her to jeopardize her own safety, identity, and emotional steadiness. Such choices carry the kind of tension critics often note in self-sacrificial ethics, where the urge to protect others can edge toward the loss of one’s own ground. This tension, however, is part of what gives her actions their clarity. She accepts the consequences of witnessing not out of idealized compassion but from a plain understanding of what silence would allow to happen.

6. Sense of belonging for identity reconstruction in the community

In contemporary minority literature, belonging often serves as the emotional core of identity construction, yet it is also one of the first foundations to be unsettled when political pressure intensifies. *Our Missing Hearts* depicts the forced separation of Margaret and Bird, tracing how a racialized system fractures, denies, and eventually reshapes their sense of belonging. This section examines their mother–son relationship through community theory and belonging theory to show how marginalized individuals negotiate and reconstruct cultural identity within an authoritarian cultural order.

6.1 Identity reconstruction on the journey of seeking

Bird’s early sense of belonging is shaped by exclusion. As the mixed-race son of a Chinese mother, he grows up in a community where his difference is quietly but persistently enforced. At school and in his neighborhood, “everyone ignores him; most days, he’s picked on or pitied” (Ng, 2022, p. 10), a pattern that leaves him unable to attain the “recognition and acceptance of a member by other members in a group” (Hagerty et al., 1992, p. 173). PACT’s institutionalized community intensifies this dislocation: loyalty is demanded, dissent erased, and children are taught to sever emotional ties that fall outside the state’s narrative. Belonging, for Bird, is not merely absent—it is systematically denied.

His journey shifts when he begins searching for his mother. This movement away from the structures that defined him opens the possibility of encountering different communal worlds. A brief stop in Chinatown marks a quiet turning point: “he feels oddly at home... for the first time in his life, he is unremarkable, and this feels like power” (Ng, 2022, p. 97). Here, belonging emerges not from institutional acceptance but from cultural familiarity—the recognition of faces like his mother’s. Hagerty’s (1992) idea of being “an integral part” (p.173) of a setting helps illuminate why the moment resonates: Bird experiences, perhaps for the first time, a space that does not treat him as other. His path eventually leads him into a loose, resistant network of librarians, artists, and anonymous couriers. The community has no formal structure; it holds together through shared risk and a quiet ethic of mutual regard. In sharp contrast to PACT’s disciplinary logic, this alternative space works through empathy and trust. Within it, Bird begins to experience a kind of recognition unfamiliar to him— “the librarian’s eyes on him are gentle and kind” (Ng, 2022, p. 91). The librarian’s attention, along with small acts of guidance and the room he is given to make his own decisions, gradually cultivates the “feeling valued, needed, accepted” (p. 173) that Hagerty (1992) associates with belonging.

The reconstruction of Bird's identity comes into focus when he finally meets Margaret. Her simple admission—"I wanted you... it was what he needed to hear" (Ng, 2022, p. 208)—restores the emotional ground from which belonging grows. Lindgren (1990) notes that belonging involves feeling "cared for and loved, esteemed and valued" (p. 469); Margaret's words give Bird exactly this kind of assurance. With it, he moves away from seeing himself through loss and rejection and toward a relationship the state had tried to sever. Joining Margaret in the quiet work of scattering bottle caps across the city signals the final turn: he shifts from a child shaped by PACT to an active participant in a community he helps create. In this act, Bird reclaims both belonging and identity as experiences grounded in recognition, cultural connection, and shared purpose.

6.2 Identity reconstruction amid displacement

Margaret's sense of belonging is shaped through a movement from dispossession to ethical reconstruction. Her earliest form of anchoring lies in her bond with Bird, yet this foundation collapses once PACT redefines her not as a mother or poet but as a political threat—"Seditious subversives. Traitorous Chinese sympathizers. Tumors on American society" (Ng, 2022, p. 20). The erasure of her works and voice reflects the "cognitive deconstruction that accompanies social rejection" (Lambert et al., 2013, p. 1420).

Her departure from Bird—"she wouldn't write, she wouldn't call" (Ng, 2022, p. 163)—signals a second loss, as she sacrifices familial belonging to secure his safety within the dominant order. Yet it is within this self-imposed exile that a different mode of belonging begins to form. By listening to families whose children were removed and recording their stories, Margaret shifts from silenced figure to witness. Importantly, her encounters are not merely observational; rather, "some of the families invited her into their homes" (Ng, 2022, p. 187), extending to her a form of trust that allows her to inhabit a community grounded in recognition and carefulness. This aligns with Hagerty's (1992) notion of belonging as an "experience of being valued or important to an external referent" (p. 174).

As she voices these accumulated narratives—"she let them speak through her" (Ng, 2022, p. 227)—her maternal identity expands beyond the personal to the collective. The communal listening scene, where the stories "felt like a voice inside them, speaking somehow both to them and from them" (Ng, 2022, p. 228), marks the emergence of a spiritual community formed through shared memory and mutual identification. Belonging, for Margaret, thus becomes an ethical practice rather than a social position sanctioned by the state.

Her reunion with Bird accomplishes this reconstruction. Both regain a sense of worth and alignment—that is "feelings of value, respect and fit" (Mahar et al., 2013, p. 5)—that had been denied by institutional community. Even her final story for him, "there was a boy, and his mother loved him very much" (Ng, 2022, p. 233), affirms her restored agency: through narration, she reclaims her identity as a mother and confirms her place within a community constituted through care, witness, and shared narratives.

7. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that in *Our Missing Hearts*, community serves as the key mechanism for resisting cultural suppression and identity reconstruction. By contrasting institutionalized structures with spontaneous artistic and activist networks, the paper highlights that identity is not an individual attribute but a relational process shaped by ethical connections and emotional bonds.

The contribution of this study lies in foregrounding a community-based perspective that has been largely overlooked in existing researches on Celeste Ng, and in demonstrating how empathy, altruism, and belonging provide the emotional and ethical resources for resisting cultural erasure.

These findings hold broader implications for literary studies, cultural politics, and community theory. Future research may further explore the formation and operational mechanisms of diverse community models within other minority or diaspora literature under similar cultural pressures.

References

Anderson, B. (2006). *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*.

Routledge.

- Araneta, R. N. (2020). Community and Cultural Identity in the Age of Globalization: A Communitarian Perspective. *International Journal of All Research Writings*, 1(12), 108-115.
- Batson, C. D. (2011). *Altruism in Humans*. Oxford University Press.
- Batson, C. D., Fultz, J., & Schoenrade, P. A. (1987). Distress and Empathy: Two Qualitatively Distinct Vicarious Emotions with Different Motivational Consequences. *Journal of Personality*, 55(1), 19-39. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6494.1987.tb00426.x>
- Buie, D. H. (1981). Empathy: Its Nature and Limitations. *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, 29(2), 281-307. <https://doi.org/10.1177/000306518102900201>
- Hagerty, B. M., Lynch-Sauer, J., Patusky, K. L., Bouwsema, M., & Collier, P. (1992). Sense of Belonging: A Vital Mental Health Concept. *Archives of Psychiatric Nursing*, 6(3), 172-177. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0883-9417\(92\)90028-H](https://doi.org/10.1016/0883-9417(92)90028-H)
- Hoffman, M. L. (2008). *Hand Book of Emotions*. The Guilford Press.
- Jameson, F. (1981). *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. Cornell University Press.
- Lambert, N. M., Stillman, T. F., Hicks, J. A., Kamble, S., Baumeister, R. F., & Fincham, F. D. (2013). To Belong Is to Matter: Sense of Belonging Enhances Meaning in Life. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 39(11), 1418-1427. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167213499186>
- Lindgren, C. L., Pass, C. M., & Sime, A. M. (1990). Burnout and Social Support in Family Caregivers. *Western Journal of Nursing Research*, 12(4), 469-487. <https://doi.org/10.1177/019394599001200404>
- MacAskill, W. (2017). Effective Altruism: Introduction. *Essays in Philosophy*, 18(1), 1-5. <https://doi.org/10.7710/1526-0569.1580>
- Mahar, A. L., Cobigo, V., & Stuart, H. (2013). Conceptualizing Belonging. *Disability and Rehabilitation*, 35(12), 1-7. <https://doi.org/10.3109/09638288.2012.717584>
- Ng, C. (2022). *Our Missing Hearts*. Penguin Press.
- Rogers, C. (1975). Empathic: An Unappreciated Way of Being. *The Counseling Psychologist*, 5(2), 2-10. <https://doi.org/10.1177/001100007500500202>
- Singer, T., & Lamm, C. (2009). The Social Neuroscience of Empathy. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 1156(1), 81-96. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-6632.2009.04418.x>
- Tönnies, F. (1887). *Community and Society*. Transaction Publishers.
- Wilson, E. O. (1975). *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis*. Harvard University Press.